Vintage

by Redisaid, UninspiredPoet

Summary

NYU grad student Jaina Proudmoore doesn't know much about music, or pop culture, or records. She's always been content to bury her nose in a book instead. That is, until she meets the owner of a vintage record store called The Undercity...

Notes

I'll be co-writing this with UninspiredPoet via chapter trade! She'll be doing evens and I'll be doing odds! Your turn, poot!
“Kinndy, what is that noise?”

An odd choral arrangement began ringing through the apartment, echoing all the way from the kitchen and into Jaina’s room. Like many of the songs her roommate played, it had the vague familiarity that most old music did. As soon as the piano came in, Jaina was certain she’d heard the song before, but couldn’t place an artist or title on it.

It wasn’t her thing. Music was something that played in the background—in shopping malls and restaurants and coffee shops. It was poetry set to notes, and she found herself appreciating the poetry more than she did the sound. And gods help her if she knew any pop culture. That had always been a weakness of hers.

“It’s music, Jaina,” Kinndy shouted from the kitchen, amidst a clatter of ceramic that also echoed off the high ceilings, “Good music! And it’s way too early in the morning for you to be judging my taste on a Saturday!”

Jaina smiled in spite of herself. She finished wrangling her blonde hair into a messy bun and put on a pair of thick-framed glasses. This was not a day worthy of putting her contacts in, no. Giving herself a final once over in the mirror, she decided this was enough of an effort for a Saturday. She knew that Anduin wouldn’t care how put together she was. They were just going shopping, after all. And for him, not even her, as usual.

The sizzle of something hitting a hot frying pan carried over the notes of the piano as Kinndy called out again, “This is a song about you. We need to get you someone to love.”

Jaina shrugged her way into a well-loved NYU hoodie as she called back, “Like I even have time for that…”
“A little Freddie to start the day,” Sylvanas said to no one in particular as she placed the needle gently onto the spinning record. The familiar notes of the song rang forth from the speakers, filling her little loft apartment with the warm sound of good old vinyl.

Now properly prepared, she could actually start getting ready. She headed over to the short wall that was her kitchen, just enough space for a fridge, a stove that was mostly in working order, a sink, and a tiny bit of counter space to prepare things on. Like all things in this loft, it was enough. Just enough. As the piano came in, Sylvanas found herself miming the keys in the air. She played chords on the countertop even as she reached for the tin of coffee and scooped it into her old drip coffeemaker. She filled it with water as the soaring notes of Freddie Mercury’s voice took over for a bit, relieving the accompaniment.

“I work hard,” she sang along softly as she dragged a bag of dry dog food out of one of the lower cabinets and poured it into a bowl.

A small, ancient mutt of a dog waddled up to the sound of his food. He stared at it with overly-large eyes, mostly black and bulbous in his smooshed face. The rest of him was also black and bulbous. Maybe a little bit pug. Maybe a little bit chihuahua. Definitely some sort of bulldog or two. But definitely ugly as sin, and older than it. A bit of drool began to cluster around a bottom jaw that jutted out much further than the top one as he waited.

“This is where you sing ‘she works hard’ back for me, buddy,” Sylvanas chided the dog, even as she reached down to scratch between his ears. “We’ll keep working on it Nathanos. You’ll get it one day.”

Nathanos didn’t sing, though. He rarely even barked. These days, he mostly just slept. And now that his food was out, he was content to do the one activity he seemed to truly enjoy anymore, which was eating it.

Dog fed, and coffee on, Sylvanas’ voice rejoined the song in its chorus as she went over to her dresser to try to find something to wear. “Somebody, ooh somebody! Can anybody find me somebody to love?”

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“Aunty!”

Jaina was caught up in an enthusiastic embrace before she could even turn to find the source of that cry. The street was busy today, and she honestly wasn’t even sure she was on the right one. Still, that word alone was enough to tell her that Anduin had found her, even before he all but crushed her with a hug.

“I’m not your aunty,” she groaned against the young man’s shoulder.

Anduin just laughed, then thrust Jaina back out in front of him. “Well too bad, because you are.”

Jaina shook her head and took in the picture of him. Lean and always smiling. And surprisingly awake, despite the fact that it was still barely before noon. His clothes even looked like they weren’t from the night before. She just had to make a comment, “I can’t believe you dragged me out here this early and have the nerve to be awake.”

“We’re going shopping and then to brunch, because I’m gay and this is New York, Jaina. That’s enough of a reason for me to get out of bed and actually shower, if you ask me,” Anduin told her.
“Plus I thought you’d be proud of me. We’re adulting!”

“I guess,” she offered with a sly smile.

Anduin pouted at her until she laughed back at him.

They’d known one another for so long. She could remember teaching him how to swim at the yacht club all those years ago. He’d been so small, just a scrawny little boy. Yet now here he was, nineteen and an undergrad in the theatre program—a sheen of blonde stubble gracing his chin, just enough to tell her that yes, he’d showered, he’d put on clean clothes, but he hadn’t fully managed to get himself together. He was working on it. Well, that was a thing they had in common still, even after all this time.

“Are we even close to this place you wanted to check out?” Jaina asked.

She looked at the street around them. Busy though it was, she’d never been to this part of the Village before. It seemed like any other street, though—filled with brownstones and bodegas and just about every type of person that could be imagined walking by, utterly unique and utterly unaware of it. A massive tauren man in a biker vest carrying his giggling daughter on his shoulders. A group of teens chatting on a stoop. A pandaren couple coming out of a restaurant with a bag full of wonderful-smelling take out. This was why she loved the city. It was so alive. It was always different. Jaina could never get bored of New York.

But she certainly didn’t see this “cool as fuck vintage store” that Anduin had wanted to check out.

“It’s down the block a ways,” he told her, pointing toward a squat, three-story building that was dwarfed by the two, more common five-story ones on either side of it. The bottom floor was painted a stark black, but she couldn’t make out what the sign said.

“Lead on then,” Jaina said. She waited for Anduin to start walking before she asked, “So you’re still looking for costumes for Hair, right?”

“And I think we’ll find you a beaded vest then.”

“You’re damn right we will. I don’t know if this place will have it. I think it’s more of a record shop, but there’s always clothes in the window too, and furniture and stuff. I figured it was worth a shot,” Anduin told her.

They made it to the black building soon enough. And yes, there were clothes in the window, as well as some old signs and concert posters. But it looked dark inside. She couldn’t see much in the way of other details, save for the white letters on the black awning that spelled out “The Undercity” over the door.

“Is it even open?” Jaina asked.

“Only one way to find out,” Anduin answered as he reached to open the door.

A bell chimed to mark their entrance. The place wasn’t all that dark on the inside. In fact, it was really charming. A carefully arranged clutter of old things covered the interior of the little shop. The back corner was filled with racks of clothes, which Anduin was already eyeing greedily. The walls
were painted black, but covered with an array of colorful posters and mirrors and well, everything really. Furniture pieces dominated the rest of the room, most of them ranging from mid century modern to something that looked like it was straight out of photos from Jaina’s childhood. She was pretty certain her grandma had that couch at one point, actually.

There was an atrociously lime green armchair near the door with an impressively winged back. A little black dog with spiked collar--an extremely ugly to the point where it was almost cute again black dog--lifted his head from one of its arms to greet them, only to close his eyes again and go right back to sleep.

“I see a vest,” Anduin whispered excitedly to her.

“Is anyone even in here?” Jaina asked, still overwhelmed by the amount of objects there were to look at.

“Maybe the dog runs the place, Jaina. Be progressive. It’s 2019, after all,” Anduin admonished as he made a beeline for the clothes.

It took Jaina quite a while to find what looked like the cash register. It was on top of a jewelry counter, and in front of a shelf of old toys. Once again, she was pretty sure that she recognized some of those old toys from grandma’s house. Didn’t she and Derek used to fight over a Mystery Machine like that one? Jaina found herself drawn to that shelf as she heard Anduin gleefully sliding the hangers along the metal racks as he browsed.

Yup. It had to be the same kind. And there were figures next to it of the whole Scooby Doo gang. Jaina found a smile coming to her face as she remember her brother. The van at grandma’s house had never had action figures that went along with it. She had to wonder if Derek had already broken them before she was born. Probably. That was how he was.

She hadn’t thought about him in a while. Like this, it was nice. She could remember him as an annoying older brother, always taking her things and breaking them, but at the same time, as a kind boy that would try his best to fix them all the same, once he’d realized what he had done. It almost didn’t hurt anymore. Almost. Gods she missed him still.

Music began to play above them as Jaina found herself picking up the Scooby Doo figurine to examine the aging plastic. Where was it coming from? As she put him back with the rest of the gang, Jaina’s eyes followed her ears to a set of black metal stairs, and a big arrow sign pointing up them that just spelled out the word “Records” in stark white block letters.

That choral opening, the piano, the crash of the drums. She knew this song. It was the same one that Kinndy had been playing that morning.

Jaina followed its notes. Anduin could take care of himself. She was curious. If this song was going to haunt her today, then she was going to find out why. Or at least find someone to ring them up, if Anduin had any luck.

She began to ascend the stairs. They were sturdier than she expected, but Jaina still found herself clinging to the railing, just in case.

“Oh my god!” Anduin almost screamed from below just before she made it to the landing. “Jaina! There’s a fucking beaded vest!”

She looked back down the stairs, about to yell her congratulations, until something caught the corner of her eye and made her turn again. And she almost ran into her.
A high elf regarded her with an expression that was likely equally as surprised as Jaina’s. Her glowing blue-grey eyes were wide, and the silver-blond eyebrows above them lifted high. The ears that poked through the maroon beanie she wore shot straight up. “Oh. Hi there,” she finally stuttered out. “Sorry, I didn’t realize I had customers. Was putting music on.”

She was young, or at least looked it. Very young to have a place like this, and an obvious love of old things. And beautiful. Incredibly beautiful, but in an interesting way, not a magazine way.

Jaina held onto the railing for dear life as her heart began to race. “Uh yeah, sorry! I was just snooping while my friend raids your clothing section. Is it cool for me to be up here or is this off limits?”

Oh no that smile. That little lopsided, fanged grin. Holy shit. That wasn’t fair. “You’re good,” the elven woman told her with that deadly little smile. “This section is actually what most people come here for. Are you looking for any particular album or anything I can help you find?”

Jaina finally managed to tear her gaze away from the woman to look around her. More black walls. More band posters. A leather couch. Guitars on the walls. And beneath it all, rows and rows of white boxes, each filled with records. There had to be thousands of them.

“Oh...I…”

She didn’t know a fucking thing about records. She didn’t even know who sang this song, still. Kinndy had harassed her about it that morning, but hadn’t told her who it was. She said Jaina should have known. Fuck.

Luckily Anduin saved her with another scream, “Yes! It fits, Jaina! It fucking fits!”

The elven woman laughed and looked downstairs. “Or maybe I should go help your friend instead. Jaina was it? No place is off limits. Please, browse all you want. I’ll make sure your friend doesn’t ruin whatever he’s getting so excited about down there.”

She passed Jaina on the stairs with another of those little smiles, only to reach the landing and call back up.

“Oh yeah, and you can change the record if you want. I’m just on a Freddie kick today for some reason.”

Freddie. Okay. Freddie. Whatever a Freddie was. Jaina kept that fact cemented in her mind as she watched the woman turn out of sight and downstairs. She...she had to have something to talk to her about.

Jaina found herself regarding the spinning record on the player next to the couch with an odd reverence. It was spinning just slow enough for her to read the text on its label. The artist was Queen. Oh shit, right. Freddie Mercury. Okay, she knew that much.

She took a moment to ground herself, alone with thousands of old records and the smell of musty paper emanating from their jackets. Just like the first floor, the second was an artful arrangement of clutter. The walls were a work of art, a collage of worship for things past.

Things that Jaina had no fucking clue about, but now a sudden, burning desire to learn.

Once she could think properly again, she found her way back downstairs to be greeted by Anduin proudly sporting a beaded leather vest, complete with a generous amount of fringe, that was just a tiny bit tight on his frame, which was just starting to broaden out and remind Jaina of his father. Just
another thing that the two of them had in common, really. NYU, a family in the Hamptons that they’d rather not talk about, and dead dads.

“We’re doing Hair,” he explained to the high elf as she helped him out of it. “So this is just fucking perfect. I literally just said that I was looking for something like this!”

The elven woman laughed again. “I’ll set it aside for you. Hair, huh? Most of my stuff is from the seventies, but there’s still definitely some good hippie vibes in there. Do you need more than just this?”

“Oh honey, I am nowhere near done with you,” Anduin told her. “And you are a treasure for having this place. What’s your name so I can scream it excitedly when I find more?”

She laughed again. “Sylvanas,” she told him. “And I’ll leave you to it.”

Anduin muttered a thanks as he trotted back over to the clothes and dove into the racks again. Jaina’s eyes didn’t follow him, though. She watched as Sylvanas took the vest back to the jewelry counter and gently laid it down there. Jaina watched the careful, practiced movements as she removed the price tag and set it on the register, and reached below the counter to grab a black paper bag with the shop’s logo--the same letters from the awning out front--and opened it to stow the vest.

Only then did she look up to find Jaina. And she smiled again. “Well that was quick,” Sylvanas noted as she finished bagging up Anduin’s impending purchase.

“Oh,” Jaina said, trying to pretend that she hadn’t been staring at her for far too long. “I love Queen. No need to change it. I just wanted to make sure Anduin wasn’t wrecking the place.”

“He might, if he finds another thing that he likes,” Sylvanas noted.

It was Jaina’s turn to laugh. “Yeah he kind of...hulks out over fashion sometimes. It happens. I’ll make sure he stays contained.”

She quickly made her way to the racks to avoid looking like any more of an idiot than she already had.

“Oh my god, you’re a fucking tomato,” Anduin whispered as she reached him.

Jaina’s hands shot up to her cheeks. Yup, they were hot. “Fuck,” she whispered back.

Anduin regarded her with a little tilt of his head. He immediately forgot the patterned button-up shirt he was holding as his eyes widened. “Aunty...” he whispered.

“What?”

“I’m contagious,” he blurted out.

“What?”

“I think you’ve caught my gay for this elf lady,” he whispered again as he poked at her reddened cheeks.

Fuck. What? No. She...no.

Before Jaina could even answer that, Anduin held the shirt up to himself. “I look fucking excellent in chartreuse, right?” he asked. “It’s really my color.”
It was not. “It’s...certainly a bold choice,” Jaina answered quickly, avoiding the earlier subject like the plague.

“It’s horrible and I love it. I’m going to make Valeera wear it,” Anduin told her as he thrust the shirt into her hands and went back to sliding through the racks.

By the time they went back up to the counter, Jaina’s arms were full of vintage clothing. There was enough for the entire cast and possibly more. Anduin didn’t even know everyone’s sizes, but there was no stopping him or talking him down when he got like this. Jaina knew that and went along with it. That was why she liked hanging out with him, after all. Anduin was never afraid to be himself.

Anduin wouldn’t have been trying to hide behind that pile of clothes, but she wasn’t Anduin. Jaina just peered at Sylvanas sheepishly over the mass of clashing fabrics as she piled them up on the jewelry counter.

The elven woman just smiled as she began to gently sort through the pile. She grabbed a scarf that was hanging in front of Jaina’s face. Jaina couldn’t help but notice she had amazing hands.

Fuck. Hands? Why hands? What was wrong with her?

The record upstairs had long since been changed. More Queen. More songs Jaina didn’t know.

“So you’ll have to tell me where I can see this play, now that you’ve cleared out half of my stock for it,” Sylvanas said to Anduin as she began to fold up the scarf.

“Oh, it’s a few months still until we’re ready for showtime,” Anduin told her. “But it’s for undergrad theatre at NYU, Tisch School of the Arts, so right next door to you. I’ll make sure to let you know once we have the venue and dates and shit. Do you have an insta or something?”

He pulled out his phone.

“I should really get one of those, huh?” Sylvanas asked.

“How do you not have an instagram?” Anduin sounded astonished. “Seriously think about it, girl! The internet needs to know about this place! You need to make one immediately, step one. And then step two, add me. I’m @theboyking. Long story, please don’t ask.”

Sylvanas smiled and nodded politely, though her muted reaction spoke that she wasn’t particularly interested in delving into social media. No, why would she be? Clearly, from the look of this place, she was more interested in the past than the future. “I’ll think about it,” she finally said, then turned to Jaina. “Are you also in the play?”

“Oh, me? No, no, no,” Jaina corrected. “I’m just a boring grad student who would rather die than be on stage. I’m here for moral support.”

“And mostly for the brunch I promised her after this,” Anduin finished for her.

“Also at NYU then?” Sylvanas continued, willfully ignoring Anduin, but still smiling.

Jaina nodded. “Studying literature, yes. Just a nerd who loves her books.”

“There’s nothing wrong with knowing what you love,” Sylvanas told her. “And surrounding yourself with it. I obviously believe that, if you can’t tell.”

There was something about those eyes. Their piercing steel gaze. Gods, she was looking right
through her, wasn’t she? What did she see? Why did she keep looking?

“I love you and your massive horde of seventies trash,” Anduin told Sylvanas as he put his phone away and reached for his wallet. “Please tell me you take plastic, or we’re going to have an embarrassing moment here.”

Sylvanas kept folding the clothes in stride. “Don’t worry, my credit card machine is probably the most recently made thing in this store,” she told him.

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“I can’t believe you just spent five hundred dollars on vintage clothing,” Jaina told Anduin later as they were toasting mimosas over brunch.

“And I can’t believe you’re just figuring out exactly how bi you are at the ripe old age of twenty three,” he countered as he watched her take the first sip of her drink.

Jaina would hardly admit to that, or to the amount of mixed orange juice and champagne that she spit out over his eggs benedict just then.

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"Somebody to Love"

Queen

Can anybody find me somebody to love?
Ooh, each morning I get up I die a little
Can barely stand on my feet
(Take a look at yourself) Take a look in the mirror and cry (and cry)
Lord, what you're doing to me (yeah yeah)
I have spent all my years in believing you
But I just can't get no relief, Lord!
Somebody (somebody) ooh somebody (somebody)
Can anybody find me somebody to love?
I work hard (he works hard) every day of my life
I work 'til I ache in my bones
At the end (at the end of the day)
I take home my hard earned pay all on my own
I get down (down) on my knees (knees)
And I start to pray
'Til the tears run down from my eyes
Lord, somebody (somebody), ooh somebody
(Please) can anybody find me somebody to love?
Everyday (everyday) I try and I try and I try
But everybody wants to put me down
They say I'm going crazy
They say I got a lot of water in my brain
Ah, got no common sense
I got nobody left to believe in
Yeah yeah yeah yeah
Oh, Lord
Ooh somebody, ooh somebody
Can anybody find me somebody to love?
(Can anybody find me someone to love)
Got no feel, I got no rhythm
I just keep losing my beat (you just keep losing and losing)
I'm OK, I'm alright (he's alright, he's alright)
I ain't gonna face no defeat (yeah yeah)
I just gotta get out of this prison cell
One day (someday) I'm gonna be free, Lord!
Find me somebody to love
Find me somebody to love
Find me somebody to love
Find me somebody to love
Find me somebody to love
Find me somebody to love
Find me somebody to love
Find me somebody to love
Find me somebody to love
Find me somebody to love
Find me somebody to love
Somebody somebody somebody somebody
Somebody find me
Somebody find me somebody to love
Can anybody find me somebody to love?
(Find me somebody to love)
Ooh
(Find me somebody to love)
Find me somebody, somebody (find me somebody to love) somebody, somebody to love
Find me, find me, find me, find me, find me
Ooh, somebody to love (Find me somebody to love)
Ooh (find me somebody to love)
Find me, find me, find me somebody to love (find me somebody to love)
Anybody, anywhere, anybody find me somebody to love love love!
Somebody find me, find me love
As previously stated, Redisaid and I are co-authoring this. It's been a lot of fun plotting and yelling about it - and it's even more fun writing it. I hope you all enjoy!

Tag, Red. You’re it.

Jaina didn’t understand why Anduin couldn’t return the pants, himself. And that’s all she kept grumbling about internally as she made her way towards The Undercity. Even if, really, she absolutely knew why he couldn’t return the pants, himself.

She rolled her eyes and pulled her phone from her pocket when she felt it vibrate against her thigh.

_Status check, Aunty? Need anything? Refreshments? A top up on the parking meter? Dental dams?_

_I hate you. A lot._

_No you don’t._

Jaina had been about to type another retort when she made contact with someone walking in her direction and nearly got the breath knocked out of her lungs. “I’m so sorry, I…” She reached down quickly for the bag of ill-fitting pants she’d been carrying as the rather aloof looking draenei she’d bumped into brushed off her apology wordlessly and moved along.

“Shit.” She ran her thumb over a smudge on one of the light denim legs before stuffing it back where
it went and groaning as she stood - all the while seriously considering throwing the entire bag away and getting cash out of the ATM on her way back to her apartment just to shut Anduin up. But she knew that wasn’t really an option. Knowing Anduin, he would stop by the shop, himself, and apologize for the return just to confirm she’d been by.

He was such a meddler. Such an irritating little asshole whom she couldn’t love any more than she did if she tried. At least by the time she saw the dark-colored building in the distance she was slightly less flustered. Slightly. But the closer she got to the door, the less calm the butterflies in her stomach seemed to get.

She didn’t even look inside before she opened a door.

Just do it. Like a band-aid. Quick and…

Sylvanas jumped at the sound of the bell ringing above the door and nearly lost her precarious balance – leaned back on the stool behind the register with her feet propped up on the counter and Nathanos asleep comfortably on her lap.

She already had an apology ready as she focused her vision and put him down but it left her mind quickly when she saw the rather large drool stain he’d left on the thigh of her torn, fitted jeans.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t know you’d be...uh…” Jaina couldn’t help it. She couldn’t help the quiet laugh that bubbled up in response to the disgruntled look on the elf’s face as her ears shifted – her beanie slightly off-kilter so that it was pulled halfway up one of them and crumpling the opposite eyebrow.

The high elf reached up quickly to fix it and smoothed her eyebrow carefully before wiping fruitlessly at the dark spot on her jeans and by the time she looked up again Jaina was just smiling.

Damn...damn, she was cute. “Hey.”

**Hey?! Get it together. Jesus.**

“What’ve you got, there?” She gestured towards what she could only assume were some of the remnants of Anduin’s shopping spree a few days earlier.

“What? Oh! Anduin wanted me to return these for him. He...also wanted to mention you haven’t hit him up on Insta, yet.” She cringed at herself for bringing it up. And for using Anduin’s exact phrasing. She’d decided not to the moment he’d said it, yet here they were. With Jaina falling into an awkward silence as she placed the bag on the table.

Jaina’s slight fumbling eased Sylvanas’s mind a bit. She wasn’t a huge fan of being caught off-guard - but she’d at least made a decent recovery - unpacking the unwanted items and checking their labels before she folded them into a stack on the counter and glanced towards her register. “I didn’t want to hurt the kid’s feelings the other day - but there’s no way I’m going to get involved in any of that. It’s nothing personal. Just not my scene.”

Jaina nodded absently as she watched the older woman do the required math on the machine she was working with and her brow furrowed as she caught a glimpse of ink trailing along the side of her hand form beneath her cuff. She was trying so hard to figure it out she jumped in response to the chime of the cash till opening.

“It’s a tattoo. He paid with debit so I’ll just give you the cash. Otherwise he’ll be waiting a year for it to hit his account.”

Jaina’s eyes flashed up to hers in response to her voice and her face was burning again in short order when she realized how badly she’d been caught just by gauging the grin on her face.
“I didn’t mean to stare. I don’t...have any. Tattoos, I mean. But I like them. I think they’re interesting.” No piles of clothes to hide behind this time. No Anduin to unintentionally vying for attention that she always gladly acquiesced to him. Just pale, lightly freckled cheeks and ears growing increasingly dark as Sylvanas handed her refund over and leaned forward over the counter with her hands clasped together atop it.

“I think they’re interesting, too. It’s alright not to have any tattoos. All that means is you’re a fresh canvas. Anyway, I need to flip my record or start it over, one of the two. I didn’t intend to fall asleep and miss the whole thing.” She walked around the counter and glanced back at Jaina as she slipped the receipt and money she’d been handed into her back pocket and glanced around with a slightly anxious expression on her face.

“You can look around...come upstairs, whatever you want. Like I said - no place is off limits. That’s the best part.” It was a little difficult to not look over her shoulder to see if Jaina was following her up, but she managed it somehow. She was relieved, though, for some strange reason - when she heard her coming up the stairs.

She kept to herself, though - thumbing through the records on the rack next to the turntable while Jaina watched her from the corner of her eye as she approached one of the countless boxes. She was a hipster. Absolutely a hipster. With her flannel and her beanie and her torn jeans and those vintage Adidas. Jaina hadn’t ever been overly fond of the style, but usually that was because of what it came with in the way of personality.

This woman just seemed so...soft, somehow. She busied herself quickly with the records she’d been pretending to browse when she finally made a selection and stood. Whatever she’d picked was soft and meandering and while Jaina didn’t recognize it - she could appreciate the atmosphere. It didn’t last, though. She hardly had time to think before Sylvanas was standing next to her looking down at the different album covers that flipped by.

“Do you even have a record player?” She asked - a very faint lilt of amusement in her tone. Jaina could almost hear the smirk. She didn’t really even need to look.

“Yes. Of course I do.” Too quick. Too rushed. “...No. I’ve never really even...had a record. I don’t know why I said that.” Well if she hadn’t felt socially awkward enough already, she certainly did now.

“Can you see them alright?” She asked as she reached over and flipped a few more records back, pulling one from its place slowly and looking at the cover with a soft smile before she turned it over. “You don’t have your glasses today.”

“Contacts. I usually wear contacts, but Anduin dragged me out of the house the other day and I didn’t feel like dealing with it.”

“Oh.” Sylvanas responded simply. “I liked them. This is one of my favorite records.” She gestured towards the record player. “I’m really into the Seventies. I don’t know if that was obvious, but, yeah. Like I said - I kind of surround myself with it. Most of this album was recorded in ’69. But it was released in ’70. It was considered their breakthrough album...and the first was actually also titled ‘Chicago’.”

Jaina listened raptly as they walked over to the record player and Sylvanas began carefully removing the pristine album from its sleeve. “So, Chicago. Are they from Chicago, or...?”
Sylvanas laughed quietly and lifted the needle from her current record to sit it aside - replacing it with the one in her hands after flipping to the B-side. “Yeah. They are. A few really great 70’s bands came out of there. Chicago, Styx, Earth Wind and Fire. But this…” She eyeballed the wider lines in the ridges of the album as she searched for the one she was looking for and placed it perfectly so that there was a second or two of grainy silence before the song came on.

The sounds of the brassy, upbeat intro came through the speakers and she looked up at Jaina as Terry Kath’s soulful voice chimed in. “This is my favorite song on the album. And if you’re going to get into vinyl, the seventies are a great place to start. The golden age of vinyl, honestly. And if you start with ‘70 - you have the whole rest of the decade to explore. Chronologically, even!”

Sylvanas didn’t really notice how excited she was as she spoke, and Jaina wouldn’t normally have listened to anything like this. It certainly wasn’t her style. But...there was just something about the rhythm. The happy loping and the celebratory chorus that seemed like it was from such a far-away place. She guessed it was, really. The seventies were a long time ago. But as Sylvanas couldn’t seem to keep from bobbing her head to it she didn’t really think that mattered so much.

“I’ll take it.”

She’d forgotten she was even selling a record - by the look on her face. “I’ll get you one that’s still wrapped, then. I’m sorry about that - I get a little into music sometimes.”

“No, no, don’t apologize and...if it’s alright, I’d like to have this one.”

Jaina couldn’t do anything about the prideful little feeling that welled up in her when it became apparent that she’d actually managed to throw the woman off that time, instead of the other way around, though she hadn’t been trying to. But the way her ears seemed to shift upward as she put the record back into its jacket was curious to Jaina. Curious and wildly distracting.

Once there was another album spinning on the turntable to kill the silence in the shop, she rang Jaina up and passed her the bag - so carefully folded at the top to keep her purchase safe. “Come by any time. And if you’re going to pick up a record player and aren’t as much a fan of antiques as I am, I’d recommend Victrola. They’re still making some of the best ones out there.”

“Victrola? Are those not antiques?” She asked incredulously - damning the paleness of her skin as she felt it start to heat up again at the amused expression sliding onto Sylvanas’s face and the soft glint of teeth as it turned into a bit of a grin.

“Sure. Some of them. But they never stopped making them. And they’re getting popular again, so it shouldn’t be too hard to find one. If you have any questions or anything, though, you know where to find me.”

Normal transaction. Business transaction. This was just shopping. Time to smile politely and leave. And definitely not look over her shoulder when she passed through the door to see if Sylvanas was still looking at her.

She was still looking at her. But at least she was kind enough not to laugh as Jaina banged her knee on the heavy wooden door on her way out.

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“What do you mean you didn’t get her number?” Anduin looked positively unamused as he stared up at her from where he lounged on her couch - not even bothering to get up. Just being lazily
Jaina placed her record down on her coffee table and pulled Anduin’s legs off her couch before plopping down with a heavy sigh and a roll of her eyes. “I mean it isn’t like that. I’m not gay, Anduin. It isn’t contagious, you know.”

“Nobody said you were gay, Aunty. I just haven’t ever seen you stare at a guy so hard and you’ve definitely never walked in here with that stupid of a grin on your face after returning pants to one, either.”

Jaina cleared her throat and reached for the remote - watching the Netflix logo fill her previously dark television screen. “Where’s Kinndy?”

“Wow, way to avoid your impending sexual awakening. She went to get ice cream for our slumber party.” He moved his legs across Jaina’s lap and she rested her arm over them. She was used to being furniture for Anduin. It was just something that came with having a friendship with him.

“There is no impending sexual awakening.” She muttered under her breath as she flipped through her watch list half-heartedly.

“Oh! American Horror Story!” He reached over and snatched the remote from her before she could even begin to object and she groaned loudly in protest.

“Anduin I am not watching the Gaga season again. I am absolutely not.”

But they absolutely were.
For the third time.

When Kinndy finally made it home, Jaina very nearly leapt from the couch and Anduin just absently moved his legs and put them back - too engrossed in the show to notice much of what was happening around him.

“American Horror Story again?” Kinndy asked as Jaina reached to help her with the bags she was currently struggling with.

“You already know,” she responded, placing them onto the counter and unpacking everything.

“Gaga season?”

Jaina simply sighed and smiled as she reached for three bowls from one of the lower cabinets.

“So Anduin said you were going to that shop you two went to the other day. How did it go?” Kinndy retrieved the first bowl and waited expectantly for her answer instead of carrying it to Anduin.

Jaina glanced over at him to make sure he was still as far gone as he had been upon Kinndy’s return. He was. Of course.

“I think I was kind’ve an idiot. I mean...not that it’s a thing. It’s just.”

Kinndy’s conspiratorial smile caused her to stop speaking and start scooping another bowl of ice cream.

“Are you gonna tell me about her, or what? All Anduin keeps saying is she’s ‘bangin’.”

The sound of the scoop clattering to the ground only drew a token glance from their friend and she
picked it up quickly to rinse it off.

“So ‘bangin’ really is the appropriate adjective?” Kinndy asked with a slight raise of her brow, deciding not to mention the beet-red shade Jaina had abruptly taken on.

“Yes. I mean, no. I mean - dammit.” Jaina slapped the lid back on the ice cream and shoved it in the freezer before turning to look at Kinndy with both the remaining bowls in her hand. “She’s really pretty, alright? Really, really pretty. And her eyes…and her hands. And she has tattoos. Not that I’ve really seen them, but…look, whatever. I’m straight. You know that. And even if that weren’t the case - there’s no way she’s not taken. You haven’t seen her. Just because I think someone is pretty doesn’t mean I want to…”

“Get in her pants?” Anduin grinned at them from where he was suddenly paying them both rapt attention from the couch.

“Anduin, come on I was really getting somewhere!” Kinndy complained as they filtered into the livingroom and Jaina took her place back as Anduin’s leg rest while Kindy climbed up to sit on his thighs.

“Guys, I really appreciate it. I mean that. But, please…I don’t have time for something like this right now.”

“There’s always time to be gay, Aunty.” Anduin responded quietly after swallowing a mouthful of ice cream quickly - wincing as it hit him all at once.

“That’s what you get.” Jaina muttered as she cut her eyes at him. “That’s what karma feels like. Do you like it? The karma?”

“Oh, wow wow wow. Karma. Is she rubbing off on you that fast? Are you going to come out here in a silk shirt and linen pants tomorrow drinking some sort of god-awful tea?”

Jaina shut her eyes and almost verbally counted to ten and it seemed like Anduin was suddenly in the mood to give her a break. And she needed it. This much blushing just couldn’t be good for a person.

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As Jaina waited for her morning shake to finish blending she kept glancing at the record on the counter near where her hand rested. Kept remembering how happy Sylvanas had looked while she talked about it. How that tattoo had just barely peeked past her sleeve while her fingertip ran over the tracklisting.

She could probably get away with a small record player. It couldn’t hurt to have a hobby besides reading. Just a little one. Just a couple records. She’d like the warmth of the sound and the soft scratchiness just beneath it. There was something so…real about it. Kinndy had class this morning and Anduin would be buried in rehearsals for a couple days. She could probably get away with slipping a record player into her apartment without too much fuss.

“Victrola? Of course we have those. Why wouldn’t we?”

Jaina smiled politely and followed the young man towards the back of the store. Exactly the kind of hipster Jaina didn’t like. That was all Jaina could think as she watched his better-than-thou man bun bob up and down in front of her.

Her eyes settled immediately on a beautifully veneered turntable that came with two understated
speakers. It would go perfectly in her mostly grey-washed, shabby chic apartment. It would fit right in.

She was right. And she grinned proudly to herself as she surveyed her handiwork - even if it had only been plugging in a couple speaker wires on the little distressed buffet against one of the walls in her living room. It had been worth the struggle of lugging the oversized box all the way back to her apartment building and holding it against the wall with her hip as she’d unlocked her door.

Finally - she fetched her new record off the counter. Looked at the same track listing and the beautifully simple design of the cover before she took the immaculate piece of vinyl out carefully - afraid it would break if she did something wrong. It took her a few tries to get it right after she slid it onto the spindle. And she hadn’t been expecting the jarring scratching noise that resulted from her failed attempts. But - eventually - after more than a little focus and eye-squinting - she found the song. And her apartment was filled with the bright, happy melody she’d found herself humming all morning.

Her thoughts, though? Her thoughts were a few miles away as she plopped down in the armchair she usually curled up in to read a book or to nap. A few blocks down in a crowded little shop full of clothes and records and furniture and an old, ugly little dog. And Sylvanas.

Now, in the much needed privacy she was currently enjoying, she smiled. She liked her glasses. Sylvanas liked her glasses. Her dumb, nerdy glasses that she wore when she didn’t really care about her own appearance. Those glasses.

“You think she likes me?” Sylvanas held another treat out to the half-awake dog on the wing-backed chair near the door of her shop. She leaned against the front counter with her legs sprawled in front of her.

Nathanos took the treat from her without answering and she gave his wrinkled, greying ear a gentle tug. “Nothing for me, huh, bud?” He looked at her hand for another treat and she smiled half-heartedly and placed it on the cushion for him. “I probably should’ve made sure she knows I at least have a cell phone. She probably thinks I communicate through letters or smoke signals or something.”

Still nothing. Just a quiet snort as he stood and stretched and moved to lay so he was facing away from her.

“Nathaniel. Windrunner.” She narrowed her eyes at him and when he just settled in more comfortably for more sleep her head thudded backwards against the glass of the display cabinet and she stared up at the ceiling through the dust motes the dim rays of sunlight filtering in through the front windows and door caught as they floated around.

“I feed you. I clothe you. I put a roof over our heads. And you can’t even tell me if a girl likes me. All you do is eat and drool.”

She glanced over at him as she was met with a quiet snore and her expression softened. She reached over to stroke along the thinning hair of his back. “Me, too, bud. Me, too.”
"Make Me Smile"
Chicago

Children play in the park, they don't know
I'm alone in the dark, even though
Time and time again I see your face smiling inside
  I'm so happy
  That you love me
  Life is lovely
  When you're near me
  Tell me you will stay
  Make me smile
Living life is just a game so they say
All the games we used to play fade away
We may now enjoy the dreams we shared so long ago
Oh my darling, got to have you. Feel the magic when I hold you
Cry sweet tears of joy, touch the sky
Now I need you more than ever. No more crying - we're together
Tell me you will stay. Make me smile
Chapter Summary

You're up, Poot!

“What is that, Aunty?”

Jaina looked up from the paper she was reviewing to find that it hadn't been Kinndy that had opened her door, but Anduin. Anduin, who she was starting to regret giving a copy of her apartment keys to. Anduin, who was staring at the record player she had hoped he wouldn't notice for at least another week or two.

“Anduin,” she said seriously, trying to recapture his eyes. “You didn't tell me you were coming. You know you are always welcome to hang out, but text me first? We're kind of in the middle of something.”

The we of that was her and Calia, a family friend and undergrad she had been tutoring. The something was Calia's essay that they were going over, which honestly didn't need much in the way of help, but the girl was nervous about it all the same.

“I did,” he told her, making a beeline for the record player and not even looking her way. Anduin leaned over it as he went on, “You just haven’t looked at your phone in hours, so I figured it was time for a wellness check. Better me than the cops.”
Sure enough, Jaina’s phone had been long since forgotten on the coffee table. Silenced as it usually was for class or the library, she hadn't even thought to look at it. She pulled up not one, but then texts from Anduin, which descended from a request to grab sushi with him for lunch into a mess of crying emojis and pictures of sad kittens.

“Oh,” was all she could say in response.

Anduin poked at the needle before turning around to face her. “Yeah about that. Anyway, glad to see you're not dead, just busy diving off the hipster deep end. Or maybe diving into…”

“Don't start,” Jaina warned him, even as she felt a smile begin to betray her. “I will explain if you let me and Calia finish up here, but only if you keep your comments to yourself until then.”

“Oh yeah, hey Cals.” Anduin waved to the other woman as he took up residence in Jaina's armchair and sprawled out in it. “I have no idea what comments you are even thinking about, Aunty. But I will wait right here, quietly and politely. Angelically, even.”

Jaina rolled her eyes and turned back to Calia, who was trying very hard not to laugh. “Anyway, before we were so rudely interrupted, I was just going to say that this section looks fine to me. If anything, you might want to toss in another quote for the source here. I know there's several passages that back up the argument you are making here. Having more evidence from the book is never a bad thing.”

She handed the draft back to the younger woman. Calia took it with an air of skepticism. “Really? You didn't think that would be too much.”

“If your professor disagrees, then drop that class, because he would be so wrong. I think you are doing great so far, Calia. You hardly need my help,” Jaina told her.

“I still appreciate it all the same,” Calia said as she tucked the essay into a folder and started packing up her bag. “Same time next week?”

Jaina offered her a nod and moved to walk her to the door.

Anduin didn't even wait for her to close it behind the younger woman before he started, “Hey now, how come you never help me with my papers?”

“One,” Jaina told him as the door finally clicked into place, “you never asked. Two, your mother doesn't demand from my mother that I help you. Three, my mother doesn't demand from me that I do, because you don't have a meathead for a brother she is still intent on having me date.”

“Oh my god,” he snorted. “Mama P still wants you to be Mrs. Arthas Menethil? Didn't she get the hint back in high school? Man, she is gonna be so pissed when you bring your new girlfriend home, huh?”

“Anduin,” she warned again as she turned to face him and found him with a shit-eating grin

“Keep saying my name like it's a curse word, Aunty. I'm living for it. Anyway, when is your lesbian hipster wedding? Do I have to wear a man bun if I'm the best man? Honestly, I would look good with it, so I won't be upset if you say yes,” Anduin kept on as he slid forward onto the edge of the chair.

“Just because I bought a record player doesn't mean that I…” Jaina trailed off.

“That you what? Like her? Love her? Want to get to know the depths of her soul? Nah, it's cool,
Aunty. You are totally not even into music at all, but have somehow come to own a bangin’ turntable and a single, lonely LP,” Anduin noted as he stood and poked at the empty record cover for the album she’d bought.

“It was just a really nice song,” Jaina tried to defend herself. “She played it for me when I returned your stupid pants.”

“Oh played it for you, huh? Just for you?”

Jaina knew that anything else she could say would only make it worse, so she just grabbed a pillow off of the couch and threw it at him.

Anduin just laughed at he swatted the projectile away.

“I’m just saying that it’s a little ridiculous to buy a record player for just one record,” he finally said.

“You do far more ridiculous things on a daily basis, so I don’t want to hear any of this from you,” Jaina told him as she launched a second pillow at him.

Anduin caught this one and held it up, threatening to throw it back at her. “Nothing as ridiculous as you are about this little crush of yours! Let me live a little, Jaina. I never have anything good to tease you about. You are always so boring and nice. It's a relief to see you can stoop down to being human sometimes.”

Jaina stopped in her attempts to reach a third pillow. Was she? Was she really that boring? That dull?

Maybe. Maybe she was. This was a fact she might have relished at times. Standing out was a thing for other people, like Anduin. Jaina did her best to stay focused on the future and keep her head down. She did everything right. She got good grades. She helped people. She didn't make waves or get in trouble.

So why did that bother her?

“Anyway,” Anduin said as he went back over to the couch and put the pillow back down in its usual spot. “It’s way too late for lunch now. I actually just came from dinner. So are you gonna buy me a smoothie or what?”

“Make a bet with me,” Jaina demanded instead.

“What?”

Jaina stared hard at him. She wasn't boring. “Make a bet with me for that smoothie.”

Anduin gave her a questioning look, then followed her eyes as they darted over to the record player and back. Another wide grin took over his features as he said, “A bet, huh? Bet you won’t go buy another record.”

Jaina would let him think that was his entirely idea. She would also not let herself think that she was just using him as an excuse.

She looked at the low light seeping in through her living room windows, then at her watch. “Anduin, it's 8:00. She's probably closed, or will be by the time we get there.”

“Then I guess you're buying me a smoothie on the way there. You know, just in case,” Anduin said as he launched a surprise attack with another couch pillow.
The crackle of static filled the shop as the record playing upstairs reached its end. Sylvanas didn't bother to go up to change it. She was busy counting out the register, fretting over how little it had changed throughout the course of the day.

“Here I thought September was going to be good to us,” she noted as she flipped through the last stack of singles. “With all the college kids coming back…”

Nathanos, as usual, did not have any wisdom to offer. He had taken up residence on the counter, with an earlier lift from her, and was dozing on a pile of unopened mail. Mail that she didn't want to open. Bills she didn't have the money to pay. Credit she badly needed, but couldn't take on any more of. Worries. Problems. The life that she had chosen for herself, lest she forget.

She pulled the drawer out to bring it to the safe. It was 8:58. It had been dead all day. No one was going to complain about her closing two minutes early.

And of course, as soon as she thought this, the front door bell chimed.

Fuck.

“Oh my god! You don’t say!” an overly loud voice cried from the entrance.

Sylvanas leaned forward just enough to get a glimpse of who the offending asshole was, who had dared to walk into her shop at this hour. Oh shit. Assholes. Well, no, not assholes.

Jaina and her friend, Anduin, wasn’t it? Anduin, who was talking on the phone with a volume that surely was not necessary. Anduin, who was holding said phone in one hand and a pink smoothie in the other.

Jaina, who was wearing her glasses again. Jaina, who gave her a little smile and a wave over her own purple and blue to-go cup.

“No shit? Well, lucky for you I’m right in your neighborhood. No it’s not too much trouble. I can swing by right now, even.”

Was he winking at her? No.

“Anduin,” Jaina said, giving him a shove. “You’re practically screaming.”

“I’m on my way. Bye!” the young man said as he rather dramatically hung up and flipped his phone back into the pocket of his jeans. He then finally turned to his slightly embarrassed friend, “Sorry, Aunty. That was my partner for a class project. He’s such a nerd. A cute one, though. He wants me to come over to his to fix a mistake we made. We have to do a whole giant section over again and it’s due tomorrow. But he lives like a block from here. You cool if I jet over there?”

Jaina shot him one brief, slightly incredulous look before she sighed, “Your education comes first, Anduin. I think I’ll be alright.”

Okay, he was definitely winking at Sylvanas this time. Definitely. “I’m sure you will be,” Anduin said. “Thanks for understanding!” He offered both of them one last little wave before heading right back out of the door that he’d come in.

Jaina laughed as she watched him go. She turned back to Sylvanas and peered around the corner to get a full view of the jewelry counter before saying, “Sorry, I know it’s late. Are you still open?”
Well, it was officially 9pm, so no. But, “Oh yeah,” was what came out of Sylvanas’ mouth all the same.

Because this wasn’t the kind of girl you said no to. No, not with her little smirk. Not with those slightly blue-tinged, pouty lips, stained already from the few sips that were missing from her smoothie. Her hair was in a ponytail today, which was half falling out in whispy trails around her face, framing her in gold, almost like an old portrait of a saint.

And she could have been one too, until she tripped right over an end table and almost came crashing to the floor. Jaina just barely caught herself on the far corner of the jewelry counter, but not before she crushed the smoothie cup between the edge of it and her chest.

“I’m fine! I’m fine!” she insisted as she quickly recovered. “I didn’t break anything, right?”

No, she didn’t break anything. Even the end table that had tripped her had just barely wobbled. The old radio on it didn’t even so much as move.

But Jaina’s white shirt was now generously stained with blue and purple. Flecks of darker material were running down it. If Sylvanas had to hazard a guess, it was a blueberry smoothie that was now dripping over the glass of the counter and Jaina’s chest, respectively.

“Oh, let me...get you a paper towel or something,” Sylvanas offered, trying not to let her eyes linger too long on the stain, lest that be interpreted as anything else but concern for Jaina’s now ruined blouse.

Jaina looked down to find out the bad news for herself. “Shit,” she muttered, already defeated. “It was blueberry.”

Sylvanas ducked under the counter to find a roll of paper towels she kept there and offered it to Jaina. Nathanos had stirred from his bed of mail to saunter over to the side of the counter that still had some smoothie on it. He began to lick up the remainder.

Sylvanas just laughed as she pat his pudgy little back. “I can tell. He loves blueberry.”

Jaina, meanwhile, was trying her best to save what little dignity she had left. Unfortunately the paper towels weren’t doing much for either that or her shirt. “This isn’t going to come out, is it?”

Sylvanas chanced another glance at the white blouse and snorted out a little laugh. “I mean, maybe if you wash it out now?”

“Do you have a bathroom then?”

No. No she did not. She had a sign that no one ever read on the front door that boldly said “NO PUBLIC RESTROOMS”. But...she did live above the shop.

Sylvanas shook her head, mostly at herself, even as she offered, “Not down here, no. But in my apartment on the third floor, yes.”

Fuck. Had she really said that?

The surprise in Jaina’s eyes told her she had.

Shit.

Sylvanas reached down to pet Nathanos again to distract herself while she waited for an answer.
Those freckled cheeks of Jaina’s grew dark again as they flushed. Her glasses scrunched up her nose a little. She smiled, cautiously, if such a thing was possible. “I mean, if you don’t mind?”

Holy shit.

“I uh, I was just closing up anyway. If you wanna give me a second to finish that, I can take you up?” Sylvanas half-asked once she recovered the power of speech.

“You don’t have to,” Jaina told her even as she watched her lock the drawer back up to move it into the safe, as Sylvanas had been trying to when they walked in.

“It’s no trouble,” she blurted out as she banged it inelegantly on the corner of the register, causing a harsh jingle of metal and coins to ring in her sensitive ears. Sylvanas winced as she made her way to the safe in one of the lower cabinets behind the counter. She entered the combination incorrectly only three times before she finally got it right.

She managed to get her thoughts back from a racing panic in time to stand back up and find Jaina cleaning the rest of the spill on the counter and scratching Nathanos behind his ears as she wiped a wad of paper towels around him. Nathanos, who never let strangers touch him without a growl.

Nathanos, who was perfectly content to continue licking up the remaining blueberry slush while Jaina let out a low laugh at his enthusiasm for her leftovers.

Who the fuck was this woman?

Sylvanas had to clear her throat to get the next words out, “I just gotta lock up the front and set the alarm.”

“I’ll hang here then,” Jaina said. “And help this guy clean up. What’s his name?”

“Nathanos,” Sylvanas told her as she slid past her and around the other end of the counter. “He must really like your smoothie. He’s usually grumpy with strangers.”

“That’s quite a long name for a little dog,” Jaina called after her as Sylvanas went to bolt the front door.

“It’s an even longer story,” she replied as she keyed in the alarm code on a panel by the door. Wait. Did that sound dismissive. No. Not this time. No. “I mean, I’ll tell you it sometime.”

She turned to find Nathanos licking more blueberry off of Jaina’s hand as she laughed.

This was dangerous. So dangerous. Why the hell did she invite her up again? How could she have possibly thought that was a good idea?

Sylvanas did not need to be falling for anyone right now. She had so many other things to worry about. So many other wounds that hadn’t quite healed, but were just closing over. So many others that were still open and bleeding. The girl could be straight for all she knew anyway. She did not need this.

But she wanted it all the same.

“Uh, all set,” she finally blurted out as she walked back to the counter. “The door is upstairs.”

“I don’t think he’s gonna let me leave,” Jaina said with a nod toward Nathanos, who was still licking the sticky mess that was her left hand.
Sylvanas moved in to scoop the dog up in her arms. “At least take a girl out to dinner first, Nathaniel. That’s very rude of you.”

Jaina laughed again. That fucking laugh. It was soft and genuine—as warm as sunlight and as addicting as nicotine.

Sylvanas headed up the stairs before she could show just how much it was affecting her.

Jaina followed below, still holding onto the railing, not trusting the metal staircase. “I didn’t see a door up here before. I thought you said no place was off limits?”

“That’s because you’re not supposed to see the door,” Sylvanas told her, regaining her stride a little.

Yes, that was the idea. The door was hidden well by the giant mirror that hung on it. It was one of the few things in the shop that didn’t have a price tag on it, because it had been the perfect fit for the space, and there was no chance she’d ever find another to replace it. The black of its frame blended in perfectly with the black paint of the walls, and made it look as though there was no difference in depth behind it. But there was.

Jaina let out an appreciative hum as Sylvanas unlocked it and slid the pocket door aside, collapsing it and the mirror along with it into the wall.

“I would have never seen that,” she noted.

“Exactly,” Sylvanas said, daring to turn back and flash her a smile.

When Jaina flashed one back at her, she had no choice but to quickly turn and fumble for the light switch.

Sylvanas lead the way up the stairs to her little loft. Her home. Her refuge, as if that didn’t really apply to this entire building. It did. Who was she kidding?

Fuck. When was the last time she’d cleaned again?

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At the top of a set of whitewashed stairs was both exactly what Jaina had imagined the apartment would look like, and exactly what she hadn’t. She could almost feel the nervous energy buzzing along her skin as she found herself standing awkwardly against a row of brightly-painted kitchen cabinets, looking out over the rest of a studio that was somehow both cluttered, but incredibly organized and cozy all the same.

The walls were covered with posters and tapestries and art that was clearly too important to be for sale down below. The wooden floor barely shown beneath a mishmash of rugs that defined the spaces—one in front of a console with a record player, another under a queen-size bed. The moon even peeked in from a sunroom set off in the back. Holy shit. A sunroom?

But it was small. It was eccentric. It smelled good, like old paper and cold coffee. It was extremely fitting for the beautiful little hipster that lived there.

Sylvanas came up behind her and set her dog down on the floor. He gave a forlorn look toward his empty bowl before heading for a little dog bed near the console.

“The bathroom is the door back there,” Sylvanas said as she pointed across the apartment.
The bathroom was also small. It was also impeccably decorated, with black and white tiles and concert photos framed in silver. It also smelled good, like expensive shampoo.

But try as she might, even with the aid of whatever sort of organic hand soap, or whatever this was in the container next to the sink, Jaina couldn't get the blueberry out of her shirt. It was a lost cause. A lost cause that only served to see her soaked and regretting every decision that had brought her to this moment. That had led her here, standing in the bathroom of an admittedly very attractive stranger, realizing that she had done nothing except for making her shirt see through.

A knock on the door stirred her from her laments.

“Any luck?” Sylvanas asked from outside.

“It's toast,” Jaina reported. “Hey uh, you don't have a shirt I can borrow for now, do you? I've managed to make this one a little too transparent to walk home in.”

Sylvanas coughed. “Um, yeah, just a sec.”

Jaina heard all together far too much noise beyond the door to really be attributed to looking for a shirt, but she didn't question it. She was too busy trying to snoop on exactly what brand of shampoo it was that she kept smelling. She was was about to step into the tub and fully commit to finding out when another knock came at the door.

Jaina spun around to see it open a crack, as a fistful of black fabric was pushed through the gap, waiting for her.

“Let me know if this doesn't work,” Sylvanas offered in muted tones on the other side of the door.

Jaina took the proffered shirt. It was soft, well-worn and a little faded. She unfurled it to reveal a simple black t-shirt with white lettering and a graphic of a falling angel.

“Oh hey! I know Led Zeppelin!” Jaina found herself proclaiming a bit too proudly as she began to shrug out of her ruined blouse.

“Man, I hope so,” Sylvanas sighed from out in the apartment. She still sounded close, but Jaina supposed there wasn't anywhere that was really too far away in the tiny loft. “Or I would have to question if you were living under a rock before you came to New York.”

“I mean, I kind of was…” Jaina trailed off as she slid the soft black fabric over her head, thinking better of the temptation to spill her life story to this woman as she stole her clothes and tried to snoop on her hair care routine.

It was justified. Sylvanas’ hair was gorgeous. There had to be some secret to it, right?

Just as Jaina was about to peek into the shower again, music began to seep in from outside. The familiar wail of guitars echoed underneath the crack at the bottom of the door. Finally, a song she knew.

Jaina walked out to find Sylvanas at the record player, grinning as she tucked the empty jacket beside it. There was no title on it. Just a picture of an old man. But the music was clearly Led Zeppelin. That much, Jaina was sure of.

“This is their best album. Thanks for reminding me that I hadn't listened to it in a while,” she said. “Do you want a uh, drink or anything? That shirt is a mess, so feel free to spill whatever on it.”
“I think I’d better stick to water all the same,” Jaina said. She had no idea what was on that album. She just knew the songs she’d put together into a Spotify playlist a while back. She almost felt guilty for thinking about that word around Sylvanas. Would she kick her out now, if she started talking about digital music?

Probably.

Fuck. What was she doing? She needed to cut her losses and go home. She’d already made a complete ass of herself. Why was she just giving herself more opportunities to look like an idiot?

Sylvanas laughed, though. A low, easy laugh that relaxed her shoulders and followed a twitch of her long ears. “You're in luck. Water is one of my specialties.”

Jaina watched her turn to the colorful cabinets and pull out two glasses. She watched as those delicate hands dug around in the freezer for an ice tray. She stopped watching when the other woman bent down to reach into the fridge and grab a bottle of water.

She didn’t want to stop, but you know, it’s not polite to stare.

It was also not polite to wear skinny jeans and an oversized hoodie around someone who was currently deep in the middle of a crisis of sexuality, but Jaina wasn't about to complain about that either.

“Sorry it's kind of a mess in here,” Sylvanas apologized as she handed Jaina one of the glasses.

Jaina caught herself staring again as Sylvanas unzipped said oversized hoodie and threaded herself out of it, revealing a red and white ringer t-shirt underneath that read “Disco is UNdead”, under her shop’s logo. And her arms. Fuck. Her arms. Toned, probably from carrying all that furniture around. The left one was covered in tattoos. Flowers and feathers, from what Jaina could see. The right had a few as well that she couldn't get a good look at from this angle.

Fuck.

“No way. It's really cool up here. I love your sunroom, porch, thing...” Jaina said as she all but jammed the glass of water to her face to stop herself from saying anything else.

Sylvanas laughed. “Yeah, it’s pretty unique.” She set her sweatshirt down on the little kitchen table and started walking over to the windowed room. “It’s a shame there’s not much of a view, though.”

Jaina couldn’t help but follow her. She was right. Most of the tall buildings around hers blocked out the night sky. The light haze of New York even blocked out the stars. Only the moon was bright enough to make an appearance, shining down on them, cutting the golden light of the city with a sliver of pure silver.

“It’s still beautiful,” Jaina told her.

It was, though. The space was nearly empty, save for a plush rug on the floor and another set of speakers that carried the sound of the record with them. A tall houseplant thrived in one corner, some sort of big flowering thing that Jaina couldn’t name. Otherwise, it was just the windows that extended up to the ceiling, and then became it.

She was just about to ask what Sylvanas used it for when the elf set her glass of water down on the window sill and laid down on the rug. Her eyes never left the moon, and Jaina couldn’t help but notice the extra tinge of silver that they took on in the eerie light.
“It’s awesome here when it rains,” Sylvanas told her. “It was raining when they showed me this place. I knew I had to have it. The store isn’t what exactly I wanted it to be, but this makes up for it.”

Jaina took one last sip of her own water before she set it down beside the other glass, then flopped down next to Sylvanas. The rug was surprisingly soft. The moon was just bright enough. And honestly, she swore that she could hear a little better down here. The last notes of one familiar song petered out into another. A crescendo of guitar and mandolin, notes piling up upon one another, building as two voices joined the melody. Ah yes, another song she knew.

“You’re gonna call me a massive nerd, but this is why I know Led Zeppelin. They were so influenced by literature. This song, for instance, is full of references to the Lord of the Rings. I wrote a paper about it in undergrad,” Jaina told her.

Sylvanas sighed and stretched out more next to her. “I don’t have any right to call anyone a massive nerd. I mean, you see what I’ve chosen to do with my life. But I think that’s really cool. Did you get a good grade?”

“Of course.”

They both laughed. Jaina liked how those sounds blended together, Sylvanas’ low chuckle and her brighter one. It was almost like a duet.

And somehow, it just happened. They started talking, through the rest of The Battle of Evermore, and into Stairway to Heaven. Nathanos came over and curled up to sleep in the narrow space between them when Sylvanas came back from flipping the record and Misty Mountain Hop started. He gave off cute little sleepy grunts when Sylvanas would get too animated in explaining the electric piano that was used in it, or when Jaina pointed out that it was yet another Tolkien reference.

Jaina found herself listening rather than talking by the time Four Sticks came on, and that’s how she learned the title of the song. Sylvanas passionately explained the trivia behind the song, telling her about how the band only played it live once, how the title was a reference to the fact that it requires four sticks to play it on the drums. She did all this quietly and reverently, between the notes, interweaving her explanations with the song itself.

But when the next track came on, with it’s quiet, smooth acoustic sound contrasting against the harder rock, Sylvanas went silent for a moment.

“This song is my opposite,” she finally said.

“Why’s that?” Jaina asked her, turning a little to face her, but careful not to disturb the dog that had finally settled into sleep just above her knee.

“Well, I guess not really. Sort of. I’m from California. This song makes me miss it, a lot. But it also reminds me there’s nothing there for me to go back to. Or well, nothing that will have me,” Sylvanas told her.

Jaina could see that it wasn’t something she should press on. She could see it in the way that Sylvanas’ eyes went distant, focusing again on the moon that loomed above them still, though it was threatening to set behind one of the buildings now.

“No trivia on this one for me then? How am I supposed to win at the next bar I definitely won’t let anyone drag me to?” Jaina prodded, trying to steer her from whatever was causing her to drift away.

“Another time maybe,” Sylvanas told her.
“You know, I don’t think I’d mind that at all. A next time, that is,” Jaina said, swallowing back the last bit of nerves she had. There was no reason for them. This was nice. She was making a friend. A really cool friend. She was picking up a new hobby. She was doing what people did in New York—thriving on connections, experiencing new things.

That finally got her. Sylvanas turned a little more to face her. “I um...I know I really cool bookstore. Used, and vintage, of course. You might have guessed that already. I think you’d like it, though. Do you wanna meet up there sometime?”

“Yes. Tomorrow?” Jaina’s mouth answered before her brain could even follow.

Honestly, she would have been content to lay on this rug for an entire day. This was really nice. But a bookstore. Well, that was one way to catch her interest.

“I mean I have a phone,” Sylvanas said as she rolled over more and pulled a smart phone out of her back pocket and unlocked it, showing Jaina the screen. “I’m not a mess enough to communicate through like, pigeons or whatever. I’m rambling. Tomorrow. Yeah. Monday. That’s good. I’m closed Mondays.”

Was that a blush creeping up? Jaina didn’t know many high elves. Were her ears that red before, or had she not noticed?

Why did she care?

She cleared her throat and reminded herself that she wasn’t about to slip back into that again. She reached out for Sylvanas’ phone. She waited for her to let go of it willingly, and tried not to think about how their fingers had brushed, just so slightly, as she typed in a contact for herself.

Sylvanas barely had anyone in her phone. Jaina tried not to be nosy, but she couldn’t help but look at the small list of contacts. How could someone be so lonely, in such a big city?

She handed the phone back before she could think too much about it.

“I’ll text you then?” Sylvanas asked as she examined the phone with a genuine smile.

“I have a meeting in the morning, but I’m free any time after that,” Jaina told her with a matching grin.

Wait. Fuck. Shit. Jaina reached for Sylvanas’ phone again, twisting the screen around to see it again. This time she wasn’t looking at the tiny contact list. She looked at the top of the screen. At the time.

It was past fucking midnight.

“Shit! I have a meeting in the morning!” she said as she scrambled to her feet. “Ugh, I’m sorry I kept you so late! Where did the time go?”

Sylvanas laughed as she stood up as well. The record spun to its last song, and the electric guitars sang out loud and proud once more. “That happens sometimes. Here, I’ll show you out,” Sylvanas offered.

Jaina grunted another apology or seven as she gathered her still drenched and stained shirt from the bathroom and followed Sylvanas back down the stairs and into the darkened shop.

“Tomorrow then?” she asked as Sylvanas disarmed the alarm and unlocked the front door for her.
“Yeah, tomorrow,” Sylvanas replied quietly, that same smile still on her face. “And thanks.”

“For what?” Jaina asked as she held the door half open to the chill air of the September night. “Making a mess? Taking your shirt? Wasting your evening?”

“None of that. Just...thanks,” Sylvanas repeated.

On the walk back home, Jaina was treated to the second set of sad kitten pictures for the day as she opened another flurry of worried texts from Anduin on her phone.

Jaina quickly typed up her reply.

_Sorry, time got away from me. I'm fine, I promise._

_Did you get a record? A kiss? A fingerbang or two?_

_No. None of that, but maybe a new friend._

_Uh huh._

_And her number._

_WHAT?????
“Her number?” Anduin demanded with the most agitating grin Jaina had ever seen plastered on his face.

Jaina was tired. She’d only gotten a few hours of sleep once she’d prepped for the meeting and gotten herself ready for bed. Yet somehow she couldn’t help the little smile his expression and his question...or rather the subject of his question brought to her face.

“Yeah. Her number. And we’re going to a book store this afternoon.” Jaina looked over at Anduin as his grin got even bigger. Even more ridiculous. “Can you stop smiling like that? Please? I’m allowed to make friends, you know.”

“Hot hipster elf lady friends that grin at you and make you blush and take you to look at your favorite things in the whole world? Yeah. You’re definitely allowed. You’re also allowed to be gay, but, like, you know.”

Jaina fell silent in response and Anduin picked up on it immediately. He performed well in less serious situations, but often felt like he was lacking in others. Especially when he caused them. “I’m sorry, Aunty. So, tell me more about your night.”
His slight feeling of discomfort and anxiety faded as they walked across one of the many courtyards of their campus and Jaina became more and more animated as she spoke. She told him things about Led Zeppelin that he might have never cared to know - but things that he certainly did, now. Gradually, the conversation shifted to more personal things. Like Sylvanas’s ugly, cute dog and how perfect her apartment was. And, finally, to Sylvanas, herself.

“And she took off her hoodie and I just...I don’t know. She has the most beautiful tattoos, Andy. And she’s so fucking tan. Nobody is that tan here. Not like that, anyway. It isn’t like she goes to a tanning bed...I mean, I guess it’s possible. But I don’t really think she’s the type.”

“Mhm.”

“And she just...we just laid there. For a long time, and...the way she talks about music is just…” Jaina trailed off as she searched for the right words. “It’s like she can make an explanation sound like part of the song. She just fills the empty places with words.”

“Uhhuh.”

“It isn’t that I don’t love you and Kinndy. Like, you know I do. But it’s nice to make a friend, I guess. She’s just so different. I don’t really buy into the whole ‘aura’ bullshit, but…”

“Jaina?”

Her eyes snapped over to Anduin suddenly and she lifted a brow more at herself than anything else. She expected some sort of smart remark. She really did. But this?

“If you don’t fuck her, I will.”

Jaina was a mixture of mortified and amused, suddenly. Neither of them were sure which would win out for a moment - until she finally responded.

“Anduin, you’re gay...and a self-proclaimed bottom.”

“Yeah, doesn’t she look like a top to you? She kinda puts off that vibe. All I’m saying is she could get it and if she can’t get it from you-”

He paused as his books were suddenly shoved from his hand to land, scattered on the ground of the courtyard. “Jaina that was a dick move.” He complained quietly as he knelt down to begin picking them up.

“You are a dick move, Andy.” Jaina left him to clean up the mess she’d made on his own. She had too much on her mind. Way, way too much on her mind after that last comment - and she needed to get ready for...for hanging out. They were hanging out. Sylvanas probably definitely had a girlfriend, and Jaina was probably definitely still straight.

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“Almost ready for your date?” Kinndy called out in the direction of the closed bathroom door on her way past the little nook that led to Jaina’s bedroom.

“Not a date!” Jaina shouted back as she looked herself over in the mirror for what must have been the dozenth time - adjusting the short-sleeved button-up shirt she had tucked into her high-waisted jeans and finally leaving the bathroom.
Kinndy looked into the kitchen at her as she drummed her fingertips against the counter and stared down at the screen of her phone.

“I’m half an hour early.” Jaina muttered distractedly to herself.

“And you forgot to put in your contacts.” Kinndy added - assuming she was being a helpful friend.

“I’m, uh...I’m not wearing them.” Jaina responded as she bit her lower lip and finally decided to text Sylvanas.

_I’m going to go ahead and head downtown. I’m free a little earlier than I thought. No need to change your plans, though, just giving you a heads up._

“Why?” Kinndy asked curiously as she moved down along the couch to rest her chin against the arm that was closest to the kitchen.

“She likes them.” The response slipped out before she could really consider it and it wasn’t until Kinndy made a quiet noise that sounded suspiciously like laughter that she finally looked up at her and it dawned on her. Only...she didn’t have an excuse for this one.

“Likes what, your glasses?” Kinndy asked as she managed to reign her reaction in again before talking. “Has she seen you without the colored contacts, though?”

Jaina furrowed her brow and tried to recall what she’d been wearing that first time. She couldn’t. Not for the life of her. Had she had them in? Had she not? She definitely had the second time...fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

She raced towards the bathroom and tossed her glasses onto the sink counter and reached up towards her medicine cabinet for her contact lense case and didn’t come back out until they were both in and settled behind her glasses. Her glasses which she was also wearing.

“This is getting a little ridiculous, Jaina.” Kinndy commented idly from her place on the couch as Jaina simply brushed her off.

“Let me worry about me. You worry about you.” Jaina responded quickly as she rushed towards the kitchen for her phone and made her way out the door - ignoring the high-pitched laughter that came in response just before she shut it behind herself.

The elevator down didn’t help her nerves. Didn’t stop her fingertips drumming on the back of her phone as she bounced slightly on her heels and nearly dropped her phone altogether when it vibrated in her hand.

_I’m at the bookstore. I’ll see you when you get here :)_.

Jaina narrowed her eyes as she studied the text for a moment - only glancing up every now and then to make sure she wasn’t running into anyone. Finally, though, she slid her phone into her back pocket and sighed. It was just a text. Just a regular text. All of this was completely...regular.

It was completely regular the way her heart felt like it skipped one too many beats when she cornered the block she’d been walking towards and saw Sylvanas waiting for her outside. Completely regular how that toothy grin made her feel and how good...no...no. It was a nice outfit. She didn’t ‘look good’ in it. It was just nice. It was nice to see her in torn jeans that exposed her knees and a hoodie that looked very, very soft. It was normal to think about the tattoos underneath it and wonder if there were more. The boots. The boots - half opened with the hem of her skinny jeans tucked into them - were a nice touch. A nice. Normal. Regular. Touch.
“Hey, you. Glad you made it.”

It was normal how gentle Sylvanas’s voice felt against her ears and how it had an almost musical quality to it - even in the absence of the music that seemed so interwoven into her life.

“Wouldn’t miss it.” Jaina responded with a grin.

“You wore your glasses.” Sylvanas commented as she held the door open for her and walked in after her. Sylvanas was smiling and it was so, so warm. There was something almost appreciative in her eyes and the curve of her lips that made Jaina very glad she’d worn them, but her only response was a rather nervous smile and a duck of her head.

With anyone else - Sylvanas might have pressed it. Might have told her they were cute or something. But with Jaina, no. She seemed so...soft, and it was so easy to fluster her and while that was adorable to a point...she also felt a strange urge to make things as simple as possible for her. No matter what that meant. Even if it meant nothing at all.

“So - books.” Sylvanas winced inwardly and looked away from Jaina as the shop bell chimed when the door shut behind them.

“Yeah, books.” Jaina responded with a grin. “I really like them. But you knew that when you invited me here, right?”

Sylvanas glanced over at Jaina in time to watch her crinkle her nose. “Yeah. I kinda did, huh?”

They walked down an isle silently and Sylvanas glanced at a book here and there, but mostly enjoyed watching Jaina excitedly flip to read publishing dates and edition counts. “Sylvanas!”

The older woman jumped slightly at the sudden calling of her name and turned quickly with a lifted brow.

“It’s a first edition! Sylvanas!”

“I’m right here!” She reassured quietly as she moved to stand beside her and look down at the worn book she held in her hands. Her brow furrowed as she tried to read the cover and she leaned down slightly only to find no words had survived however many years this book had been through. Not on the outside, at least.

There was something about the way Jaina’s fingertips brushed the cover and the spine and traced the bindings before she opened it for the first time that Sylvanas found strangely intimate. So these were Jaina’s records. Books. “How did you know it was a first edition?” She asked quietly.

“A friend of mine had one. She wouldn’t part with it, though. And see -” She traced the publisher and date on the first page and Sylvanas was surprised at how clear and crisp the typeface still was. It made the date seem even less likely. “1863. There were only fifteen thousand of these. Two runs in later years, but this was its most successful printing, so it’s rare to find them anymore. People tended to hold onto them. Read them until they were too worn to save.”

“What’s it about?” Sylvanas asked as Jaina handed the book over to her. She held it as though it were made of glass and - with the most delicate of touches - began to turn the pages and glance over them.

“It’s poetry. Only...in a narrative format, I suppose you could say. At least more narrative than most collections, just not quite so much as, say, the Canterbury Tales.” Jaina checked to see if Sylvanas was ready to head for the hills on that one - but she was just tracing words with her fingertip and
further inspecting the little volume.

“Mm, Canterbury Tales. Thanks for dragging me back to Highschool Lit.” She handed the book back to Jaina and stayed close to her as she tried to gauge the almost apprehensive expression on her face. “Don’t stop. I like hearing about things. Especially when the person explaining them is excited.”

Jaina felt some of the edge of anxiety that had crept in fade, then, and a certain measure of warmth replace it. She thought about returning that reassurance. Thought about telling her that’s how she felt about those records in her apartment...but she was more comfortable with literature than with whatever this was.

So - in the warmth of light filtering through the shop’s windows between the bookshelves, they found themselves sitting on the floor as the bored shopkeeper up front let them be - and Sylvanas learned about Ole Bull and Thomas William Parsons and his translation of Dante until, finally, Jaina closed the book after examining it carefully and breathing in deeply.

“I like the smell, too.” Sylvanas said as Jaina’s eyes slowly opened again. The older woman toyed with one of the fraying bracelets around her own slender wrist and looked at Jaina out of the corner of her eye.

“Almost everyone does. It’s the same as your records...the jackets, anyway - just more concentrated. A lot of people compare it to coffee or chocolate because there just isn’t a good word for it. Wood never stops decomposing.”

Sylvanas’s brows shot up worriedly in a way that caused Jaina to laugh quietly. “Slowly. Paper decomposes slowly. This book is over a hundred and fifty years old. Your babies are safe. It’s just...a release of chemicals. And our minds don’t quite know how to process it. Maybe that’s what makes it so alluring. The fact that we have a hard time understanding it.”

“Thank you.”

Jaina’s expression was questioning. Why did she keep thanking her, and what had she done to deserve it this time?

“...Why?”

Wow, Jaina. How eloquent of you.

“For sharing that with me. I think that’s one of my favorite things anyone has ever told me.”

Oh. ...Oh.

Jaina was quiet for a long time. As though she couldn’t quite comprehend that. This was something she held so close to herself. Something most people didn’t have the energy or the interest to care to understand. So she never talked about it. She didn’t want to be too nerdy. Too this. Too that. The flutter in her chest felt so strange and out of place.

“You’re welcome.” Jaina’s voice was so soft that it made Sylvanas’s ear shift against the slit it rested through in her beanie. She glanced down at where Jaina’s hand rested between them and then back at the shelf across from where she sat.

“Come on. We’ve only made it down the first isle.” She announced as she pushed herself up off the floor suddenly and reached down to help Jaina up - careful that her hand didn’t linger in the warmth of the younger woman’s for too long.
They parted ways for a while - each of them exploring sections that they found interesting - but always seeming to find one another again. If only to smile as they passed each other.

It was Sylvanas who found something exciting, next. At least that’s what Jaina gathered from the urgency behind the sound of the other woman calling her name - only to find the woman doubled over with a few books between her legs that were spread along the floor in front of her.

Jaina knelt down beside her and reached for one of them - examining it carefully before a snort gathered and became audible before she could even hope to stop it. “The Joy of Sex?” She asked in a whisper. “Really? They have that here?”

Sylvanas’s shoulders were shaking in unadulterated mirth. “’72. It’s a classic. Not a first edition or anything, but - you know.”

Jaina, resigned to actually let loose for once, plopped down next to her and pulled one of the books into her own lap, eventually snorting again as she flipped to one of seemingly endless illustrations.

“What?” Sylvanas asked as she shot her a grin - her eyes mischievous, suddenly, in a way that Jaina found disarming and distracting.

“Oh, it’s nothing.” She responded nonchalantly. “I was just never made aware that armpit hair was an erogenous zone.”

Sylvanas’s mouth fell open at the remark and she snatched the book from Jaina’s lap - staring down at the picture of a bearded man face-deep in underarm bush. “Apparently it was in the seventies. Wow he’s, uh...he’s up in there, huh?”

“I mean...not that there’s anything wrong with it. If, you know...” Jaina said quickly as she shot a glance in Sylvanas’s direction.

“No, no! No, not that there is. It’s just a thing. I dunno.”

“Yeah, no. Yeah.” Jaina responded as she doubled down on the attention she was paying to her own book once Sylvanas handed it back to her.

They flipped through and shared amused chuckles and occasionally showed one another the more outlandish illustrations until Jaina covered her mouth to hide her laughter and shook her head. “Jesus, look at all these dicks.” She whispered breathlessly as Sylvanas glanced down at them.

“I’d rather not.” She responded dryly - which only seemed to exacerbate Jaina’s laughter situation. “Not the biggest fan of them, to be honest. Might not be too obvious, or whatever, but...”

“No, no I wouldn’t have assumed.”

She cut herself off as Sylvanas gasped and lifted a hand to her chest. “Are you insinuating that I look like a homosexual?” She asked incredulously as she wilted her ears as much as she could to complete the look.

Suddenly, Jaina couldn’t tell if she was joking or not and Sylvanas’s feigned indignance broke in a sudden fit of laughter. “I’m gay.” She gasped out as she bent over her book. Her grin was so wide it caused faint lines to appear beside her eyes, and that, coupled with how genuine her amusement was, saved the moment. “I’m sorry, I was just...” She brought a hand up to wipe the tears that had begun gathering in her eyes. “Your face. I...fuck...okay. Sorry. Yeah. No dick-liking here. You were spot on.”
Jaina had to stop a ‘same’ from coming out in response as Sylvanas sighed once she caught her
breath and gathered the books to slide them back into their place on the shelf they were sitting by.
That wouldn’t...necessarily be true. Would it? Not that she particularly enjoyed them. In fact, the
thought of not bothering to try enjoying them again was really quite appealing. But that wasn’t
relevant. Definitely not. And it definitely wasn’t something she was going to figure out on the floor
of a used book store.

Again - Sylvanas helped her up. Again - she didn’t allow her hand to linger.

“Have you eaten? I know you had a meeting this morning, how’d it go?” Sylvanas asked as they
made their way up towards the register with the first edition Jaina was holding against her chest
again.

“It went fine, really. I mean - not that I was too worried about it. It’s just I like to be prepared for
things like that. And, no - I haven’t eaten. I kind’ve rushed home afterward to make sure I looked as
un-trash as possible.

“I doubt you’ve ever looked trash a day in your life.” Sylvanas responded so quietly the cashier
would never have heard her - and Jaina wasn’t even entirely sure she had, either. “We could go grab
a coffee and a scone or something after this before you head home. If you want. It’s up to you,
though. You’ve already spent your whole afternoon with me looking at armpit hair.”

The young woman behind the register did her best to hide her smile at their interaction, but couldn’t
help but glance up at them a time or two while she marked down the book’s information in a register
she’d pulled from beneath the counter. Something Sylvanas found rather strange. All this for a book?

“Oh, that’ll be four hundred and ninety-seven dollars even, ma’am. Will you be paying with cash
or card today?”

Sylvanas blinked hard at the total and tried to casually look at Jaina. She just wasn’t too sure how
successful she’d been at making it ‘casual’. The easy smile and handing over of a debit card didn’t
help matters.

“Card, thanks.”

The book was wrapped and bagged and Jaina allowed it to dangle from her wrist by the handles of
the bag as they headed for the busy sidewalk outside.

A million thoughts at once raced through Sylvanas’s mind. This girl had money. She looked like she
did...but a lot of people looked that way, here. She hadn’t even batted an eye. She had ‘doesn’t even
bat an eye at a five-hundred dollar book’ money.

Shit.

“So - where are we going, exactly?” Jaina asked suddenly, breaking her out of her self-imposed
trance and causing her attention to snap back to the younger woman.

“Oh...sorry. It’s just a little spot I like, that’s all. They have good muffins, too. And quiche. My
favorite are the blueberry and lemon scones, though.”

Jaina tried to think hard, then. She didn’t remember a Starbucks on this block. Not even a Starbucks
Reserve. Before she knew it, though, they were entering into a shop with a front not too unlike The
Undercity. The only difference was the natural store-face was restored and painted a dark, muted
blue and there was an a-frame board outside with unfamiliar drink specials written on it in white
chalk, alongside a single table with mismatched chairs.
When they made their way inside it became *extremely* apparent that they were most definitely not in a Starbucks. The smell of baked goods and espresso was overwhelming and there was someone playing music in the corner of the shop. Jaina hadn’t even ever *seen* whatever instrument he was playing, much less heard one. She followed Sylvanas to the register but hung back slightly as she tried to navigate the unfamiliar menu and listened to Sylvanas order with enviable ease.

“I’ll take a Red Flash, half-ice, and a kale, spinach, and ricotta croissant. Oh, and add an order of alfajor.” She turned to Jaina with a smile. “They’re great, you’ll like them. They’re sweet maize cookies. Amazing. Do you know what you want, or….” She trailed off at the way Jaina was looking at her. As though she’d spoken another language.

“What’s...what’s in a Red Flash?” She asked quietly - thankful the barista behind the counter seemed too bored to pay much attention to her confusion.

“Oh, apple, rose hips, hibiscus, ginger, clove, licorice root, cardamom, and black pepper. It’s my favorite...I try and have one at least a few times a week.”

“Black...black pepper? In tea?” It was a near mind-numbing list of ingredients yet the only one that really stuck out to her was the pepper. The *pepper*. In Sylvanas’s favorite tea.

Sylvanas rolled that question around in her mind and realized that, no, that probably didn’t sound too appealing.

“Well, what do you usually get when you go out for coffee?” She finally asked as the young man who was somehow both looking at them and not looking at them at all drummed his fingers on the side of his register.

“I, uh…I usually get a caramel frappuccino and avocado toast.” She sounded slightly defeated and Sylvanas found it entirely too...cute. She turned back to the register as she pulled out her wallet.

“Can we also get a Dulce De Leche latte - full ice, please. And avocado toast.”

“Do you want caramel drizzle on that?” He asked as he lifted an eyebrow and looked over at Jaina.

“Of course we do.” Sylvanas responded without Jaina having to say anything as she handed her card over. Once everything was bought and paid for, Sylvanas carried as much of it as she could over to the table nearest to where the man - whom Jaina was now close enough to see was an elf - was playing his...instrument. No sooner had they sat down than he put it aside on its stand next to his chair and strolled over to the table to drag another seat up to it.

“Lor’themar.” Sylvanas greeted - suddenly mildly regretting choosing this particular place to take Jaina.

“Sylvanas, it’s so nice to see you. Truly.” He responded as he leaned back in the chair with a smile. He was impeccable. From his goatee to the long blonde hair that was shaved on the sides and back and gathered in a bun at the crown of his head.

“You saw me yesterday. I was just here yesterday.” Sylvanas responded as she took a sip of her tea and sat it back down. *Not now, Lor. Please. Not now.*

Apparently she still hadn’t acquired ESP on her rather non-existent list of super-powers, because he immediately turned his attention to Jaina. “And who is this? How could you not introduce me to your date? I felt like you were a touch more chivalrous than that.”

“Lor...for fuck’s...she’s not my date. We’re hanging out. Anyway, Jaina, this is Lor’themar.
Lor’themar, this is Jaina.”

Jaina smiled politely at him and took his hand from across the table - glancing down as he only grasped it for a moment then released it, when she’d been expecting at least some form of handshake.

“So...Lor’themar.” She would try to be friendly. She had to. This was Sylvanas’s friend, right? She had to not look like an idiot in front of him. She’d already royally fucked up at coffee in general.

Now was the time to recover. “What do you do when you aren’t playing? Or is this your main gig?”

“Oh, not much. I only study the environmental impact of urban apiaries on our community and have had a big hand in the farm-to-table movement. It’s nothing, really.” He seemed smug. Sylvanas was staring daggers into the side of his face.

“Beekeeper.” Sylvanas corrected as she narrowed her eyes at him. “He’s a beekeeper, Jaina.”

Lor’themar looked like he didn’t know where to go from here. He certainly wasn’t used to being called out, which was a little ridiculous at this juncture of their friendship - if you could call it that. More of a mutual tolerance. There weren’t many elves here - and Lor’themar was, unfortunately, one of them. Solidarity. Something, something. It didn’t make him any less irritating.

He sighed heavily as though he was suddenly very tired and his eyes slowly shifted from Sylvanas back to Jaina as he gave her a rather curt smile. “I’m a beekeeper. An urban beekeeper. It was a pleasure to meet you. Truly. I think it’s best I return to my set now.” He grasped her hand one more time as he stood and made his way back to his little corner and Jaina turned her strange expression to Sylvanas. She still hadn’t touched her toast or her latte.

“Sorry.” Sylvanas moved her chair closer to Jaina’s and scooted the plate of cookies between them.

“No, don’t be. He’s your friend. He’s important to you, and-”

“He’s definitely not important to me. The embarrassment outweighs the importance most days. This is one of those days.”

Jaina couldn’t help but relax at that. Thank god. She’d found the man unbearable.

“Try one of the cookies.” Sylvanas picked one up and handed it to her as she took another sip of her tea before she began cutting her croissant in half. Half now - half for dinner. It was somewhat of a routine and she’d spent a little more today than she’d bargained for, so this would make up for it, anyway.

Jaina was hesitant, at first. Maize in a cookie? That seemed almost as strange as pepper in tea...but she tried it, anyway and she was surprised at the way it crumbled in her mouth as the sugar flakes decorating the sides melted on her tongue. It almost had the effect of shortbread and the flavors, while unfamiliar, were subtle and sweet.

“Good?” Sylvanas asked as she finally hazarded a small smile and took a bite of her lunch.

“Very. Extremely. I wasn’t expecting it at all, honestly.”

“But what about the latte, though?” Sylvanas queried after Jaina finished off a second cookie. Honestly? She’d forgotten all about it. And the first sip was...life-altering. She could taste each and every subtle note beneath the delicate, creamy caramel flavor that was somehow both richer and softer than actual caramel.

“Fuck.” Jaina muttered as she placed her cup back on the table and nudged the toast on her plate, still
not over what she’d just experienced.

“Yeah. It’s wild. You wanna try my tea, or are you still worried about the pepper?”

Jaina eyed it suspiciously. It was beautiful. It really was. She could see the peppercorns and the flower petals floating in the rose-colored drink. Finally, she decided. She was going to try tea with pepper in it.

Unfortunately, after the initial sweet, floral notes died off - the pepper hit her directly in the back of the throat and, suddenly, that’s exactly what it tasted like. Tea. Tea with pepper in it. She coughed as quietly as she could and Sylvanas winced as she took the cup back from her.

“Sorry.” Sylvanas murmured as her cheeks flushed a bit.

“No, don’t apologize.” Jaina responded as soon as she was able - soothing the discomfort in her throat with another sip of her latte. “I wanted to try it, and now I have. No big.”

They ate in relative silence, then - and, while Lor’themar really was pretty irritating, he was rather skilled at whatever it was he was playing - and it was pleasant.

“What is that, by the way?” Jaina asked as she looked over at the way his fingers moved along the base of it and along the strings, plucking away rhythmically.

“An autoharp.” Sylvanas whispered. “And for the love of god - don’t let him hear you ask about it, or you’ll be sitting here listening to him for the rest of your life.”

Jaina hoped Lor’themar couldn’t tell what she was laughing about right then, because she sure as hell couldn’t help it. When she managed to regain her composure she moved her hand closer to Sylvanas’s on the table before curling her fingers back underneath her fist quickly

“Sylvanas?”

The older woman looked up at her and swallowed her mouthful of croissant, having missed the fact that Jaina had nearly reached for her hand - a fact Jaina was extremely thankful for, right then.

“I had a good time today. With you. So..thank you.”

Had anyone ever done that before? Thanked her? She thanked other people, sure...all the time. But Jaina had just thanked her for this. For taking her to a bookstore and a pretentious East Village coffee shop. Or, maybe not specifically for that... Sylvanas pushed that thought aside as quickly as it had come.

“Thank you, too. It really was nice.”

They walked together to the end of the block Sylvanas would turn down to go home and they both paused for a while, looking awkwardly at one-another’s shoes. It was Sylvanas who finally managed to break the silence.

“I’ll see you soon? If you want?”

Jaina sighed and smiled as though she’d been extremely worried about exactly that.

“Yeah. Absolutely. As soon as you like. Just let me know.”

Sylvanas smiled, too, then, and rocked slightly on her heel before she lifted a hand in a wave and turned. Her smile got wider and wider with each step even as she felt a barely-there tug in the
Sylvanas was humming softly to herself as she set her alarm and turned - plucking Nathanos out of his usual spot in the armchair near the door and spinning him around before he found himself tucked beneath her arm with only a lazy grunt of protest.

“Hey, Ugly.” She murmured to him as she rubbed the top of his head with her knuckles and began taking the stairs two at a time towards her loft.

“It was great, thanks for asking.”

He snorted as she shifted him beneath her other arm like so much luggage and slid her pocket-door out of the way so she could escape the world and bury herself in her little haven of music and sunshine. Only now - thoughts were creeping in. Thoughts beyond records and antiques and regrets too numerous to count. As she brushed her teeth - she thought of Jaina’s smile. As she turned on the shower - she thought of her laughter and the way she’d tried to hide it behind her hand at the bookstore.

She toweled off her hair roughly and meandered out of the bathroom to find Nathanos looking at her expectantly from the edge of the bed. “Sorry, bud.” She tossed the towel over her shoulder and half-hopped into the pair of sleep pants that were folded on the table by her bed before padding towards her little kitchenette to feed him - but not before helping him down off the bed, first. He had a hard time jumping, sometimes, now. Especially later in the day like this.

“She thanked me, you know.” She murmured as she slid down onto the floor next to him to stroke along his back while he ate - ignoring his soft snorts of appreciation because she knew they weren’t for her. They were for his kibble. And that was fine. He was an alright listener, sometimes. Especially while he was eating. “I think just for taking her out...but maybe more. I dunno. What do you think?”

She looked down at him and half-smirked as he only buried his face further into his dinner. No wisdom, there, no. There never was, really.

Her thoughts trailed back to the bookstore. To the ease with which she’d dropped half a grand on a little book...and her smile faded. “She’s one of those rich girls, I think. I dunno what that means for us, Nathaniel. This is kind’ve all I’ve got to work with. It’s not really much, huh?”

More snorts.

Sylvanas waited until he was done eating and stood, carrying him over to the bed and plopping down onto her back across the middle of it - allowing Nathanos to sit on her chest and stare down at her. Kind of an empty stare. But it lifted her spirits, anyway. Just a little.

“There’s only one way to find out. How do you think she’ll feel about my side-gig?”

Nathanos huffed as he half-slid off of her chest and went, immediately, to one of her pillows to lay down.

“You own the place, now? Could you at least tell me whether or not I should text her?”

He could not. Fine.
She reached over for the phone she’d left laying on the bed when she’d dropped Nathanos there and slid her screen open to find Jaina’s number.

*Hey. I was wondering if you’re free this weekend?*
“What is this?” Jaina asked as she opened the door to her apartment, only to find Kinndy and Anduin sitting at her kitchen table, looking up at her with conspiratorial smiles.

“A peace offering,” Anduin told her as he gestured to a piece of white frosted cake on a plate in front of her usual chair.

“Andy has been sobbing to me all day about how worried he was that he pushed you too much,” Kinndy elaborated. “I’m purely innocent, of course, and just here for the cake. So how was your date?”

True to form, her and Anduin had empty plates in front of them, filled with nothing but a few errant crumbs and smears of icing.

“Kinndy!” Anduin cried out even as he started to laugh.

Jaina just rolled her eyes and set her things down at the empty place on the table, careful to still be gentle with the bag that held the book, despite her desire to toss it all down with an exasperated sigh. “I had a great time hanging out with my new friend, thank you,” she answered Kinndy as she sat down.
Jaina took up her fork and pointed it at Anduin before she even looked at the cake. “And I'm sorry about this morning, and your books. I was just...flustered. You were right. That was a dick move.”

Anduin shook his head. “One well-deserved, all the same. I was kind of being a dick. You know I love to joke around and fuck with people, but it's one thing to see them get genuinely upset.”

Jaina smiled at him—a warm, and almost proud smile. Finally, he was growing up. She lowered her fork and used it to scoop up a bite of cake. She almost put it into her mouth without noticing the variety of colors that wove their way through the white icing. Instead, she pulled the fork back and threatened to flick its contents at him with her other hand. “Really? Rainbow cake?”

Anduin's stoic expression immediately crumpled into laughter. “It's really good though. I promise!”

Kinndy joined in the laugh, even as she reached for Jaina’s hand across the table to try to stop her from tossing the bite of cake. She had no hope of reaching her, of course, and the way her little body shook as she laughed harder and harder wasn't helping either.

Jaina wanted to be more annoyed than she was, but found herself laughing along with them. She even turned the bite of cake around and ate it, once she wasn't about to risk choking on it.

“It is really good,” she admitted through one last giggle, trying not to spray multi-colored crumbs all over the table as she said it. The cake was amazing, though. Sweet and vanilla, rich and perfectly baked. “Fine. Peace offering accepted.”

Anduin leaned over to give Kinndy a triumphant high five.

Jaina just shook her head and laughed at them again, then went in for another bite of cake.

By the time the cake was gone, she had retold for them a very stripped down version of her day, and tried to spend more time gushing about the latte she'd had than Sylvanas. Tried being the keyword. Was it weird that she had to try?

“An urban beekeeper?” Anduin asked her, sputtering into a laugh again. “That's like one of those made up jobs people on House Hunters have! 'Ah yes my name is John and this is my wife Cindy. We are urban beekeepers and want to buy a condo on the lower east side. Our budget is somehow 6.5 million, and we absolutely must have a jacuzzi tub and a sex dungeon.'”

“I mean, you're not wrong…” Jaina started to laugh at the odd voice he was using, only to be interrupted by her phone vibrating on the table, causing the empty plates to rattle and the forks on top of them to clink along.

So yeah, there was no hiding that she had gotten a text. She might as well look at it.

Jaina flipped her phone around to see Sylvanas' name on the notification, along with a simple question.

*Hey. I was wondering if you're free this weekend?*

“Jaina? What's wrong? Did somebody die?” Kinndy asked her.

“She doesn't look that upset. Maybe a great uncle she hardly knew? Or the bitchy cousin that brags about her perfect life at family reunions?” Anduin offered.

“Mmm, maybe,” Kinndy nodded.
How long had she been staring at her phone? “Nope, nobody died,” Jaina informed them.

“Nope, nobody died?” Anduin exclaimed. “Doesn’t she know you are supposed to wait two days before you text so you don't look desperate? Lesbians, I swear…”

Well, she might as well be honest, since they had already guessed it. “She uh, she wants to meet up again this weekend.”

Anduin and Kinndy simultaneously screamed in a way that Jaina was certain to get her a complaint from her neighbors, especially considering how late it had gotten.

“To do what?” Kinndy demanded. Jaina shushed her and she repeated her question again as a whisper. “Sorry! To do what?”

“I don't know yet. I'm too busy making sure you two don't wake the dead here to reply and find out,” Jaina told her.

“Well, go on then,” Anduin said in the same weird voice he had been using earlier. “Ms. Sparkshine and myself will be here, ready to consult.”

“Can that be our House Hunters jobs? Lesbian dating consultants?” Kinndy asked him with way too much enthusiasm.

“Not quite as posh as urban beekeepers, but it'll have to do,” Anduin answered.

Jaina was doing her best to ignore them as she typed out a reply.

*I'm pretty sure I am. What did you have in mind?*

She hesitated a second before sending the text. Was that too eager? Should she have thought about that for any actual length of time?

No. This wasn't like that. Sylvanas wasn't playing games. She seemed like she really needed a friend. Yeah. That was it.

Jaina sent the text.

And then was promptly blinded by a flash as she looked back up.

Anduin turned his phone around to show her the picture he had just taken of her, smiling softly at her phone as she typed. “I just need you to see this face you’re making,” he told her.

“My dear Anduin, you've captured a photo of a specimen in the wild. A stunning one at that!” Kinndy complimented him using her own weirdly accented funny voice.

Jaina kept her eyes on her phone as she warned, “Keep at it and you will be buying me more apology cake tomorrow.” She still felt a smile creep into that warning all the same.

Anduin let out one last scoff before he slid his chair back and stood. “I'll leave you to it then. I actually do have to go. 8am lectures can go straight to hell, and I have one tomorrow. Thanks for not throwing cake at me, Aunty.”

“Thank you for being an ass, but with good intentions,” Jaina told him.

Anduin grinned far too wide at that.
“At least you can't kick me out,” Kinndy reminded her. “My name is on the lease!”

Jaina kept her phone in her hand even as she saw Anduin out and helped Kinndy clear the cake plates away. But she resisted the urge to look at it until she was in the safety of her bedroom, picking out pajamas for the night. Only once she'd set down a pair of soft flannel pants and a tank top did she unlock the phone next to them.

_Would you be down for a little road trip? I need to drive to Jersey on Sunday for my side gig. It's pretty fun actually._

_Oh yeah? What kind of side gig?_

_Have you ever heard of picking? Like looking for antiques to resell?_

She had. She knew there were shows about it that Kinndy left on as background noise sometimes. Jaina herself wasn't much of a TV person, so she had never really paid that much attention. Shit.

_Like going into dusty barns to find valuable old motorcycles buried under piles of junk?_

_That was literally all she could remember from the show._

_Pretty much. Only no motorcycles for me. I look for music stuff. Anything that I don't want for my store, I have a guy out there who will buy it off me for his own place. I finally got permission to go check out a property I've been waiting to see. An extra hand is always welcome :)_

_But I will have no idea what to look for!_

That was true, but Jaina still very much wanted to dig around in a dirty barn all the same. Imagine she actually found something good? The smile that would light up Sylvanas’ face when she saw it…

Fuck.

Jaina moved to the bathroom to try to distract herself from that thought. She took her contacts out while she waited for a reply

_Her phone buzzed again on the marble countertop._

_The rule with picking is that, if it stands out and catches your eye, chances are it's something good. You will do fine, but if you don't want to go, I totally understand._

Jaina picked up her phone again so fast that she almost threw it into the toilet in the process. Thankfully, she managed to keep hold of the device and started to furiously type a reply.

_No! I'm interested! I just don't want to slow you down! When on Sunday?_

_We have to leave pretty early, if that's okay? I can pick you up around 10? I promise I will take us to an awesome place for lunch to make up for it._

_That's perfect :) See you then!!!!!_

_Shit. That was way too many exclamation marks, wasn't it?_

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Jaina didn’t know what to expect, honestly. She had been told to wear clothes she wouldn’t mind getting dirty and that Sylvanas would provide transportation. She had been told where they were
going, but had no idea about the place besides where Google Maps said it was.

She did not expect to see in front of her apartment that morning was an old truck idling, with Sylvanas in a ripped flannel with one arm hanging out the edge of an open window, beckoning her over. The truck wasn’t like any she’d seen before. It wasn’t in great shape either. Rust was catching at the corners of the panels and in the curves of the wheel wells. The blue paint was chipped in places and fading. But it still hummed with life as Jaina tried her best not to run toward it, if maybe a little too loudly.

Sylvanas waved frantically before she opened the door and slid out of the driver’s side to open the passenger door for Jaina.

“Hey,” she greeted her with a beaming smile. “Thanks again for coming. I promise this will be fun.”

“Thanks for inviting me! I still can’t promise I’ll be much of a help, but I’ll try!” Jaina told her.

Was it weird to want to give her a hug? Yes. Yes it was. They didn’t know each other that well yet. They honestly didn’t know each other well enough for Jaina to want to spend hours upon hours in the car with her either, but that was irrelevant. Maybe a little relevant.

It was definitely weird, though, to mention that she had been marathoning as many picking TV shows as she could find, to the point where Kinndy was even sick of them. To the point where Jaina had to resist wanting to take notes, and did so anyway in the margins of the thesis research she was working on inbetween glances at the show. To the point where it seemed like all she was doing with her free time anymore was just that, sitting with a pile of books and watching other people look at antiques.

Oh right. And texting Sylvanas.

So yes, Jaina decided that she knew her enough to slide into the passenger side of the truck, trying to look as though she hadn’t had that hesitation, and that she knew how to properly lift herself into a pickup.

A pickup with a bench seat and no digital displays on the dash. “Wow, let me guess, this truck is from the seventies too?” Jaina had to ask as she searched for the seatbelt.

“1974 Ford F100 Ranger,” Sylvanas told her proudly, as if those words would actually mean anything to her. “She’s not pretty, but she still runs good and has excellent cargo space in the back. Perfect for this kind of thing. You’re sitting on the seatbelt, if that’s what you’re looking for.”

“Oh...thanks!” Jaina said as she slid down and found the offending seatbelt, and only struggled just a little bit with how to get it latched.

Well, this was off to an awkward start.

Except it didn’t last. Even as Sylvanas pulled out into the ever-hectic New York traffic, that tension instantly melted away. There was just something about the air of an indian summer rolling in from the open windows, the rumble of the engine, and of course, the excitement in Sylvanas’ voice as she talked about where they were going and what she hoped to find there. It was even better when they left the traffic behind. Sure, the other side of the Holland Tunnel was mostly filled with factories and industrial complexes, but at least there was less honking.

Sylvanas seemed especially relieved. Driving in the city wasn’t an easy task, after all. That’s why Jaina avoided it. No point in having a car--even if her apartment was one of the rarer ones in the city that came with parking--when she could just take a taxi or the subway where she needed to go.
But she couldn’t help but notice as the elf’s shoulders eased, and she smiled easier. Sylvanas finally went for the radio then, and flipped predictably to a classic rock station.

“I’m surprised that you didn’t find a way to install a record player here,” Jaina joked.

“Oh believe me, I would if I could. It’s got an eight track, though. I just didn’t remember to bring any tapes,” Sylvanas told her.

God. Of course it had a fucking eight track.

The commercial that had been playing faded out and gave way to an echoing trill of guitars that Jaina instantly recognized.

Was this seventies? She had no idea. She just knew it was a classic song that she knew.

“Well she was an American girl, raised on promises,” Jaina dared to sing along, then dared to look at Sylvanas to join her for the next line.

Fuck. The smile that followed told her yes, this had to be from the seventies, and that yes, Sylvanas was loving it. “She couldn’t help thinkin’ that there was a little more to life somewhere else!”

They ended up singing the whole thing, and Sylvanas even struggled to keep up for a moment, as she was too busy laughing at Jaina rocking out an imaginary drum solo across the dashboard of her truck.

They were both laughing so hard at the end that Sylvanas almost missed her turn off. Almost.

And Jaina almost missed the opportunity to comment that this certainly didn’t seem like farm country. “I don’t see any barns here,” she said as she finally recovered. “Just more factories and stuff.”

“I promised you lunch, didn’t I?” Sylvanas reminded her.

“Oh yeah. But...here?” Jaina asked, still suspicious of the largely industrial area they were driving through. She certainly hadn’t seen any restaurants.

“It’s a little ways off still,” Sylvanas assured her.

Factories eventually gave way to townhouses and row homes. And packed in with them, a restaurant that only stood out for the fact that it had a parking lot, and a few outdoor tables. Honestly, it seemed almost like an old fire station that had been redone, and definitely funky enough for Sylvanas to have as a recommendation.

“Get the pork roll,” Sylvanas suggested once they were inside and she noticed Jaina staring up at the menu over the counter.

There were too many possibilities. Jaina was used to chains, or places that she knew enough in the city to have a favorite thing to order. She was the type of person to always get said favorite thing and never branch out. Well, there was nothing wrong with knowing what she liked, right?

“I don’t know if I like that combination of words,” she admitted as she kept trying to scan the menu.

“The fried chicken then,” Sylvanas offered.

“Now you’re talking. Oh my God. Are those crinkle fries?”
Jaina had to shoulder her way past Sylvanas to slap her debit card down before she could offer to pay for the copious amount of fried chicken they had ordered, and one of whatever a pork roll was. Sylvanas tried to object, but the cashier rang them up too quickly for her to counter.

“I owe you from before, at the coffee place,” Jaina explained as they slid the plastic trays they were handed down to wait for their food at the other end of the line. “Which I’m pretty sure was a lot more expensive than this. And gas. And...yeah...so let me at least buy us lunch!”

There it was. The smile was back. “Fine,” Sylvanas said with far more warmth than she was expecting.

With far more warmth than she was expecting to feel fluttering in her chest from just a single word as well. Shit.

But one meal of the best fried chicken she’d ever had later, amidst the odd, train-themed decor of this little fast food place, Jaina was questioning if friend crushes were a thing. She was pretty sure they were. You could be really enjoying someone’s company in a platonic way and just really excited about it, right?

You could be really having a great time with them, fighting over the last crinkle-cut fry. You could be glad that you had another hour to go in the car, more old songs to sing. You could be happy when one came on where you actually knew the words, or just as happy to just listen when Sylvanas knew them and would sing by herself. You could admire that she had a nice singing voice, even when she was jokingly jamming along to classic rock as she drove.

Yeah, you could do that, right?

They were back on the highway just after noon. Factories gave way to suburbs, then to trees and farms. Jaina was only slightly disappointed when they turned off toward the open fields. She would have been just fine listening to music and talking for another few hours.

But it was beautiful out here, and so different from the city. It was easy to forget the natural world existed sometimes, outside of manicured parks and the odd greenspace. Jaina was beginning to get used to being surrounded by steel and concrete. But if Sylvanas had brightened up after they managed to get out of the traffic, then she was positively beaming here, shining like the sun itself.

Jaina swore she’d never seen her smile wider than she did when her boots hit the ground outside of the farm they’d pulled up to. Well, at least until Sylvanas scrambled around the front of the truck to help Jaina open her door and offered her a hand to get down. Then yeah, that smile might have been the biggest one.

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“Andesha?” Sylvanas asked as she turned away from Jaina and waved toward the massive Highmountain tauren that came lumbering off the porch of the farmhouse.

The old bull nodded and hovered a good distance away. She’d been trying to get on his property for a while now. He rarely ever returned calls, and when he did, said maybe about two words during them. Rumor was that he had some old jukeboxes, though. At least that was what she had been hoping to find.

“I’m Sylvanas. Nice to meet you in person. This is my friend Jaina,” she said as she gestured behind her. Sylvanas just caught Jaina’s sheepish wave out of the corner of her eye before continuing on. “Is it still okay for us to look around your property today? I’ll offer you a good price for anything I want
to take with me.”

Andesha nodded again. Well, that was about as much as she was going to get out of him.

“Thanks!” Sylvanas offered before heading toward the closest outbuilding.

And man, he had a lot of them. The property was a bit overgrown, and quite forested, but she could see the hard edges of sheds and barns and stables and just about any kind of structure poking their way out of the natural curves of the trees. If all of these were full? Damn. There was no way she could look through them all today.

And she doubted she would be looking there the entire time. Because Jaina was really cute in her beat up hoodie and frayed jeans. Her hair had been swept up into a messy braid that laid over one shoulder, flopping around as she deftly stepped through the minefield of rusted junk that led up the door to the barn. And her glasses. She’d worn them again.

But Sylvanas was almost sure she was straight. Well. Maybe. It was hard to tell. Still, she would be respectful until she found out otherwise. Either way, she was pretty sure Jaina couldn’t be single, no matter what kind of person she preferred to be with. Girls like her rarely were.

That didn’t stop Sylvanas from holding the door open for her, or from handing her a pair of gloves, which she knew Jaina wouldn’t have known to bring. “Here,” she explained. “You gotta protect those hands. There’s plenty of sharp stuff that you might want to dig through. They’re hot and unwieldy as fuck, but better than a tetanus shot.”

“Shit,” Jaina swore as she squinted at the barn, which was indeed packed full of junk. “I guess you’re right.”

She took the old leather gardening gloves from Sylvanas and put them on, just as Sylvanas did with her own pair.

“I guess just start looking? Remember what I said before; if it stands out to you, chances are it’s something cool. Anything music-related, yell at me for. Otherwise, just set aside anything you like and we can try looking it up on our phones if we don’t know what it is. I think I still have like...a bar out here, maybe two,” Sylvanas told her.

They headed toward different sides of the barn, but Sylvanas kept her eye on Jaina in between digging through the junk. She seemed hesitant to disturb things at first, but started to gain some courage. Especially so after a few glances at Sylvanas that she pretended not to notice.

The afternoon mostly turned into them just chatting through the dust they kicked up and showing each other stupid things they found--like a version of that dogs playing poker print stuck in a way too nice frame, or a weird folk art carving of a teddy bear wearing a too large cowboy hat and matching boots. They’d covered half the barn already and hadn’t found anything really that exciting. Sylvanas had only set aside a lamp she liked and a box of mostly intact depression glass she knew her buyer would be interested in. Other than that, this building was mostly made up of rusted old farm equipment and actual trash.

She’d cleared a path to the ladder up to hayloft, though, and that was stacked high with boxes. It was worth a shot. “Hey,” she called over her shoulder to Jaina. “I’m gonna go up here and see what’s in these boxes. Yell if you find more weird shit!”

“Okay!” Jaina yelled back from the pile of chairs she was trying to slide her way through. She’d shrugged her hoodie off a while ago. It was pretty warm in the barn. Sylvanas had been trying very
hard not to stare at the adorable spattering of freckles that ran across her shoulders.

And she caught herself doing it again before she turned back to climb the ladder. Nope. Don’t. You don’t know if she’d be okay with that. Stop.

The boxes turned out to be full mostly of magazines. National Geographics—nah, everyone had tons of those they couldn’t sell. Life, eh, a little better, but neither she nor her buyer did much in the way of paper goods. A box of old Playboys that was labeled as “Kitchen Stuff”. Pretty much every barn had those. Sylvanas laughed and decided that Jaina didn’t need to know about the old bull’s secrets. She’d been awkward enough with those “Joy of Sex” books before last time. Better that she not think that Sylvanas was just a magnet for old porn.

Just as she was thinking this loft wasn’t worth going through, an old file box caught her eye. It was just wide enough. Maybe…

“Yes!” she cried out as she opened the lid to find a ton of LPs, all in excellent condition. She flipped through them, finding a smattering of decades in the collection, all the way from the fifties to the eighties. Plenty of stuff that would fit in her store though, and others she knew she could sell easily to collectors she knew.

“Find something good?” Jaina asked below, clearly having heard her.

“Big box of nice records!” Sylvanas told her as she continued to flip through them.

“Score!”

It turns out there were two such boxes. That alone was worth the trip out here. If she could get the owner to part with them for a decent price, of course.

Just as she was piling the second one next to the ladder and thinking about the best way to haul them down, it was Jaina’s turn to cry out, “Hey! I think you’ll wanna see this!”

Sylvanas left the records where they were and scrambled down the ladder. Jaina had made her way through the forest of old chairs, and was holding an old pallet away from the wall it was leaning against. By the time Sylvanas got to her, those freckled shoulders were drooping.

“I think it’s broken, but maybe still worth something?” Jaina said, sounding a little disappointed.

“Let me see here,” Sylvanas started, carefully trying to make her way around Jaina without touching her too much, despite the cramped space.

But it was impossible to avoid having their hips brush, and the bones of their wrists poke into one another. Impossible for Sylvanas not to smell a little bit of what she guessed had to be Jaina’s perfume amidst the ever-present scent of dust and her own sweat.

But she forgot all about that as soon as she laid eyes on what was underneath that pallet. A guitar. Oh my god. A Rickenbacker?

“Holy shit,” Sylvanas whispered as she dropped to her knees, forgetting all sense of dignity as she did her best to gently drag the instrument out from under the pallet and into the light.

A twelve string Rickenbacker in fireglow. The smaller, solid body model. Fuck. The neck was cracked, and bad. But it was still incredibly rare. And incredibly valuable.

“That’s pretty. Shame about the neck. Is it still worth anything?” Jaina asked her.
“Thousands, even with the crack,” Sylvanas muttered, reverently brushing the thick layer of grime that covered the orange and red body of the guitar.

“Whoa,” Jaina said as she got down on her knees to get a better look.

“Tom Petty made this guitar famous. You were singing his song before, and now you found this. See? I knew you’d do good. Look what luck you brought us!” Sylvanas told her.

Jaina just gave her one of those little laughs of hers and shook her head. “I wouldn’t have known it was worth anything without you. I’m glad I found something cool, though!”

“If Andesha knows what this is, he might not want to part with it, but I guess all we can do is try,” Sylvanas said as she stood and gently picked the guitar up to add to their pile of things to negotiate.

“I doubt he even remembers even a tenth of what’s in here. I know I couldn’t,” Jaina offered as she stood up and dusted off her jeans.

“You’d be surprised,” Sylvanas laughed. “A lot of these old coots have their memories jogged once they see this stuff, especially if they see you excited about it.”

“Ah, I get it,” Jaina said she weaved her way out of the chair forest. “Memories and sentiment that makes the price to let it go higher?”

“You know it,” Sylvanas replied with a wink.

Fuck. Don’t wink. Idiot. Well, too late now.

Sylvanas tried to pretend that the darkness she saw rise to Jaina’s cheeks was just from the dust. Yeah. It had to be. It was dirty as hell in here.

The rest of the barn didn’t hold anything else of interest, really. Sylvanas dragged the record boxes down, and Jaina found a reproduction vase that she liked and took for her apartment, even after Sylvanas told her it wasn’t worth anything.

They decided to call it a day when Sylvanas noticed the light in the barn was growing dim as the sun was threatening to dip toward the western horizon. They’d only managed to cover one building in all this time. Damn.

And they were filthy. Sylvanas more so than Jaina, for sure, though both of them were sporting a fine layer of brown barn dust over their clothes and skin and hair.

Andesha proved to be a man of just as few words when it came to negotiating. He mostly nodded at Sylvanas’ suggestions of prices, which, as she had promised, were fair. She saved the Rickenbacker for last, though, and held it for a while, hesitating as she contemplated what to offer for it. If she could get it restored...shit. She wasn’t sure, but it would probably be an easy sell at five grand.

“Is a hundred good for the guitar?” Jaina asked before she could think of an offer. “The neck is broken, so…”

Sylvanas tried not to let her dismay show on her face. No. God no. That wasn’t enough.

Andesha nodded.

Holy shit.

“Um, this guy is riding up front with us, if you don’t mind,” Sylvanas told her as she loaded the
record boxes in the back, then pointed to the guitar that she’d handed to Jaina, with careful instruction on how to hold it so as not to strain the cracked neck any further.

“Do we have to seatbelt him in too?” Jaina joked. “Ooh, or maybe get a baby car seat?”

“You’re laughing now, but I would totally put that thing in a car seat if I had one,” Sylvanas told her. “Just sit him next to you and keep a hold of him while I drive us back, if you don’t mind?”

“Happy to help,” Jaina told her with one of her too cute and too genuine smiles.

Fuck. This wasn’t fair. Not when Sylvanas couldn’t tell what was freckles and what was barn grunge. Not when this rich girl, who would just as soon drop half a grand on an old book and eat avocado toast, seemed to be having just as much of a good time digging through garbage with her all day.

Sylvanas shook it off and went to pay Andesha. She thumbed through her wallet, noting that she had an extra couple hundred that she had planned to spend today. She counted out the amount she they agreed on as she approached the old bull on his porch, where he was waiting for her in a rocking chair.

“Here’s your cash. Thanks for letting us poke around,” Sylvanas said as she handed him the money.

Andesha nodded his response.

Feeling a twinge of guilt about the guitar, she reached back into her wallet and handed him an extra two hundred. “And this is for the guitar. It’s really rare, and worth much more than my friend offered you. I...I don’t really have enough with me to pay you would I should for it, but please accept this.”

For once, he shook his head, then finally spoke. “Nah. You’re gonna fix it, right?”

“I...uh...yeah. That’s the plan,” she told him.

“As long as you make it so somebody else can play it again and enjoy it, then the money doesn’t really matter,” he told her, his deep voice soft, but somehow booming at the same time. He pushed her small hand away with his giant one, gently.

“Then I’ll make sure it goes to someone who will play the hell out of it for you,” Sylvanas promised him. “Thank you. Thank you so much.”

Jaina had just finished carefully leaning the guitar against the bench seat when she got back to the truck. She was still wearing that warm smile of hers as she turned and faced Sylvanas.

“I know we didn’t find a whole lot, but this was really fun. Thanks for taking me along,” Jaina told her.

Man. What could she even say to that? What could she even say to this woman who looked amazing in the glow of the sunset, even with the sweat still drying on her hairline and the dirt that smudged her glasses in a way that made Sylvanas just a little bit anxious.

This was going to be a problem, wasn’t it?

“Thanks for wanting to have an adventure with me,” was all she could think of.

“We’re filthy,” Jaina noted. “You especially.”

Sylvanas looked at herself. Yeah. She was a mess. The rolled up sleeves of her flannel were pretty
much a solid brown, and she could barely see her tattoos through the grime on her forearms. “Heh. Yeah, I guess I am. Sorry.”

“Nothing to be sorry about. You did warn me,” Jaina told her. And then she leaned forward in a way that almost made Sylvanas’ heart stop.

Only to brush away at the dust that covered her left cheek with her thumb. God. Her hands were so warm and soft.

This was going to be a problem.

“Okay yeah, you’re going to need way more help than that,” Jaina laughed as she pulled her hand away.

Sylvanas watched those too blue eyes dart downward, then back up to her, then back to the ground again.

Okay, it was already a problem.

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Jaina was thankful for two things as she rode back toward the city. The first was the guitar she had been charged with holding onto, as it provided an excellent distraction from her thoughts, especially once they started to hit the potholes as the highway became more beat up closer to the city. The second was her own exhaustion, as that also kept her from going in circles in her mind too much as she drifted into a doze in between clutching the guitar to herself and making the odd comment to follow Sylvanas’ at the old songs that continued to play softly on the truck’s radio.

So, in those moments where she wasn’t freaking out about the fact that she’d touched Sylvanas’ face, and exactly how that had made her feel, this was nice.

Jaina was just about to fall asleep when a loud thump and the truck swerving woke her right back up, and immediately set her to clutching the guitar again. She looked over at a frantic Sylvanas, who managed to gain control again and pull the truck to the shoulder, her eyes wide and her delicate little hands white-knuckled and clutching the wheel the whole time.

“What happened?” Jaina asked, trying to be calm, once they were safely out of traffic.

“Fucking tire blew I think,” Sylvanas said as she unbuckled her seatbelt. “You okay?”

“Yes, me and Mr. Rickenbacker are perfectly fine,” Jaina assured her, gently patting the body of the guitar as proof.

“Okay, gonna hop out and check, one sec,” Sylvanas told her.

Jaina breathed out a ragged sigh of relief as she watched Sylvanas carefully slide out of the driver’s side and walk around the truck.

“Fuck,” she reported as she slid back into the seat. “Rear passenger tire is a goner. I don’t even have a spare on this thing, so we’re going to have to get a tow. Sorry, it’s gonna be a while before I can get you home.”

“It’s okay, these things happen,” Jaina assured her. “Is the stuff in the back okay?”

“I think so,” Sylvanas said. “All things considered, that could have been way worse.”
“Yeah.”

“I’m just glad you’re okay,” Sylvanas told her.

“Yeah, uh, same.”

After assuring the tow truck driver that no, they were not a couple, and yes, the guitar had to come with them in his truck, they managed to get him to take them to a shop that was still open at this hour on a Sunday. Somehow. Sylvanas blamed it on the good luck Jaina seemed to have granted them that day. Jaina didn’t know what to blame it on, but was grateful that she wouldn’t have to worry too much about her and her truck.

She’d taken up residence in the waiting area of the shop, with a disappointing cup of coffee, and herself in one of the ratty plastic chairs, and the Rickenbacker in the other.

Jaina flipped through her phone as she watched Sylvanas chat with the mechanics from afar.

Anduin had been blowing her up all day, of course.

_She didn’t murder you and leave your corpse in Jersey, right Aunty? Please? You’re too pretty to die in New Jersey…_

Jaina laughed softly to herself as she typed out a reply.

_No, but we’re still on the other side of the tunnel. Car troubles. But it’s being handled now. Thanks for being concerned anyway._

_Ah shit. Do you need a ride? An uber or something?_

Jaina looked up to find Sylvanas shooting her a grin over her shoulder. Well, if she was back to smiling like that again, then it probably wasn’t that bad. It was just a tire, after all. Jaina didn’t really know much about cars, but she was beginning to understand how to read this elf.

And beginning to wonder what that meant for her, exactly.

_No, I’d rather wait with her while they fix it. Thanks anyway._

_Kay. I’ll get you a Uhaul gift card instead then._

_Is that another joke I don’t get?_

_Yes, Aunty…yes it is._

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Jaina was always early. Early to class, early to bed, and early to get ready for things. Things like this dinner with Anduin she’d agreed to. Normally, she might have been excited. Now, though? Now, she was struggling. She’d put on one of the records Sylvanas had given her from the boxes they’d scared up in that old barn in Jersey and at first, it had been innocent enough. Just some good old...regular...absolutely regular music to get dressed to. To do her makeup to.

And now she was on the floor listening to the gentle riffs of ‘Going To California’...and missing the way Sylvanas’s voice had filled in the lulls of the song that night in her loft. This wasn’t normal. This was...

The flutter in her chest every time she could remember the other woman’s soft explanations that had seemed to weave themselves into the music itself. Like she had an intimate understanding of it in a way Jaina might never quite grasp.

She missed her. She missed her new friend and the way she laughed and the way she made her laugh in return, and all the texts in the world couldn’t help her, now. A text was nothing compared to the warmth Sylvanas just...exuded. Without even thinking. Without even trying.

Anduin pressed his ear to Jaina’s door for a moment before using his key. More of that Seventies music...lord. He’d been prepared to tease her when he nothing short of barged in, but the sight of her laying on her back on the floor in front of her new record player staring at the ceiling made him pause. Oh, no. A serious situation.

You’ve got this, Anduin. You’ve trained for this. This is just gay shit. Who knows gay shit better than you?
“Hey, Aunty.” He hazzarded his greeting quietly as he made his way towards her and looked down at her once he was standing above her. “You gonna pull through?”

Jaina shifted her gaze slightly from the ceiling to the face looming above hers. “Don’t know.”

Anduin sighed and plopped down on the floor near her head, reaching out to pat her forehead in a way that might have been incredibly awkward coming from anyone other than him. “Talk to me. Spill.”

“I don’t know what to talk about.” Jaina mumbled as she shut her eyes against the harsh reality of her current predicament. The song had changed. Soon, the record would need to be flipped or switched - and they’d be gone to dinner by that time.

“We should probably just go ahead and address the tiny, pointy-eared elephant in the room, honestly. If you want my opinion.” He was trying. God, he was trying, and Jaina loved him for it. That didn’t make any of this any easier, though.

“I don’t know, Andy.” She breathed as she rolled herself onto her stomach and hid her face against her arms. “I just...can’t stop thinking about her, and I don’t know what any of this means, you know?”

“It means you’re not straight. It means you wanna do gay things with her. Do gay things. Be gay.”

“Yeah. I definitely know.” It was becoming increasingly difficult to bite his tongue but there was something about the way Jaina reached out to play with one of the frays in the intentional tears in the knees of his jeans that made him stop himself. “It’s okay, you know. To feel that way. I know you know that. Whatever it is that you’re feeling...or wind up feeling? It’s all okay.”

Jaina sat up in front of him and then pushed herself up to her feet, offering him a hand and tugging him up once she had her balance. God, she’d been on the floor for forever. Her head even spun a little as she retrieved her bag from the kitchen island and shot a weak smile in Anduin’s direction. “Why don’t we just go eat?” She asked - trying her best to sound cheerful. Fake it ‘til you make it, right?

At least Anduin seemed relieved at her perceived change of heart as he waited for her by the door. “My little bi-sexual aunty is growing up.” He pouted and sniffled as she reached for the door knob and cut her eyes at him.

“Andy, please. Not tonight. Just one night, that’s all I’m asking.”

The young man held his hands up and lifted his brows. “Alright, alright. Just don’t tell the hot lady on me and I promise to stop.”

Jaina heaved a sigh that might have driven all the air from a lesser woman’s lungs as they made their way down the hallway to the stairs, lest Anduin complain about her aversion to exercise.

“Alternatively, you could always tell on me. At best - she’ll know you’ve been harboring the Secret Gay. At worst, she’ll punish me. Or...you know. Whatever. That might not be a worst-case-scenario. I’m not exactly sure how she rolls, she’s a little difficult to peg. You know who’s not difficult to peg? Me. Like. She could p-”

“I’m going to throw you down the stairs. It’ll look like an accident. Nobody will ever know.” Jaina spoke so evenly that, for a split second, Anduin couldn’t help but believe her and his forced, nervous laughter had Jaina cracking up before she could become any more irritated than she already was.
The walk was actually nice, tonight. It was a comfortable temperature and the sidewalks weren’t overly crowded and, to top it off, Anduin actually gave her a break for once. They talked about Hair - he sang her a few lines, which she didn’t mind, despite the sideways glances here and there. She’d probably have fought and lost against all of them for this kid.

They were, however, getting suspiciously close to a certain block with a certain shop on it. With a certain woman in said shop that she just couldn’t get out of her head. “Anduin, where are we eating tonight?”

“That Greek place I like.” Anduin responded simply - not looking at her as he spoke.

“Anduin, I don’t think I’ve ever even heard you talk about Greek food.”

Anduin hummed as though he were thinking that over as they turned a corner. The corner. The one that took them to the row of shops she was both nervous and excited to approach.

“You don’t have to keep doing things like this, you know. We do talk pretty regularly. We made an entire plan without you.” Jaina sounded slightly defensive and it made Anduin smile faintly - though he was careful with the sounds of amusement that kept trying to build in his throat. No. Bad time to laugh.

“I actually do like Greek food, for your information. Even if I haven’t really ever eaten here.” Anduin held the door open for her when they finally got to the aforementioned restaurant and he winced slightly as it became apparent that it was, probably, an extremely popular restaurant. At least there was that. That didn’t really change the fact that there was going to be a considerable wait, however.

“Sorry.” Anduin muttered as they made their way back out to the sidewalk and he slid the numbered buzzer he’d been given into his pocket. “This wasn’t part of the plan, I swear. I really did want to try this place.”

He sounded so...forlorn that Jaina almost felt sorry for him. “It’s alright, Andy. You did your best. Besides, we’re already down here. We might as well go to the shop while we wait.”

The way he lit up at her suggestion almost made her regret making it. Almost. But, honestly, Jaina wanted to go. They hadn’t seen one-another since their little road trip and there were a million things that kept running through Jaina’s mind. Maybe seeing Sylvanas again would help her sort them out. That’s what she was hoping, at least - and this gave her an innocent enough excuse.

“Well, what are you waiting for, then? Let’s go see the hot elf lady.”

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“Tired, Nate?” Sylvanas smiled as she lifted Nathanos from the floor near the counter and smiled at him, turning him onto his back in her arms much to his distress and ruffling the scraggly hair atop his head before she placed him back down. “Only two hours left, then bed. Promise. We can’t afford to close early the rest of this month.”

He grunted at her and shuffled towards the chair by the door - looking over his shoulder at her. Sylvanas rolled her eyes and followed him, helping him up into it. “You can jump, you know. There’s no reason I should suffer just because you get lazy as soon as the sun goes down.”

Nathanos looked up at her dolefully and she reached into the pocket of her hoodie for one of the handful of treats she sometimes kept there, kneeling in front of his chair and placing them beneath his
chin one by one as she stroked over his head with her free hand.

“Gonna take a nap?” She received a familiar huff in response when he realized there would be no more treats and began walking circles to find a comfortable position to sleep in and then stood to find herself something to do.

The day had been so slow that the last thing she expected was to, all at once, hear her door chime and impact with someone rather solidly as she turned on her heel.

Jaina hadn’t been expecting it, either. She’d had her head turned and her attention on a rather hilarious story Anduin had decided to delve into on the short walk to The Undercity and her arms shot out instinctively to catch whoever she’d run into. Sylvanas. Of course she’d run into Sylvanas. Jaina removed her hands from the other woman’s arms instantly as their eyes met and an apology fell silent on both their lips.

This wasn’t helping. Anduin was still half in, half out of the shop - having paused his story fairly quickly as the strange moment began.

This wasn’t helping. The way Sylvanas seemed to look at her extra hard for a moment before finally taking a step back.

Everything felt different for Jaina, suddenly. “Sorry.” She finally managed after clearing her throat, ignoring Anduin as he slipped into the shop behind her and half-tiptoed to the clothing section to rummage around.

“No, don’t be. Please. I was just…” She looked behind herself at Nathanos, who hadn’t moved a muscle despite the commotion. “Helping the Old Man into his chair. Not paying attention. Were you guys just on this side of town, or...did your friend have another pair of pants to return?”

Jaina’s eyes. Sylvanas made the connection rather quickly. They were this softer, cooler shade of blue the first time she’d come into the shop. The same shade they were now. Sylvanas had caught herself staring more than once in an attempt to figure out if she’d just been crazy when they’d met, but she hadn’t.

Shit. Sylvanas was looking at her eyes. Shit. She hadn’t worn her contacts. “In the area. We’re having dinner at the Greek place and there’s a wait. I just wanted to drop by.”

“You’re always welcome to do that. Always.” Sylvanas winced inwardly at herself. That second ‘always’? Really?

“That’s really good to know.” Jaina smiled faintly in response and didn’t seem to bothered by it, which drew from Sylvanas the very warmth she’d been thinking about far too often lately in the form of a gentle curve of her lips and a slight squint of her eyes that let her know this smile was real. Genuine. Something Sylvanas couldn’t control. “I think I should go see what Anduin is up to. He’s like a toddler sometimes.”

Sylvanas nodded and gestured towards the section Anduin was currently doing his best impersonation of someone minding their business in and made her way back behind the counter. She busied herself with her sale register - staring down at numbers and items without really making too much sense of any of it.

“You don’t have to babysit me, you know.” Anduin complained quietly as he pulled a t-shirt from one of the racks to look it over. “You can go talk to her. That’s pretty much the whole point of us being here, anyway.”
“You don’t say.” Jaina muttered under her breath, taking the shirt away from him to hang it back up. “Nice try, but that was like four sizes too small for you.”

Anduin was in the middle of conjuring up a witty retort when he pulled his phone out of his pocket and his eyes widened. “Shit, it’s that guy from...nevermind. I gotta take this.”

Jaina was about to protest when she realized, at least on some level, she was glad to be alone in the shop. Glad and terrified. She found herself wandering naturally towards the front again - towards Sylvanas, when a song she was unfamiliar with came on the record player.

The words hit her like a brick wall.

_I ain't ready for the altar but I do agree there's times_  
_When a woman sure can be a friend of mine_

Sylvanas’s ear shifted towards a song that she, on the other hand, was all too familiar with. Any attention she’d been attempting to give her balancing book was completely gone and she was suddenly acutely aware of Jaina’s presence on the other side of the shop.

_Well, I keep on thinkin' 'bout you, sister golden hair surprise_  
_And I just can't live without you, can't you see it in my eyes?_

Jaina’s hand went still on the clothing rack. She couldn’t even remember the last few garments she’d examined. Had she just seen Sylvanas’s ear move out of the corner of her eye, or was she just imagining things?

_I been one poor correspondent, and I been too, too hard to find_  
_But it doesn't mean you ain't been on my mind_

Sylvanas felt eyes on her. Felt Jaina’s eyes on her. Just barely. Over the hammering of her heart in her chest. She looked up, then, and blinked softly at Jaina from across the overcrowded room before quickly averting her gaze back to her convenient ledger. That didn’t stop her from seeing Jaina make her way over, though. Didn’t stop the rush of thoughts she couldn’t even begin to decipher or turn into words.

_Will you meet me in the middle, will you meet me in the air?_  
_Will you love me just a little, just enough to show you care?_  
_Well I tried to fake it, I don't mind sayin', I just can't make it_

“What’s this song called?” Jaina asked quietly as she examined a tree of antique jewelry that was situated on the far end of the counter.

_“Sister Golden Hair.” _Sylvanas’s voice was a murmur - a tone Jaina hadn’t heard before from her. One that made her swallow thickly. “America. ‘75. Off the album ‘Hearts’.”

Jaina nodded simply and drew in a slow, steady breath. Okay. Okay. “I really like the lyrics.”

Sylvanas placed her pen down and finally managed to give Jaina a look that stuck. One that Jaina returned and that she held. “The lyrics are beautiful. I, uh...”

Jaina hadn’t realized she’d been holding her breath until Sylvanas managed to continue speaking.

“Can I ask you something?”

Jaina nodded.
“Do you wear colored contacts?”

Shit. “Sometimes. Why do you ask?” Jaina made an effort at sounding nonchalant. She really did.

“It’s just...I don’t think you had them in the first time you came to the shop. And I know you don’t have them in now, and...and you have the prettiest eyes. I just don’t want you to think you have to wear them around me.”

Jaina’s hand fell from the jewelry tree, then, and her cheeks flushed so darkly she knew there was nothing she could’ve done about it. She didn’t quite catch the flash of panic on Sylvana’s face as she averted her eyes. “Oh...oh, I-”

“Jaina!” Anduin beamed at her as he opened the door and leaned in, holding the buzzer up to show her that it was going off. “I’m starving!”

Jaina jumped at the sudden intrusion and so did Sylvana, and Jaina smiled at her apologetically. “I gotta go. I’m sorry. But...I can stop by after? If that’s alright?”

“That’s...yeah. Yeah, that’s totally fine. You two go eat. Greek place two doors down? That place is great.” She grinned at them both as they left and Jaina couldn’t for the life of her figure out if that grin had reached her eyes as they headed for the restaurant.

It hadn’t.

Sylvana watched them until they disappeared down the sidewalk and then looked bitterly down at her ledger. At the negative she’d been in since the first week of the month. Fuck. Why had she done that? Fuck, fuck, fuck.

She leaned back in her chair and pressed her hand over her face, digging her fingertips into her temples and slowly looking down at the floor when she heard a quiet grunt from near the legs of her chair.

“Hey, you.” She tried to clear the rasp in her throat as she leaned down to pick Nathanos up and place him in her lap. They stared at each other for a while before she spoke again. “I suck, dude.”

No response.

“Like I’m some idiot teenager who can’t tell she’s...whatever. I just suck. I shouldn’t have done that.” She reached out to fix one of his ears where it had somehow gotten turned inside-out and tried her best to smile at him, as though he cared. “I’ll just...I don’t know. I’ll make it better when she comes back. I don’t want to make her uncomfortable, you know?”

Her smile faded slowly. He didn’t know. He absolutely didn’t know. And neither did she.

Jaina tried her best to enjoy their dinner and, for the most part, she did. Her thoughts wandered, of course. To that compliment. ...Constantly. It would have been so easy for her to say thanks or tell Sylvanas she had a beautiful smile. Because god, she had a beautiful smile. But that was...that was a lot. A lot to admit to herself and a whole lot to say out loud.

“You haven't taken a bite in like ten minutes. I wasn't sure if you were aware or not.” Anduin had finished his meal a while ago and Jaina was almost impossible to have an actual conversation with tonight.
Jaina smoked apologetically and looked up as their waitress approached their table.

“Anything else this evening? Dessert? We have great cakes!”

Jaina looked up at the intensely tall Night Elf smiling down at her. “Can...can I actually get an order of baklava to go? And then we're ready for the check, if you don’t mind.”

“Of course! I'll be right back with that. Sir, anything for you to take home?”

Anduin grinned up at her in response. “Oh, she's definitely not taking that home. But no, thank you. Just the check is fine.”

She nodded, casting a last glance at Jaina and politely ignoring the redness in her cheeks and the daggers she was glaring at her friend before she headed for the kitchen.

“You're impossible, Anduin.” Jaina admonished under her breath before fishing her debit card from her bag. “But I'm paying for your dinner anyway.”

“I’m impossible?” He asked as amusement dripped from every syllable. “Really? You're, like...fawning over this woman constantly while simultaneously clinging to...I don't know, whatever it is you're clinging to. Like...have you seen yourself? Have you even seen yourself? I'm not being an asshole, I swear. Mostly. Jaina, you look...happy. When she texts you. And like you're a million miles away any other time.”

The look on Jaina’s face turned almost unreadable and she lowered her eyes slowly. “I'm sorry. I know I've been distracted lately. I'm working on it, Andy, I swear.”

He smiled and nodded then reached out to pat her hand where it rested on the table in a rare display of softness. “You're doing great. You're just doing it...real slow.”

“Wow. Thanks...I guess. Would you...would you wait for me outside while I drop that off to her? It was kind of awkward when I left earlier and she just seemed, I don't know. Could you just give me, like, ten-fifteen minutes, tops and then I swear we'll go back to the apartment?” Jaina handed her debit card to the waitress without bothering to look at the check, but she did open the to-go container to check the baklava. It was gorgeous. This place was, admittedly, great. She just hoped Sylvanas liked baklava. Did anyone not like baklava…?

“Earth to Jaina.” Her eyes snapped up to Anduin and then to her debit card and the receipt that was resting beneath it. The waitress wasn't even anywhere in sight anymore. She smiled at her friend rather sheepishly and wrote the tip into its appropriate line before standing and slinging her bag over her shoulder as she held Sylvanas's to-go container close. “Ready?”

“Me?” Anduin asked, incredulously. “To leave, or to witness you actually doing something mildly gay? Because the answer to both of those things is, respectively, ‘yes’ and ‘fuck yes, please do something, you're hopeless’.”

Jaina chose to ignore him for now. She only had an exceedingly short walk during which to compose herself, and that was easier said than done right now. Especially when Anduin started to hang back a few steps before she got to the door and reached for the handle. She frowned when it didn't give when she pulled. “Andy...what time is it?” She asked - looking over at him with furrowed brows as he pulled his phone out of his pocket and winced.

“...Fifteen after. Sorry, Aunty.” Jaina wilted visibly. Fuck. She'd told her she would stop by. How had they just spent over an hour and a half in that place? Jaina peered into the window only to find the bottom floor dark and void of life and when she took a few steps back to crane her neck so she
could see the top floor, it was just as dark. So she'd probably gone out. Not that Jaina blamed her. Sylvanas didn't have any reason to wait around for her all night and she didn't want to interrupt her if she was busy.

“I'll just…it's fine!” Jaina turned towards Anduin and shrugged light-heartedly despite the fact that ‘light-hearted’ was the last thing she was feeling right now. “I'll just text her later and tell her I lost track of time. No big.”

It was kind of a big deal, though. Even if it wasn’t to Sylvanas...Jaina had really wanted to see her again. That moment had felt so unfinished. She knew she was probably just being weird about it. She definitely knew that, but still.

Holding out hope didn’t really come naturally for Sylvanas anymore, yet she’d watched the clock as it ticked towards closing time and, eventually, beyond it. She’d even left the door unlocked as she’d counted down her till for the evening and swept up. It became apparent, though, that Jaina wasn’t coming. She didn’t blame her, really. That had been a dick move. Right? She’d enjoyed being with her. She’d enjoyed every second of it...and that hadn’t been enough, had it? And, now, she was back to square one. Alone. Just her and Nathanos who seemed too lazy, even, to complain about being carried up two flights of stairs tonight. Or maybe it was just too far past his bedtime for him to bother.

Sylvanas hated this feeling. This feeling of being in limbo. She’d made the last move...and it had been a big one. A way too forward one. It was Jaina’s prerogative not to respond to it. All she could do was wait. Waiting was just...hard, these days. Especially when it came to things like this. Maybe she was finally tired of being alone. Maybe she was finally tired of everything hurting.

She sat up in bed and wiped almost furiously at her eyes in response to the feeling of a tear slipping down the side of her face. Her breaths were sharp, suddenly as she moved to sit on the edge of the bed. Reign it in. Get it together. Not now, god damnit.

But it was hard to keep it together sometimes. As hard as waiting. It wasn’t just Jaina, though. It was a hundred little things piling up and...suffocating her. Every day. The shop, the money...home. She missed home. She missed a place that wasn’t home. Maybe she missed the feeling of it. The idea of it. Most nights, her loft was like a haven. Somewhere to hide away from the rest of the world. Sometimes, though, it was like being stranded on a desert island.

And sometimes, Nathanos wasn’t too tired, for once, to nudge her hand where it gripped the edge of the bed. Sylvanas looked over at him in the moonlight that filtered in through the sunroom. It was dim, but it was enough to see the little grey hairs mingled in the sparse, too-long tuft atop his head as he whined quietly at her. “Sorry.” She whispered, wiping her eyes again quickly and reaching out to pull him into her lap. “S’not your fault, bud. You’re doing great.”

As much effort as she’d had to put into calming down, it still didn’t stop her heart from jumping into her throat as her phone vibrated on her nightstand.

“Try and have a good night, yeah?” Anduin said as he leaned half into Jaina’s apartment with a smile.

“I will, Andy. Thanks for dinner. Text me tomorrow? I have some studying to do, but...maybe lunch,
or something after? Or coffee?" As much as she loved him, she was glad he seemed to have
somewhere else to be. Not that she was going to work through her impenetrable cloud of worry-
inged confusion in one night, but...still.

“Coffee sounds great. Love you, Aunty.” He caught her up in a hug before she knew what was
coming, but she needed it. She really did.

“Love you, too, Andy. Night.” She waved at him as he left and shut and locked the door behind him
before resting her forehead against it.

“Rough dinner?” Kinndy asked quietly from the kitchen as she shut the fridge and held her glass of
juice close to herself.

Jaina simply shook her head and dropped her purse onto the kitchen island. “No. Dinner was great. I
just...think I messed up a little bit? Not that I think it matters that much to her, it’s just, you know. It
feels weird.”

“I take it ‘her’ is...nevermind. I know it is. So, Andy dragged you over there, again?”

“Yeah. I mean, not dragged. I wanted to go. Like, I wanted to see her, too. It’s just...she said
something. I didn’t really know what to do about it, and then Anduin walked in to tell me our table
was ready. I kind’ve...left. I told her I’d stop back by, but by the time we left the restaurant, she was
closed.” Jaina handed her little to-go box to Kinndy. “I got her this, but...yeah. That didn’t really
work out. Baklava. I know you like it.”

Kinndy looked down at the box with a soft frown and then back up at her friend. “It really isn’t a big
deal, Jaina. You can just text her, you know. It isn’t like you two don’t text. It’s not the end of the
world, really. But...what did she say to you, exactly?”

The slight nervous feeling she’d been battling in her stomach for most of the night returned tenfold in
response to that question. It was difficult for her. So difficult for her to admit anything regarding
Sylvanas to Kinndy or to Anduin. This wasn’t really admitting something, though. This wasn’t some
intangible, debatable thing that might or might not be a possibility. This had happened. “I forgot my
contacts today. I didn’t know we’d be going to that part of town and I didn’t really think about it
when we went to the shop and I guess she noticed. I wasn’t wearing them that first time when I took
Anduin costume shopping, either, and she...she remembered.”

“Oh…” Kinndy sounded like she didn’t know how to feel. Worried? Impressed?

“Anyway, she told me I have...the prettiest eyes. And that I didn’t need to worry about wearing the
contacts around her if I didn’t want to.” Jaina felt her cheeks heating up at the mere memory of it
and, all at once, the gentle warmth of Sylvanas’s voice flooded her mind in a rush. She had meant
that. It hadn’t been a line. It hadn’t been ‘game’. Sylvanas had said that because she meant it.
And...she hadn’t worded it the way a friend would. Not at all.

“You said you didn’t say anything.” Kinndy prodded gently - her juice and her second-hand baklava
all but forgotten in her hands.

“I said something along the lines of ‘uh’.” Jaina corrected - her voice quiet and her eyes pointed
directly at the floor. “Then Andy walked in and...I told her, you know. What I said I did. That I’d
stop back by.”

Kinndy weighed the gravity of the situation - tried to picture it in her mind. She was a problem
solver. She always had been. This just...wasn’t a problem that she could solve. She couldn’t make
Jaina see anything she wasn’t ready to see. “You should text her, Jaina. She sounds so sweet. I can’t imagine she’s not at least a little worried about it.”

“Worried?” Jaina’s eyes shot up, then. The thought hadn’t even come close to occurring her. “Worried how?”

“Just text her before you go to sleep or something. It’ll work out. I have a good feeling.”

Jaina watched her walk towards the other side of their apartment towards her bedroom with her snack and her drink and sighed.

Jaina didn’t take her time getting ready for bed on purpose. Mostly, she was just tired. It took her a few tries to tie her hair up comfortably. A few tries to find a shirt that was soft enough to sleep in tonight. She just wanted something soft against her skin. She felt like she’d been washed with a scouring pad recently for some reason.

Maybe, though...maybe she was putting off this text message. Maybe she didn’t know what to say because maybe there was too much to say in a text. She had to try, though. She knew she had to try.

Once she was successfully tucked under her blankets with her phone in her hand there wasn’t really anything else she could do to put it off. She must have typed the same few words at least ten different ways before she finally got frustrated and sent the one that sounded the best mixture of casual and genuinely apologetic to her.

Hey. Sorry about earlier. I stopped back by but you were already closed.

Sylvanas looked down at the screen of her phone. She was both relieved and incredibly nervous. Back off. Chill. Don’t fuck this up. God, don’t fuck this up.

No worries. Have a good night.

Normally, she might have sent a smiley face at the end of that. Normally, she might have tried to reschedule. That just didn’t seem like the right thing to do, right now. At least not for Jaina, and she wanted so badly to do what was right for Jaina. More than she didn’t want to be alone.

At least now she knew she hadn’t cost herself a friend, if that’s all this was going to be - and tonight she’d realized she needed Jaina in her life, regardless of pretenses.

Jaina was more important than ‘all or nothing’.

And this was something. God, at least it was something.
Jaina had to call twice to get him to pick up. Why she was calling was entirely another thing, of course. “Hey Andy, am I still invited to your Halloween party?” she asked as soon as the ringing stopped.

“Anduin warned her on the other end. “Holy shit, Aunty. You scared me. Picking up the phone and calling people is for bad news only,”

“Sorry I just…” What was she just? Why had she picked up the phone in a fit of panicked genius? “I just wanted to see if I could find out real quick.”

“Of course you're invited. You told me a week ago you weren't going, though. You hate parties anyway,” Anduin said, as if she needed to be reminded.

“I've had a change of heart,” Jaina told him. Well, it wasn't a lie. “Thanks for picking up.”

“Are you okay, Jaina? Do I need to come find you?” Anduin offered, his voice soft and sweet as it was any time he asked those questions.
This had not been the first time. It would probably not be the last. He’d been asking those questions since before his voice dropped, even, since before NYU and the city, since she would sit on the docks of the yacht club and just wait for a ship that wasn’t ever coming back into the harbor.

“I’m okay,” she assured him, feeling the phone press against her cheek as she smiled at the memory of him. “I’m really good. I promise.”

“Okay. It starts tonight at nine. And don’t think that you changing your mind at the last minute is an excuse not to wear a costume!”

“I’ll figure something out. Thanks Andy!” Jaina told him as she got up and went to her closet to start that process.

“See you tonight, Aunty. Glad you changed your mind,” Anduin said as he hung up.

Jaina put her phone in her pocket and stared at her closet, suddenly wondering if this was as great an idea as her mind had made it out to be. She slid a few items of clothing along on their hangers before her hand stopped. She should...she should probably figure out the other part of this idea before even worrying what she was wearing, right?

She pulled her phone back out, fingers hesitating over the screen as it waited for her to unlock it.

They’d been talking still. Well, texting. Mostly Jaina texted her and Sylvanas responded politely. Maybe distantly. But she replied. She wasn’t ignoring her. And today she’d even sent her a picture of her dog, asleep on his chair in the sun, belly up, with the caption “the last four people that walked into the shop have asked me if he’s dead.”

So that was something.

Jaina shook that doubt from herself. She had decided enough was enough. She hated this. She hated this caution. It wasn’t what she wanted, and it wasn’t what she wanted to feel around Sylvanas. She wanted it gone. She wanted a chance to explain, if there was anything to explain even, and no amount of cute animal pictures and emojis were going to do that for her.

She typed out the text as fast as she could, fast enough not to think a second thought about it before she all but slammed the send button.

>Hey I know this is sort of short notice, but Anduin is having an early Halloween party tonight. They all have midterms next week, so they’re doing it now. They meaning the undergars. Anyway, I was wondering if you wanted to go with me?

Shit. She’d already sent it. Why had she done that? Jaina didn’t even like stupid college parties. She knew Sylvanas had to be at least a little bit older than her. Probably way too old to enjoy any of that nonsense.

But it was an excuse to see her again. To talk to her. Actually talk to her.

Jaina was almost surprised that her phone vibrated when it was still in her hand.

_Halloween huh? I guess I’ll need a costume then?_

Wait. Was that a yes?

_Anduin already threatened me with unknown consequences if I didn’t wear one, so I guess, yeah. I mean, you don’t have to go. I don’t know if that’s something you’re even interested in honestly. But_
usually it’s pretty relaxed at his place, and his building has a really cool rooftop deck.

Jaina didn’t have picking or records to talk about or cool restaurants or shops to suggest. She honestly wouldn’t leave her apartment much, save to go to class or advisory meetings, if it weren’t for her friends. So yeah, this was what she had to share. Her wonderful friends, who were a bit much, but still wonderful.

I haven’t been to a Halloween party in years. Sounds like fun. I’m sure Anduin hosting it will make it especially wild. What time does it start?

Nine, but you know how these things are. You’re supposed to be fashionably late.

I’ll come by after I’ve finished closing the shop then. And after I figure out what to wear...Can you text me his address?

Fuck. She was really doing this, wasn’t she? She was really going to see her again. Instead of wondering why this filled her chest with warmth, Jaina just let it happen. She just let a little laugh of relief bubble up and burst past the back of her teeth as she typed out the address to Anduin’s apartment.

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“Nathan, why the fuck did I do that?” Sylvanas asked her dog as he sprawled out on the bed behind her.

He, as usual, had no answer for her as she threw clothes from her dresser out onto the bed. Vintage band tees. A rayon windbreaker. A polyester pencil skirt. Overalls. Striped sweaters in varying shades of earth tones.

“I can’t wear any of this shit,” she told the dog as she turned to him and the pile of very decade-specific clothing on the bed. It was the contents of her entire ‘fun stuff’ drawer. “I’m already that ‘weird seventies girl’. I’m sure all her friends know that by now. I...I don’t. Listen Nathan. Listen close. Tell me I have something else. Please.”

He sneezed and then walked over to huddle against a particularly colorful sweater and curl up to go back to sleep. Well. At least that was a response.

Sylvanas sighed and went over to pet him and look through the clothes a second time. “You live a very simple life, my little friend. You don’t have to worry about what people think of you. You don’t have to be concerned about fucking up all the time. All you have to do is eat, sleep, and poop. An enviable life, really.”

But Sylvanas had to reason that it couldn’t be that bad. Jaina still wanted to see her. And she’d kept texting her too. Maybe even a little more than she had before.

“I just can’t ruin this,” Sylvanas explained as she kneeled in front of the bed.

She ran her hand through the odd tuft of fur on top of the little dog’s head, then down his pudgy neck, where the black fur was tinged grey with age. Every day, she’d find a new patch of grey hair on him, slowly taking over his little body. He was all she had here, yet nature served to remind her daily that it was lining up to claim him too.

Sylvanas let her fingertips circle the grey patch again. “You need to live forever bud. Because I’m gonna fuck this up somehow. But I can’t fuck up with you. Well, unless I forget to feed you, but then you usually forgive me as soon as the food goes down.”
Wait a second. Didn’t she have some old stage makeup? From that KISS night she’d hosted a few years back? Black and white grease paint, yeah. Mixed together...hmm...that could work.

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“I believe the spell you are looking for is ‘Accio Girlfriend’,” Anduin informed Jaina sagely. Well, it would have been very sagely, if he were not dressed as a giant banana.

“Can you ‘Accio’ me a drink at least?” Jaina groaned from his couch, where she definitely had not been sitting and staring at the door. Not at all. Not in any way.

“You can conjure yourself whatever you want in the kitchen, you know,” he said as he handed her a plastic cup filled with a brightly colored mixed drink all the same. “I would expect an esteemed Ravenclaw prefect such as yourself would be well-versed in potions enough to make a decent screwdriver.”

“Are you out of Harry Potter puns yet?” Jaina asked him, though she had been a deserving target, after all, dressed in a Ravenclaw uniform that would have put even some of the movie costumes to shame. She’d almost forgotten she’d owned it, really. She bought it back in high school, when she volunteered at the library. The kids always loved it.

“Oh, I’m nowhere near done, and they’re only going to get worse as the night goes on. But you can’t stay mad at me, because I’m a fucking banana,” Anduin told her as he did a twirl, showing off the entire effect of his hideous costume, complete even with banana-shaped slippers and little banana barrettes clipped into his hair.

And yes, she did laugh. She couldn’t stay mad. He was a fucking banana, and a good friend.

She took a sip of the drink. It was so cloyingly sweet and fruity that there was no way to tell how much alcohol was in it, much less what kind. If it were anyone else but Anduin, anywhere else but here, that might have made Jaina nervous. But here, now, she took as big a swig of it as she could stand, trying to get her mind off the fact that it was now just about 10:30, and she hadn’t even gotten so much as a text from Sylvanas.

“Then please tell me this potion will make me forget what an idiot I am,” she begged through the burn of the citrus juice.

“If you keep drinking it like that, yes, but I don’t think that’s what you want,” Anduin said as he flopped his yellow-clad body next to hers on the couch.

“I don’t know what I want. That’s the problem,” Jaina told him as she finally took her eyes off the door to look at Anduin instead. She got a view of the rest of the room with him, of course, filled with people she both recognized and did not know, colorful costumes, and laughter.

“But you’re trying to figure it out. That’s a step,” Anduin assured her. “At least a step compared to where you were last week. Or are you still lying on your floor and pining for long periods of time?”

A walking pinata bumped into Anduin’s knee and offered, “That’s just when Jaina researches her new project: Contemplations on Human Sexuality.” Kinndy’s voice was muffled by the head of her costume, which she took off and threw at Anduin unceremoniously as she climbed up onto the couch between them.

“Has anyone tried to break you open for candy yet?” Anduin asked as he automatically moved to help her up the last bit of her climb.
“No, but maybe if you hang me from the ceiling,” Kinndy suggested.

“Maybe later. It’s time to cheer Jaina up now,” he informed her.

“Oh, right,” Kinndy said as she turned toward Jaina, as awkwardly as one might think she would in a tight space with a blocky piece of cardboard around her body. “Listen Jaina. Any minute now, that hot elf is gonna burst through the door dressed as a sexy something. A sexy fireman or policeman or a sexy ghost. I don’t know, but it’s going to blow your mind. And she’s gonna walk straight over to you and be like, ‘Hey babe, what’s up?’”

Anduin leaned over her head to whisper, “Sorry, she’s already had more than enough for someone her size, but yeah. Try to have some fun, even if your girl doesn’t show up dressed as a sexy garbage man or whatever.”

Kinndy swiveled toward Anduin again and punched him in one oddly smooth leg, clad in yellow tights, of course. “Sexy garbage man! Why didn’t I think of that one?”

“I don’t even know if she’s interested in me enough to dress up as a sexy anything,” Jaina lamented over another sip of her drink. “But thanks anyway, guys. I appreciate it.”

“Are you fucking blind, Jaina? Do you not have eyes? Did you ‘Accio’ your vision away as well when you stopped wearing those contacts? She’s super fucking into you,” Anduin assured her.

“Okay that’s one too many ‘Accio’ jokes in a ten minute period, Andy. You’re cut off now,” Kinndy commented.

“Hush, you. Anyway, I don’t think you need to worry about that, Aunty. Continue to worry about whether or not you are into her, not the other way around,” Anduin finished.

“I mean…” Jaina started. She lost her train of thought as her eyes counted the myriad of happy couples that dotted Anduin’s loft apartment, chatting in corners and smiling over the rims of their plastic cups at one another. Some swaying along to the music that filled the loft. Gay and straight alike, and anything else in between. It didn't matter what they were. They all looked happy.

“Wait…” Anduin sat up on the edge of the couch so he could lean over Jaina to ask, “Are you actually going to try to date her?”

“Maybe?”

Jaina expected that confession to sting her her throat more than any combination of fruit juice and alcohol ever could, but it didn't. It just made her look back toward the door.

Toward the high elf that was walking through it, the glow of her eyes muted as she looked around. Toward the grey paint that covered her skin and the ashen highlights under her cheeks that made them look sunken in. Toward the darkened hollows around her eyes, lined with stark black that was beginning to run down her cheeks. Toward the fact that Jaina could see past the color, or rather the lack thereof, to immediately see this was Sylvanas, wearing her normal clothes, but painted to look like a zombie.

And she was looking for her.

Jaina thrust her drink at Anduin and got up without even saying anything. She nearly tripped over the long black robes she forgot she was wearing, only to stop short when those eyes finally found her, and Sylvanas grinned at her.
“Look at you,” she said as Jaina managed to regain her momentum and walk the rest of the way to the door.

“Look at you, more like,” Jaina countered, even though looking at her was all she could do. “You look like you just came from filming a modern version of Thriller. That makeup is awesome!”

Jaina could see the tips of Sylvanas’ ears lower a bit as she relaxed and replied, “I probably spent way too much time on it. Sorry. I guess I forgot this was a college party. I tend to like the version of Halloween that’s more scary than slutty.”

Jaina followed her eyes across the room to find that, yes, most of the other women here had joined the ranks of the sexy nurses or sexy witches or what have you. “I’m with you on that,” Jaina noted.

“Considering you are dressed as a character from a children’s book, yeah. I almost would have expected something more literary from you,” Sylvanas said as she poked at the shoulder of Jaina’s robe.

“Everyone loves Harry Potter,” Jaina shrugged. “I’m not that pretentious, am I? That I come across as someone who doesn’t still love Harry Potter?”

“No, no, not at all,” Sylvanas said with another smile. “But you’re definitely a Ravenclaw.”

They shared a laugh that was just...god. It was everything. It was warm and soft and normal. Just like many others they had shared over the handful of times they’d been together. It was fine. Everything was still fine.

“No question there,” Jaina agreed as she pointed across the apartment. “Come on. The kitchen is over here. Let’s get you a drink or something. I think there’s pizza, if you’re hungry.”

As she turned to lead the way, she found Anduin giving her a subtle thumbs up from the couch, where he had trapped Kinndy in a tangle of his long, yellow-clad limbs. The gnome was trying to escape with a devious look on her face as she tried to make a beeline for Jaina and Sylvanas, but Anduin stopped her at every turn.

Jaina mouthed a ‘thank you’ as she led the way to the kitchen, which was thankfully almost empty. Most of the rest of the guests were mingling now. Only one elf lingered there, alone. Jaina didn’t know her very well, but the impossibly long blonde hair and her dancer’s body were a giveaway even in that awful sexy ninja costume she was wearing. And of course, she was standing right in front of the cups, looking at her phone.

“Hey Valeera,” she greeted Anduin’s friend and fellow theatre student. “Can I squeeze past you a sec?”

“Oh, yeah sorry,” Valeera offered with a distracted air. She moved over to the other edge of the counter without looking up from her phone.

Jaina plucked two cups from the stack and handed one to Sylvanas, looking between her and Valeera for a moment. Wait. This was a good opportunity. She didn’t know much about this girl, but like many of Anduin’s friends, she was certain of one thing. One thing that hopefully would make Sylvanas look a little less overwhelmed right now.

“Is your girlfriend here tonight?” Jaina asked Valeera. “I keep hearing about her, but I’ve never met her.”

“No she’s…” Valeera finally looked up from her phone to finish the explanation, but her eyes
immediately found Sylvanas instead.

And grew wide.

Did she know her? Maybe she was a customer. But something seemed off. Like this wasn't a recognition between friends or acquaintances.

“She couldn't make it,” Valeera finished, her eyes still locked on Sylvanas for a moment before she moved toward the doorway. “I gotta go. See you around, Jaina.”

“Who was that?” Sylvanas asked after Valeera disappeared back out into the crowd in the living room.

“A friend of Anduin's. Not sure why she was being so weird. Do you know her?” Jaina wondered out loud.

Sylvanas shook her head. “Never seen her before in my life. Maybe she thinks I'm someone else.”

“I've heard people say all elves look alike, but I don't think so. Oh well. So what do you like to drink?” Jaina asked as she went over to the large collection of liquor bottles and mixers that dominated the kitchen island.

Sylvanas gave her a pensive look, then played with the rim of her plastic cup before saying, “I, uh...I don't drink. That's probably another thing I should have thought about…”

Jaina didn't even think. She didn't wonder. She didn't pry. She just went to the fridge and found a stack of sealed water bottles in one of the drawers, then held one of them out to Sylvanas. “Is water okay then?”

Sylvanas smiled again, finally, blessedly, as she took it from her. “You're not going to tell me how lame I am?”

Jaina let out a little huff. “Watch how lame I am too,” she said as she dove back into the fridge to get herself a water too. “Anduin made me a drink before that I think might be rotting my teeth right now. I could only stand to take a few sips of it, so I'll stick with this.”

“Please don't spoil your fun on my account,” Sylvanas said as she cracked open her water.

“I mean I do drink,” Jaina told her as she stacked her plastic cup back onto the others that were awaiting more exciting beverages. “But like, not at these kind of things. A glass of wine with dinner, or a book, maybe. I'll be honest...this whole party thing isn't really my idea of fun.”

Sylvanas joined her and leaned back on the edge of the island. They both looked out at the party going on in the other room, all a sea of skin and color. Sylvanas let out a warm little chuckle as she turned to Jaina again. “Then why did you want to come here?”

Jaina took a deep breath. She found a joke bubbling up in the back of her throat, but stopped it short. No. She had told herself that it was time to be honest. She could do that. She knew she could.

“I wanted an excuse to see you again,” Jaina told her, as loudly and clearly as she could manage, which still came out almost as a whisper.

Sylvanas looked at her thoughtfully for a moment, as if trying to read anything beyond those words, any clue in Jaina's face other than the deep flush she could feel taking over her cheeks. The elf's mouth lifted into a little smile, then opened, only to have the first syllable of her sentence drown out
by a combination of the noise of a confused crowd, the suddenly very loud and brassy tones of funk music, and a very familiar high pitched voice screaming, “It's time to dance, bitches!”

That...was definitely seventies music. Jaina scanned the room to find Kinndy, still clad in only the bottom half of her colorful pinata costume, balanced precariously atop Anduin’s stereo, messing with a laptop that must have been controlling the playlist. Anduin was trying to get to her, but plenty of people were already following the gnome's command and had started a makeshift dance floor between the couches and the TV. They were blocking his way too her.

It wasn't at all subtle, or slow, or even easy, but Jaina felt a sudden surge of confidence flow through her as the music rang through the loft. Accio girlfriend indeed.

“Well, you heard her. Dance with me?” Jaina asked as she set her water bottle aside and put out a hand for Sylvanas.

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Jaina’s hand was warm in hers. Sylvanas didn’t think about anything else. She didn’t voice any objections, or make any excuses.

Well, she thought about one other thing. She thought about the soft way Jaina had muttered that she just wanted to see her again. She already knew she would think about that for the rest of her days.

She didn’t think about how she didn’t really know how to dance. She just followed Jaina into the crowd and started moving with her. She didn’t think about how she didn’t belong in that crowd. She didn’t notice how she was at least five years older than most of the other party goers, and far more moderately dressed. No, all Sylvanas could see was the smile on Jaina’s face, the one that lit up the room, just like the so many glittering lights of the city that were on display through the windows of the loft.

She was staring. Maybe Jaina wanted her to. Well. That was something she’d have to process. “Your tiny friend there has good taste in music,” Sylvanas said as she swayed with Jaina, not touching her, not yet, but close. Really close.

“My roommate,” Jaina told her, shaking her head, but not losing that grin all the same. “Who might have already had a bit too much booze for her own good. Is this the Jackson Five?”

“Close,” Sylvanas noted over the blaring horns that weaved their way through a funky bassline. “This is from the late 70s, when they went by just ‘The Jacksons’.”

“Of course,” Jaina said with a laugh.

She took her eyes off Sylvanas for just a moment, looking around them before she led the way into a thicker pocket of people. Sylvanas followed her, as bodies walled them off from the sparkling windows and the rest of the loft, until the only lights were Jaina’s cool blue eyes, resplendent in their natural color. None of that overly-intense aqua color that her contacts had given them. No. She didn’t need that. She didn’t need any of that.

This blue was intense enough on its own, especially now, the way it peered in askance at Sylvanas, for just a moment, letting the music answer the question as the song picked up. As her hands reached for Sylvanas’ hips, both to pull her closer and to guide her. As those hands were still warm, even through the fabric of her jeans.

Sylvanas opened her mouth, to object, to make a joke, to flirt, even, but closed it before any sound came out. No. Jaina wanted this. She actually wanted this. Even with all the pink that was coloring
behind the freckles on her cheeks, she didn’t look away. She didn’t stop smiling.

They were so close now. Jaina was a little taller than her. Just a little. She was sure of it now. And she was definitely wearing a skirt beneath those robes. Sylvanas was very sure that her knees were brushing bare legs. And she smelled good. God. Of course she smelled good. Like citrus and salt and just...her.

They say that actions speak louder than words. Well, Sylvanas was listening loud and clear to this dance, to the way her hands fell just as easily to Jaina’s hips, to the way that she somehow instantly forgot how awkward and out of place she felt here, in this high class apartment full of drunk rich kids. They didn’t exist then. It was just her and Jaina, just blue eyes on blue eyes, little laughs and smiles, and a little gasp here and there too when her grip tightened, and she pulled Jaina as close as she dared.

They stayed that way, hidden by the bodies of the other dancers, until the song faded out into another one--a modern one full of throbbing bass and electronic noise.

And Jaina looking at her with her eyes glazed now, half with wonder, like Sylvanas had just revealed some great secret to her, and half with something she didn’t quite want to name yet, but might have been called lust by someone with the courage to do so.

“Do you want to show me that rooftop deck?” Sylvanas suggested, leaning into Jaina again to whisper it to her, but then taking a step back, and then another.

No. She couldn’t fuck this up. This, whatever this was, whatever that had been when they danced--it wasn’t something to be rushed. It wasn’t something to dive into without thinking. It had been raw and real and...no. She wasn’t ready for that, and Jaina sure as hell couldn’t be either, right?

Jaina just nodded, and grabbed for Sylvanas’ hand again to lead her away through the mass of bodies. She made for the door, dodging them through all manner of creatures; a sexy lamp, a young tauren in a nothing but a toga, the back end of a two-person horse costume, and a handsome young human man--looking very lost and just holding a giant spoon.

“Excuse me. Sorry,” Jaina said as she shoved her way through the apartment, which seemed to have doubled in population in the short amount of time that Sylvanas had been there. “Oh, hey Calia.”

A girl dressed in an angel costume, resplendent in a display of gold and white that was more at home on the top of a Christmas tree than at a Halloween party stared at them in utter confusion.

“Can we just, sneak by real quick?” Jaina asked her, as the girl was standing right infront of the front door.

“Uh, yeah,” Calia finally said as she stepped away.

Even out in the hallway, Jaina didn’t let go of her. It was only in the elevator that she dropped her hand and punched the button for the roof, then turned around to give Sylvanas that same bewildered, but sublime look.

God. She could kiss her right now. She could just press her up against the wall, and listen to the hum of the elevator mix with the hammering of her heart. She could. It would be wonderful.

But Jaina deserved better than that.

“I...I’m glad you invited me here, even if you don’t like parties,” Sylvanas said, trying to will her face into a friendly smile. Strictly friendly. Nothing else. Not yet.
Okay, maybe that was a little too hard right now--when she could still practically taste Jaina.

“I’m...really glad you came,” Jaina returned as some of the wildness left her gaze.

The elevator chimed, and the doors opened to blessedly cool air, and out into the night. Sylvanas led the way out this time, though she looked back for Jaina to follow her. The deck was deserted, but beautiful, if just maybe a little too cold and windy. But Sylvanas spotted a sunken bench area, clustered around a large planter that looked like it had been freshly filled with an assortment fall mums. Just out of the wind. Maybe a little out of the cold. Perfect.

“Come on, over here,” Sylvanas beckoned her.

Sylvanas took a seat on one of the benches, only to find Jaina standing in front of her awkwardly. She laughed, only a little. “Sit down and talk to me,” Sylvanas said as she patted the cushioned bench next to her.

Jaina sat with a mixture of relief and disappointment further coloring her blush. She arranged her robe to cover her legs, which were indeed bare save for a skirt that looked like it had once belonged to some sort of school uniform. But she let her knee touch Sylvanas’, and then didn’t move it away. “I have to be honest, I wasn’t sure if you wanted to come up here to talk or…”

“Talk first, please,” Sylvanas said. “I--”

“No, just...wait a second okay? Me first,” Jaina demanded. “I’m sorry if I’ve made you uncomfortable or anything like that. I don’t...I mean I have no idea...I barely even know you…”

Jaina reached out, as if she could somehow draw the words that were escaping her in the air and release them that way. But it didn’t help.

Sylvanas took her hand and gave it a quick squeeze before letting it go. “I thought I was the one making you uncomfortable. Before, in the shop.”

“No! No way! I didn’t get to say anything and then it was too late and ugh...no! I’m glad you think my eyes are pretty. I mean, I spent that whole dinner trying to think of what I could say in return, but I decided that you just have the best smile and...shit. I don’t know,” Jaina rambled.

Sylvanas was showing off that smile, whether she wanted to or not. “And here I didn’t think you were into girls. I’m a real bad judge of that kind of stuff, though.”

“Well, I haven’t been. Before. I mean. Not that I think it’s bad. I just…” Jaina took a deep breath, closing her eyes for just a moment as she did. “Sorry. This is new for me. I’m trying to be honest with myself as much as I am with you. You just make me feel like no one else ever has, any time I’m around you. It’s just so easy to be with you. And you don’t ever want me to be anything else. In fact, you just seem to always push me to be myself. It’s...really nice.”

“I didn’t realize that,” Sylvanas told her. “I don’t want to push you to do anything, really. You’re just...I don’t know. You’re like the sun after the rain.”

It was Jaina’s turn to wear the grin now. “That sounds like something from an old seventies song.”

Sylvanas laughed. “It might be.”

Jaina took another deep breath, but this time it came out less shaky on the exhale. “You could have kissed me, you know. Right there, before we even left. Or in the elevator. Or here. I wouldn’t have minded.”
God, she wouldn’t have minded either. She still wouldn’t mind. But no. This wasn’t going to end up that way. It wasn’t going to be another night of empty passion, and another morning of lonely regret. No. Not this time.

“You deserve better than that,” Sylvanas told her. “Especially if this is...new for you. I really like you, Jaina. And if you really like me, well, I don’t want to be the one to mess that up. I was so afraid I had already.”

“You’re too good, you know,” Jaina said. She looked down at Sylvanas’ hands before taking one, and smearing the grey paint that covered it around one of her knuckles as she toyed with it. “But you’re right. Let’s...let’s start this fresh, the way it should be. Hi, I’m Jaina Proudmoore and I think you’ve made me realize that I might be more than a little bisexual.”

Sylvanas smiled and captured the hand that was playing with hers. “I’m Sylvanas Windrunner, and you make me smile.”

“Can we just...can we keep hanging out and see what happens? Is that okay? Is that enough for you? To not put any words or labels to it right now?” Jaina asked as she held tight to her hand.

“That sounds amazing,” Sylvanas assured her.

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They danced some more, or at least they made an excuse out of doing it every time Kinndy snuck back onto the laptop and put on more seventies music. They had to honor her efforts, right? It wasn’t like that first dance, never quite threatening to spill over the edge into something way too much for either of them to handle, but it was closer than they had bargained for, but also shy and sweet.

Sylvanas was a hit with her friends too. She and Kinndy talked about funk music for way too long. Anduin was all over her zombie makeup and begging for tips. His theatre friends had either heard of her shop or been there themselves. Jaina found herself staying close in these conversations, where she would have normally made an excuse to wander off and get away. She felt like she had to stay close, to keep whatever ember they had managed to kindle going, just by being near her.

And God, just being near her. Knowing that she could. Knowing that the feeling was mutual, but that Sylvanas cared enough about it, about her, not to push, not to hurry.

And knowing what she could have, when she was ready for it. Fuck.

But it went by so fast, and it got so late so quickly. Jaina had a thesis review meeting the next morning, not super early, but early for how late it was. She had to go. She had to go an hour ago. But as soon as she mentioned something about it, Sylvanas was immediately helping her round up people to say goodbye to. She even helped find Jaina’s jacket and purse for her in the chaos that was the pile in the spare bedroom.

“I’ll walk home with you,” were some of the sweetest words she’d ever heard.

And despite everything, nothing really changed, yet everything had. They still laughed. Sylvanas still listened attentively as Jaina talked about her books, about the research she was doing, about her thesis and her passions. Jaina still listened as Sylvanas talked about Kinndy’s surprisingly vast knowledge of funk, and how impressive it was to hear all that coming out of a drunk gnome dressed as a purple and pink pinata.

And maybe, yeah, their hands touched, and some fingers held onto other fingers. Any maybe Jaina
was mentally mapping out Sylvanas’ graceful, soft hands, and still thinking a lot about how they’d felt on her hips earlier. Just maybe.

They got to her apartment too fast. Jaina eyed the doorman, wondering just how many times he’d watched this scene with other people. How many times he’d watched someone say goodbye when they didn’t really want to, but when they should have. When they needed to.

“I had a really great time tonight. We should really, you know, plan a next time. Like...soon,” Jaina said as she shuffled around, just out of sight of the door, half from the cold of the October night, half from anxiety over her still-awkward attempts to ask for a date. A real date.

“Tomorrow, for sure. We’ll text. Or I’ll call you?” Sylvanas offered. “Tonight, you need to sleep.”

“Yeah I know,” Jaina grumbled. “And I hate it. You’ll call me tomorrow?”

“Yeah,” Sylvanas said with tired grin. Jaina would have been just fine with a kiss now. She would have been very happy to live that New York fantasy of kissing beneath the ever-burning lights of the city that never slept. But no. It wasn’t the right time yet. She didn’t know why, but she knew that much.

“Can I have a hug?” she asked instead.

Sylvanas answered with one. Decidedly chaste, compared to how close they had been earlier in the evening, but a hug all the same. It was warm and soft and smelled like her shampoo and grease paint. Jaina was pretty sure she came away from it with some grey on her cheek, but that was just fine. Let the doorman see that and wonder.

“Get home safe, okay? Text me when you do,” Jaina demanded.

“But you’re supposed to go right to sleep,” Sylvanas objected. “I don’t want to wake you.”

“Shut up and text me anyway, please,” Jaina insisted. Sylvanas laughed. “Fine, fine. Go to bed, Jaina. I promise I’ll be here in the morning. And I’ll call you.”

Jaina almost wanted to stop her from walking away, to keep her close as she had been all night. She felt a piece of herself leave with Sylvanas as she watched her walk down the street and wave back at her. As cheesy as that sounded, as stupidly romantic, she felt it. She understood that now.

And she felt it still, up in her room. She felt it in the quick shower she took, which admittedly should have been a little colder than it was. Well, maybe a lot.

And she felt it still when she looked in her pajama drawer and found the beat-up old Led Zeppelin shirt, the one that Sylvanas had given her when she ruined her blouse before. She felt it even more when she slid the soft fabric over her head, and still feeling too hot, opted to wear only that and a pair of panties to bed. She felt it when she looked at her phone and didn’t see a text from Sylvanas yet, but it was too early to worry. She had a long walk ahead of her still. That much Jaina knew.

She also knew another feeling too--or the memory of one. That first dance. That heady, amazing dance. The way Sylvanas hands held her. The way her hips brushed against Jaina’s. The way her thigh had parted her legs, brushing the inside of Jaina’s own thigh against the seam of her jeans.

Fuck. That shower really should have been colder.
And now Jaina couldn’t sleep. She couldn’t stop looking at her phone, or at the ceiling. Every time she shut her eyes, the image of Sylvanas’ eyes, all half-lidded and serious, found her. The warmth of her skin and the smell of her...or wait, was that maybe coming from the shirt? Fuck.

“You said you were going to be honest with yourself,” Jaina muttered to the darkness of her bedroom.

She was working on it. She really was. And if she was going to be perfectly honest with herself, then Jaina would say she knew how to get to sleep. Oh she knew.

And she knew for sure now that she was very, very into girls. Or at least into Sylvanas Windrunner.

She was so certain of that fact as she slid her hand beneath the waistband of her panties. So certain as she closed her eyes and let her mind wander to where it wanted to. To soft, but strong hands. To that perfect smile. To elven grace in hipster clothes.

Fuck. It had never felt like this before.

And when she let it wander to other things--to what Sylvanas might be like. To how those hands would look, balled in the sheets as Jaina’s free one was. To what those half-lidded glowing eyes would look like beneath her. To how those smooth lips might part to moan her name.

That was when Jaina spilled all too quickly over the edge. Wow. Had it ever been that good?

And that was when she was very certain that she was really, really into Sylvanas Windrunner.

Just as her hand stilled, and she felt sleep finally coming to claim her in her afterglow, Jaina’s phone buzzed on the nightstand next to her.

Home safe. Have a good night :)

Shit. Jaina wiped her hand off hastily before typing a reply, with an odd edge of guilt cutting at her as she did, but only for a brief moment. No. No need to feel like that. Not with her. Not now.

I already had a good night with you! And I promise I’ll go to sleep now!

You better!

And she did. With her phone as a weight on her chest, and a warm buzz of both satisfaction and affection filling it.

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Alright, Red. Your turn!

Jaina rubbed at her eyes as she walked from her bedroom towards the kitchen, lifting a brow in amusement at the sight of both Anduin and Kinndy half-in and half-out of their costumes on the couch and armchair, respectively. She wondered idly how late they’d stayed up the prior night as she poured herself a glass of orange juice - deciding to forgo blending anything on a whim of mercy for her undoubtedly hung-over friends.

While she hadn’t had much to drink last night…’hung-over’ was probably the only applicable description of how she was feeling, though she was almost certain it was a lot more pleasant than what Anduin and Kinndy would experience when they finally managed to wake up. Where there might normally be an ache in their head - there were, instead, memories of Sylvanas’s gentle acceptance. Where there might normally be an ache in her stomach, there was an ache, instead, in her chest. A heaviness that was somehow light and freeing at the same time. A warm weight that she didn’t mind feeling, now, because it felt right. Like she’d just discovered the missing piece to complete a puzzle she’d given up on years ago.

She smiled a little into her orange juice as she leaned back against the counter and looked into the living room at the half-dressed banana and disheveled pinata taking up her furniture in its entirety. As much hell as they’d given her lately, she was glad to have them. Yet, at the same time, thankful she had a meeting to rush off to before they could pry about the previous night. She didn’t think she’d
mind talking about it, now...she just wanted to have it all to herself for a little while longer.

The meeting was painless, if not a touch dry - as per usual. Only, this time, she was excited to leave it. Excited for ‘later’ when Sylvanas would be up and about and maybe, just maybe call her. No...probably not ‘maybe’. She’d have to get used to not thinking like that, anymore. She had to get used to the fact that Sylvanas was, possibly, one of the most genuine people she’d ever met. Especially in this place.

Jaina had just begun contemplating the odds of meeting someone like her when she felt her phone begin to vibrate in her back pocket. This time, she didn’t bother to question or attempt to dampen the excitement at the sight of the contact information coming into view on her screen. She slid the call open and lifted the phone to hear ear - already grinning widely, uncontrollably, as she spoke. “Hey.” Jaina’s voice was almost quiet, though it was quiet in a way that spoke more of restrained excitement than anything else.

Sylvanas leaned over the counter of her shop as her own grin widened. She could hear the smile in Jaina’s voice. It was unmistakable. It was...so much.

“Hey, you.”

Such a simple phrase. Such an odd thing to plant itself in Jaina’s mind so solidly. It was so familiar and so...good. Just good.

“Hey. I’m...glad you made it home alright.” Jaina found the nearest bench and sat her books down beside herself as she switched her phone to her dominant hand and crossed her free arm over her legs.

“Me, too. I’m glad for a lot of things.” Sylvanas’s voice was full of that same warmth Jaina found herself missing more often than not, nowadays. The kind that you couldn’t fake even if you tried. The kind that made her duck her head slightly despite the fact that there was no one around.

“Me, too. I’ll tell you something I’m glad for - but only if you tell me something you’re glad for, first.”

Sylvanas pushed herself away from the counter and walked around the front of it as she thought about the request. The offer, really. She took Nathanos’s place in his green chair and, instead, let him sit in her lap as she looked out the storefront to sidewalks that were still relatively quiet. It was fairly early, after all.

Jaina was precious. The thought darted into her mind before she could even fully process it. She was so...open. And she seemed so honest. Sylvanas didn’t doubt for a second that Jaina wanted to know what she was thankful for. It was so refreshing. And it was so fucking nice for someone to care enough about her to ask.

“I’m glad that you walked into my shop that day to shop for clothes. I’m even more glad that you came back.” Sylvanas crossed her legs and leaned her head back as her grin faded into an easier smile - her cheeks already aching, not that she cared.

Jaina rolled that response around in her mind - appreciating the near-innocence of it. The pureness. The sudden security that blanketed her in response to knowing that that’s how much Sylvanas wanted her around. So much, that even something as simple as her coming to shop stuck out in the other woman’s mind.

“I’m glad you share your music with me.” Jaina said into the receiver of the phone in reply -
speaking quietly because she wasn’t entirely sure whether or not she had the breath to talk with any real volume.

It was Sylvanas’s turn to find herself a bit breathless, then. Music was...god, everything to her. There weren’t even words, really, for how important.

“Sylvanas?”

Shit, how long had she not said something for?

“Sorry! I was just...I dunno, thinking.” Sylvanas looked down at Nathanos as he made an errant noise that most people would likely consider gross but she only smiled at.

“About what?” Jaina asked curiously. It was easy, somehow, to say whatever was on her mind when they were talking like this. She didn’t have to run through options in her head or overthink things. It was such a relief.

“Do you want to go to dinner tomorrow night? It’s National Cheese Fondue Day tomorrow.”

Jaina was combating the sudden flutter in her chest and the fact that it was painfully adorable that Sylvanas both knew about Cheese Fondue Day and wanted to observe it.

“Is...is that a real thing?” She finally asked once she got over the shock of Sylvanas...asking her out?

“That hurt, Jaina. Of course, it’s a real thing. I would never joke about fondue.”

Jaina was barely stifling her laughter, now, and it was infectious. Soon, they were both losing the fight. Jaina, because Sylvanas was being absolutely ridiculous...and wonderful. Sylvanas, because Jaina couldn’t catch her breath long enough to try and stop when she started. And because they were both...happy. Happy and excited and so much more.

“I’m sorry I hurt your feelings, Sylvanas.” Jaina finally half-wheezed as she rubbed her eyes beneath her glasses before adjusting them back up the bridge of her nose. “And I would absolutely love to go to dinner with you.”

“Great. That’s...great. How’s tomorrow night at seven?” If Jaina had been able to see her right then, she’d have probably noticed the short series of bounces her heel made against the floor that disturbed Nathanos to no end. She’d definitely have noticed the slight perk of her ears.

“That’s perfect. Is...” She trailed off then, for the first time stopping herself from just saying what was on her mind.

“Is what?” Sylvanas asked as she stood to unlock the door, having only just realized she was a little late opening the shop. Not that anyone was exactly waiting outside. But, you never knew.

Jaina scrambled for an appropriate end to the beginning of the question she’d actually wanted to ask. It had been a dumb question. Probably. Right? You didn’t just ask someone if something was a date.

“Is it formal, or? I’ve never been to a Fondue restaurant on such a holy day, so I don’t want to look like a scrub or anything, y’know?” There. Perfect. Nice save.

“Definitely not formal. Just wear what you’re comfortable in.”

“Alright, I’ll see you tomorrow night?” Jaina pulled the phone away long enough to check the time and immediately grabbed her stack of books to rush towards her next commitment as she waited for
Sylvanas’s answer. She hadn’t even realized how long they’d been talking.

“Tomorrow night. I’ll be there with bells on. But...you can still call me tonight if you want. Or we can just text. I’m...” Sylvanas sighed as she made her way back behind the counter and plopped down on her stool. “I just like talking to you. Doesn’t really matter how.”

Jaina paused for a moment, struck by the sudden softness of Sylvanas’s voice. “I like talking to you, too. A lot. And we can talk as much as you want.”

Sylvanas didn’t know why, exactly, she felt relieved. She just did. Possibly because it was still a little hard for her to open up like this. To look forward to something and for that something to be not entirely in her control. “I’ll talk to you later, then. I hope you have a good morning.”

“You’ve already made it pretty great, but I’ll try.”

Sylvanas stared down at her phone for a while after the call disconnected, silently contemplating how utterly ridiculous the somersaults her stomach was doing were. She was slowly allowing herself to ease into the idea that Jaina might want more from her than most people seemed to. And the sweet little things the woman had begun to let slip weren’t helping.

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“Spill, Aunty.”

Jaina placed her bag down on the coffee table and plopped down next to Anduin who, at the very least, was no longer a banana.

“Alright.”

Anduin’s eyes snapped over to her and his brows lifted incredulously. “Alright? Really? You’re actually gonna talk about it?”

“Yeah, sure. Where’s Kinndy, so I don’t have to recap later?” Jaina lifted her feet to place them on the edge of the coffee table, crossing her legs at the ankle to get more comfortable where she sat. She really hadn’t gotten enough sleep. That didn’t matter much, though. She hadn’t felt this good in a very long time.

“I’m here! I’m here!” Kinndy half-galloped from her bathroom into the living room, still picking little pieces of pinata fluff out of her hair. It seemed even a shower hadn’t gotten it all out. “Did I hear that right? Did Jaina just agree to actually talk about Hot Elf Girlfriend?”

“First of all, she’s not my girlfriend.” Kinndy narrowed her eyes at her friend as she moved to pull herself up onto the armchair she usually occupied. “We’re hanging out and seeing where things go.”

Kinndy’s eyes un-narrowed immediately. “That’s...oh. Wow. Who, uh...who decided that?” Anduin looked just as interested as Kinndy, if not also slightly shocked. It wasn’t that he hadn’t expected Jaina to eventually realize, it was just...god, the moment was finally here. He couldn’t have been more proud if he tried.

“I did. She asked me to show her the rooftop and we sat together and talked.” Jaina avoided their staring. Avoided the unspoken questions in their eyes and expressions - not out of shyness or denial, now, but amusement.

“Jaina. Please. I’m dying. What else did you do?” Anduin pulled both his legs up onto the couch and
folded them over each other as he turned to face her.

Jaina smiled and released a little breath from her nose as she looked up at the ceiling. “Nothing, Andy. She’s...not like that. It’s not like that.”

“Jaina, please. I can’t handle you telling me this isn’t gay at this point.” Kinndy lifted a hand as Anduin complained. “Seconded.”

“No...it’s definitely that. But Sylvanas...you guys don’t understand. You wouldn’t. She’s just so different. Nothing happened. She walked me home...she hugged me, she left. Then she texted me goodnight.”

“You should see your stupid face right now.” Anduin remarked quietly, though he was smiling. He couldn’t help but smile at the almost serene look on Jaina’s otherwise relatively tired features.

“And then today, she called me like she said she would. And she asked me to dinner.”

Anduin’s mouth dropped open for a moment and, for once, he was almost too stunned to speak. Almost. Not quite, though. “Dinner?” The single-word question ended in a near-shriek. “Where? When?”

“Fondue. Tomorrow night at seven.” Only then, did she finally look over at her friends, who both looked all too pleased at this revelation.

“Excited, Aunty?” Now that Anduin had all the information out of Jaina that he felt he was going to get, he seemed content to lounge back on the couch again - no doubt to nap off the rest of his morning-after woes. So did Kinndy, for that matter, already dragging a throw blanket from the back of her chair to curl up in.

“Yeah. I really am.”

The day hadn’t really gotten better. It hadn’t gotten worse, either. She’d been a little busy the rest of the afternoon, catching up on readings and laundry - juggling both at once, more often than not. She figured Sylvanas had been busy at the shop, too, because she hadn’t heard from her at all. Not until she was laying, exhausted, in her bed. Probably way too early for someone so young to be so tired.

She glanced at the time on her phone and snorted. Eight o’clock at night and she was going to sleep...she hoped Sylvanas would be able to find a way to keep up with her. She’d only just retrieved her book from her nightstand when her phone vibrated against her chest.

*Hey, you.*

*Hey :). How was your day?*

*No fair. I was gonna ask you that. It’s been fine. Started off stellar. Talked to this great girl, had a decent day at the shop. You know.*

*I might have some idea. I talk to someone pretty awesome this morning, too.*

*Do you have any idea how sweet you are?*

*Same to you.*
Jaina bit her lip as she brushed her thumb across the words they’d been sharing, squinting her eyes for a moment in thought before she sent her next text.

You should send me a pic. Just so I don’t forget what you look like before I see you again.

Sylvanas was a little surprised. Surprised, yet...pleased? Yeah. She could allow some little part of her to be glad Jaina had asked. Just a little, tiny part.

You’re going to see me tomorrow, silly. ;)
Can I see you tonight, too?


She nearly dropped her phone when another text came through and she slid the notification open.

God...Sylvanas was so pretty. So fucking pretty in whatever too-big, ratty band shirt she was wearing with her platinum hair loose against her pillow and a soft, playful smile on her face that scrunched her nose ever so slightly. She must have had a lamp on...or turned one on for the picture. She was illuminated by a soft yellowish glow that only accentuated the delicate, slender lines of her features.

It was a hell of a selfie.

Wow.

Was that...a good ‘wow’?

God, yeah.

Your turn.

Somehow the likelihood of a ‘your turn’ had slipped Jaina’s mind. But it was only fair. She glanced down at the Led Zeppelin shirt she had on and thought, for a moment, about changing it. Was it weird that she slept in it more often than not? Well...Sylvanas wouldn’t know that, anyway.

Sylvanas smiled at first as she looked at the picture she’d been sent in return. Then the smile faded. Then it returned as a grin. She loved Jaina’s glasses. She loved the braid she’d put her hair up in to sleep in...and the blue of her eyes along with the barely visible dusting across her cheeks of freckles that were so faint makeup usually hid them.

Jaina just didn’t have any on right now. And she was...god, she didn’t need it. She didn’t need any of it.

Is that my shirt?

Yeah. It’s my new favorite. Comfy. ...And it still smells a little like you.

Jaina left that part out.

It’s so cute on you. I’m glad it got a good home.

Thank you for the picture, by the way. You didn’t have to.

Neither did you. Get some sleep, okay? I know you had to be up early today.
As right as Sylvanas was...it was hard to stop talking to her. It got harder every single time.

Alright, if you insist. I'll see you tomorrow?

Absolutely. I can’t wait. Sweet dreams.

Night. You, too.

Sweet dreams. Jaina felt almost overwhelmingly warm as she plugged her phone up and placed it on her nightstand, rolling onto her side and pulling her blankets over her shoulder as her thoughts raced for a while despite how tired she was.

She only looked at that selfie two or three more times before she finally drifted off.

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The next day seemed to stretch on forever. That was, at least, until it came time to get ready. Then, the minutes passed like seconds as Jaina struggled to figure out what she should wear. She might have wondered if Sylvanas were going through something similar if she didn’t think she’d look just fine in a paper sack.

Jaina, though? Well. She’d done her hair two different ways before settling on a braid and only then had she moved on to clothing choices. Kinndy had the patience of a saint sitting on the edge of her bed while Jaina listened to absolutely none of her opinions. Each outfit she chose looked just fine, and Kinndy told her as much - but, honestly, she was too much of a mess for anything to sink in.

“Jaina.”

Jaina shook her head at herself as she held yet another shirt up to herself in the mirror.

“Jaina.”

Her eyes snapped up to Kinndy’s, suddenly, in the mirror.

“The first outfit you picked? Was totally fine. And I’m sure she doesn’t care what you wear, anyway. But you have to stop freaking out long enough to get dressed. I haven’t even stared at myself in just a bra and pants this long and it’s getting a little ridiculous.”

Jaina glanced down at what she was wearing and, sure enough, she was in jeans and a bra and that was it. “...Sorry.”

“I mean she’d probably like this outfit, too, but you’re going out into public so it might not be, y’know. The best choice for a first date. Great underwear choice, though. Planning on going back to her apartment, or do I need to vacate within the next couple hours?”

“Kinndy, please. You aren’t helping.” Jaina groaned as she finally caved and pulled her initial choice of a button-up off its hanger. Once she had it buttoned she looked at herself in the mirror and, while the simple taupe plaid was nice enough - she felt like it just looked...stuffy. She glanced down at the cuffs and unbuttoned them, rolling them up to just beneath her elbows and checking her reflection again.

This was...fine. This would have to do.

“Wow, uh...I didn’t even know you had an outfit that made you look that gay.”
Jaina’s mildly approving expression shifted into nervousness once again as she turned to look at
Kinndy, who looked - immediately - like she regretted her choice of words.

“I mean, it’s fine. You’re…going on a date with a lesbian. That makes sense, you know. I’m serious,
Jaina. You look great.” Kinndy slid off the edge of the bed, finally and made her way for Jaina’s
bedroom door. “You should’ve left five minutes ago, by the way.”

Jaina gasped and grabbed her phone from her dresser, cursing under her breath as she read the time
on it and rushed to grab her purse. “I don’t even know if it’s a date, Kinndy!” She shouted on her
way out the door before slamming it behind herself.

Kinndy stared at the door for a while once Jaina was gone before rolling her eyes so hard she
wondered, suddenly, if they might get stuck there some day. “Doesn’t know if it’s a date. God help
her.”

In her panic, Jaina made rather good time to the restaurant. In fact, Sylvanas looked like she was just
walking up to it, herself when she arrived. And… “Wow. Hey.” She stopped, then, and let Sylvanas
walk the last few steps between them as she looked at her. She’d foregone her usual hipster attire for
something…wildly distracting. A shirt that might have been some sort of 70s throwback, but was
most certainly modern - a shirt that exposed her shoulders and the delicate lines of her collarbones
and looked like it only just covered the skin above her high-waisted skinny jeans. She also had the
barest hint of makeup on. Some light liner and mascara that made the intensity of her eyes that much
more striking. She’d even done her hair. Really done her hair. Half of it was up - tamed into an
intentionally messy style that allowed most of it to still hang down around her neck and shoulders.

“Wow, hey?” Sylvanas asked - her smile broaden in such a way that her teeth glinted in the
various lights that glittered around them. The sidewalk was busy. Intensely so. But they didn’t notice.
Not right now, anyway.

“Yeah, no, you just…look at you. I dunno. I’m sorry. Hey.” Jaina couldn’t help but laugh at herself,
albeit a bit nervously, as Sylvanas just smiled at her attempt at saving some semblance of dignity.

“Hey to you, too. You look really nice. So…also, ‘Wow’.” Sylvanas reached out towards her and
Jaina glanced down in time to both see and feel the back of the other woman’s fingers brush her
hand where it gripped the strap of her purse rather tightly.

Jaina’s blush would probably never stop being one of the cutest things Sylvanas had ever seen in her
life. She told herself it would probably be best to get used to that fact sooner rather than later as the
other woman took another step towards her to get out of the way of someone passing by that seemed
as though they were in too much of a hurry to notice them standing there together.

“Sylvanas? Can I ask you something real quick before we go inside?”

Sylvanas glanced towards the doors and then back at Jaina. “You can always ask me anything.”

“Is…is this a…”

“It’s whatever you want it to be.” Her response was so immediate and so firm, Jaina didn’t really find
not believing her to be an option. “No pressure. No expectations. Whatever you want and whatever
you’re ready for. I promise.”

Jaina let the words wash over for her as she nodded and smiled. “If it’s alright with you, then, I think
it would be really nice for it to be a date.”

“I think it’d be nice, too. Of course it can be. Let’s get inside and start our date, then.”

As they made it the rest of the way up the sidewalk, Jaina reached over to touch along the side of Sylvanas’s hand - allowing her fingertips to brush her palm just barely in silent question. A question Sylvanas answered without even looking by twining their fingers together gently and stroking over Jaina’s thumb with her own.

Sylvanas’s hand was so warm and soft in her own. So delicate. She doubted she’d ever forget this feeling - as that warmth spread while Sylvanas gave the host their names - never letting go.

In fact, she didn’t let go until Jaina slid into the circular corner booth, and even then, she only let go so she could sit, herself. Once their drinks were ordered, Sylvanas pulled a menu over to them and opened it between them. “Have you ever eaten here?” She asked as she glanced over it.

“I haven’t, no...have you?”

“God, yes. Big guilty pleasure. Do you like lobster?” Sylvanas looked up, then, and realized Jaina was looking at her instead of the menu, and dropped her eyes, immediately - almost in exact time with Jaina.

“I love lobster.”

“Okay, awesome. So let’s do the surf and turf, if you’re alright with that? And these are the cheeses they have for the first course. “ She pointed at the list and Jaina studied it carefully as she scooted a bit closer, both to be able to read more easily and just...because.

“The Classic Alpine sounds wonderful.” Jaina commented idly as she read the list of ingredients. “But, so does the Quattro Formaggio.”

Sylvanas nodded and thought the options over, trying to recall which she’d had and which she thought Jaina might enjoy most.

“Well, they both have roasted garlic. The pesto in the Quattro, though, is to die for. It really is.”

“Let’s go with that, then.” Jaina shifted her attention along with a subtle gesture from Sylvanas to the main course section.

“Alright, for the broth - since we’re going lobster, we should probably stick to the Court Bouillon. The other flavors might be a little strong for it.”


Jaina sounded so serious when she said that, that Sylvanas just barely managed to stop herself from snorting in response, though the noise that came out instead wasn’t that much more dignified than the alternative. “Same. Definitely, same. ...Holy shit. The desserts.”

Sylvanas nodded almost gravely. “Yeah. The desserts. God...the desserts. Anything catch your eye?”

“The Cookie Butter Crunch.” Her response came quickly - and there was so much surety in it, Sylvanas laughed quietly.

“It’s settled, then. Good job. You’re a good food decider. That’s got to be a first.”

Jaina’s brow furrowed and she looked up from the menu as Sylvanas folded it and held it out to the
approaching waiter. What could that comment possibly even mean? She’d have to remember to ask her later.

Sylvanas ordered for them as Jaina sipped her water. Even with the menu gone, she didn’t move from where she was - the side of her thigh pressed lightly against the side of Sylvanas’s. There wasn’t much time in between their ordering and the waiter returning to prepare their cheese course - an experience that left Jaina wondering why, exactly, she’d never done this before. She paid careful attention as he explained the color coding system for the different foods they’d be preparing for themselves lest she embarrass herself in front of her...date. Her date.

Jaina started with something safe. A nice, hearty-looking cube of pumpernickel bread which she dipped carefully and delicately pulled from its prongs with her teeth. Fuck. This was good. Really, really good.

She made it through another cube of bread or two before she nudged an apple slice with the end of her fondue fork. “Why...why are there apples? Are they palate cleansers or something?”

“No. They’re to dip in the cheese.” Sylvanas responded simply, skewering one for herself and dipping it before she popped it into her mouth as though that would make this suddenly make sense somehow.

“Sylvanas, that’s...that’s kinda gross. I don’t know.”

Sylvanas swallowed and shook her head before finding one for Jaina and dipping it - with maybe more cheese than Jaina might have put on an apple. As though she’d have put any cheese at all on an apple.

“Here.” Sylvanas held her hand beneath the slice in order to protect Jaina’s clothes - a gesture that wasn’t at all lost on her - and Jaina leaned in for the bite. The intimacy of the moment didn’t really hit her until Sylvanas was already pulling away - and it hit her at the same time as the realization that this was...actually really good.

“Thank you.” Jaina wiped her lower lip with her napkin and smiled into it as she, much to Sylvanas’s surprise, went for another apple slice.

By the second course, Jaina was much more comfortable with everything. They’d even begun discussing her meeting the prior morning, and, much to Sylvanas’s amusement - Anduin and Kinndy’s respective hangovers.

“So he still had the tights on?” Sylvanas asked as she slipped another morsel of lobster into the cooking broth in the center of the table, holding the handle of her fork out of the way for Jaina’s currently cooking piece so they wouldn’t get confused.

“Yes. I should’ve taken a picture. He had the damn tights on, his undershirt, and that was it. Kinndy, though, god. Kinndy is covered in little bits of tissue paper. She probably will be for years. She doesn’t regret the costume, though, of course.”

“Of course she doesn’t.” Sylvanas responded with a chuckle that drew Jaina’s attention to her as she reached for her own fork.

Jaina drew her hand away sharply with a hiss as she touched the metal part instead of the rubberized handle and Sylvanas’s expression shifted almost immediately from amusement to worry as she reached out and pulled Jaina’s hand towards herself gently. “Careful.” Sylvanas murmured as she inspected her palm and ran a fingertip along the faint red line crossing the insides of her fingers.
“You okay?”

Jaina was fine, of course. The sting had subsided almost immediately, though the sting to her pride would probably take a little while to fade. “Yeah, I just wasn’t paying attention. I’m kinda a clutz if you haven’t noticed.”

“A clutz?” Sylvanas responded as she stroked along Jaina’s palm one more time before releasing it and reaching for the fork the other woman had been going for. She dropped the piece of lobster she’d been cooking onto her plate and selected a piece of filet for her to go in next - dropping it into the broth and then retrieving her own lobster. “You’re, like, the most graceful person I’ve ever known in my life. Easily.”

Jaina narrowed her eyes and Sylvanas caught the expression from the corner of her own. Keeping a straight face hadn’t ever been her forte, and that was certainly still the case now as Jaina delivered a gentle shove to her side. “I’m kidding. Sorry. My sense of humor is kinda...dry, sometimes.”

Jaina only smiled down at her lobster before biting off a piece of it. “I love your sense of humor, actually.” She responded quietly before finishing off the last bite and checking on her filet - making sure to look at the fork this time as she reached for it. Beneath the table, though, Jaina reached for Sylvanas’s hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. She caught a slight shift in Sylvanas’s ears from the corner of her eyes and noticed, suddenly, it seemed to correspond with the faint smile that was turning the corner of the High Elf’s lips.

Jaina had to turn her own attention back to her cooking food, then, lest her staring or her grin be noticed. It had been, though. Yet Sylvanas didn’t let on. Not outwardly, anyway. “You’re the sweetest girl, Jaina Proudmoore.”

Jaina released Sylvanas’s hand slowly as she allowed herself to look at her - watching the unsurety in the other woman’s eyes following the painfully sweet words she’d just spoken so softly to her. “Where’d you come from?” Jaina asked, her food temporarily forgotten in its broth. Sylvanas’s own was currently suffering a similar fate.

“California.” Sylvanas’s answer was so deadpan - the feigned look of confusion on her face so well-done - that Jaina wondered for a split second if she was serious. Then she was stifling her laughter and lifting her glasses to wipe beneath her eyes in order to keep her makeup from running.

“Can I be really stereotypical real quick?” Sylvanas asked with a playful smirk on her face.

“Absolutely.” Jaina responded, watching as Sylvanas removed a strawberry from the end of her fork and held it out for her. The older woman was careful to release the strawberry the moment Jaina had it in her teeth, and she looked away so Jaina could eat it comfortably.

“I guess I enjoy ‘stereotypical’.” Jaina said after wiping her mouth, though she didn’t look at Sylvanas for fear it would make the blush on her cheeks that much more obvious. She didn’t find anything about Sylvanas all that stereotypical, though, truth be told. She was the exact opposite of the norm, really. And Jaina loved discovering each and every new thing there was to learn about her.

Dessert was, perhaps, her favorite course. The crunchiness of the almonds and the cloying sweetness of the white chocolate made the strawberries they were dipping it in that much better. That much brighter.

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Once the bill was settled - by Sylvanas, at her insistence, Jaina left the tip. A tip which resulted in them both laughing amongst themselves as Sylvanas tried and failed to give it back to her a time or two before relenting.
They held hands more comfortably this time on the way to the subway. They could’ve gone their separate ways, but this alternative allowed them more time together. Something they both needed and wanted, right now.

Jaina didn’t regularly take the subway anywhere - though it seemed Sylvanas didn’t really mind it. And, honestly, her presence made it more bearable. Even the smells seemed less offensive. Even the people bumping into her or standing too close were less overwhelming when, each time she was bumped, Sylvanas only held her hand more tightly or looked over at her to check on her.

It began to wear on her by the time they made it to the car and filtered onto it amongst the rest of the travelers, most of them exhausted from a too-long day at work. Sylvanas managed to spot a seat for them, though, and turned sideways to make it there, never letting go of Jaina’s hand.

“Hey, this seat’s free.”

Sylvanas’s head snapped towards an older looking man Jaina was currently walking past. He wasn’t sitting. It was clear what seat he was referring to - and if it wasn’t - his rather lewd gesture certainly came through loud and clear.

Before Jaina even had a chance to get mad about it, Sylvanas pulled her in front of herself and placed a hand on her lower back to keep her moving forward. “Back off, do you hear me?” Sylvanas asked under her breath as her eyes burned into the man’s, who was suddenly looking rather surprised at being confronted, and altogether uncomfortable. “I asked you a question, man.”

Jaina noticed their forward progress had stopped and she turned to look at Sylvanas. She’d never really seen her angry. Not at all. It was strange - the way her ears had flattened somewhat and the way her eyes seemed a little brighter than they usually did.

“Sylvanas?” She tugged at her hand and stroked across her knuckles. “C’mon, babe. Let’s sit down.”

The word came out before she had really registered it, and Sylvanas suddenly all but forgot the man who was currently looking anywhere except for at them. She followed Jaina to the seat they’d been heading for and sat down next to her as Jaina seemed to be holding onto the wince that had followed what she’d said.

“I didn’t mean to...I don’t know. It kinda just slipped.” Jaina mumbled as she looked down at her hands in her own lap. Sylvanas smiled and reached for one of them, pulling it into her own.

“No, I...I liked it. I promise. Sorry about...y’know. I’m a little defensive down here, sometimes. There’s some things about this place that are hard to get used to.”

Jaina leaned her shoulder against the other woman’s, then. “I don’t think anybody gets used to it. Don’t feel bad. Thank you. For saying something. Most people just ignore it, but…”

“Nothing changes if it gets ignored.” Sylvanas said quietly.

“Yeah. It’s brave, you know. To actually say something. So, thank you.” Jaina watched Sylvanas cover her hand with the one that wasn’t already holding it.

“Don’t mention it. Maybe I also kinda hated hearing someone talk to you like that.”

“I think I’d have hated that, too.”

She felt so calm. So warm with Sylvanas cradling her hand the way she was. And the car was more subdued than they usually were. It was the perfect storm and Jaina could barely keep her eyes open.
It was risky. Hell, yeah - it was risky. But she leaned a little closer, rested her head on Sylvanas’s shoulder, and let her eyes shut.

Sylvanas’s ears perked as she looked down, her lips parted faintly as Jaina’s hand relaxed in her own. It was risky. For sure. But she lifted one of her hands, anyway. She stroked some of Jaina’s bangs from her eyes and tucked them behind her ear, anyway.

She didn’t have time to regret it as Jaina’s eyes fluttered open, though her ears relaxed immediately into a more natural position. Jaina made a soft, amused noise in the back of her throat at the sight. “Sorry.” She murmured as she sat back up. “That was just way too comfy.”

“No, it’s fine. It...it was. Comfy.”

All too soon, after an oddly romantic subway ride, Sylvanas was standing in front of Jaina at her apartment building again. Holding both her hands and looking down at their feet on the ground.

“You’ll text me, again? When you make it home?” Jaina finally asked as she took a step closer.

Sylvanas released her hands slowly and then wrapped her arms around Jaina’s waist, stroking along her lower back a few times with her thumb. “Yeah. For sure. I have to tell you goodnight, after all.”

“I can have another hug, right?” Jaina asked, then, smiling at the fact that Sylvanas was, technically, already hugging her. She didn’t wait for an answer. She just wrapped her arms around Sylvanas’s neck and leaned into her.

“You can have as many hugs as you want.” Sylvanas murmured, lifting her hands up Jaina’s back and squeezing her tight.

“You smell really nice. You always smell nice.” Jaina commented softly, pulling back and running a hand down one of Sylvanas’s arms until just their pinkies hooked together. They were both loathe to relinquish even that little bit of contact.

“So do you.” Sylvanas took a step back, then, and finally let go. It felt...terrible. “I’ll talk to you when I get home.”

Jaina ran through her options. She wondered if Sylvanas would come upstairs if she asked her to. She wondered too, too many things. So many, in fact, that she couldn’t arrange her scattered thoughts into even the barest semblance of action. “Good night. I had such a good time.”

“So did I. The best time.” Sylvanas grinned in that way that she had when they’d met on the stairwell and Jaina felt her heart flutter until it sank when she turned away.

Sylvanas only made it a few feet down the sidewalk before Jaina called her name and she turned to look back at her searchingly.

“I’m...I’m gonna miss you. Until I see you again. Is that okay?”

Sylvanas nodded, crossing her arms over her own stomach as her ears did that thing again that Jaina had noticed earlier.

“Is it okay if I miss you, too, then?” She asked in response as Jaina smiled - no, positively beamed at her.

“Yeah. Yeah, it is.”
Sylvanas nodded and pressed her lips together - though that did little to minimize the ridiculous grin on her face.

Jaina got herself ready for bed in as much of a daze as Sylvanas walked home in. Sylvanas had only just made it upstairs when she pulled out her phone to text Jaina, sitting on the side of the bed next to a rather confused, sleepy Nathanos as she typed out her text.

*Hey. All tucked in?*

*I am. The subway was better, though.*

*Agreed. But try to get some rest anyway, okay?*

*I’ll try my best.*

Sylvanas locked her screen and ran her hands through her hair after she released it from its tie and managed to find the one or two bobby pins buried in it. God, Jaina was so wonderful. And she wasn’t fucking it up. For once, she wasn’t fucking it up. It was going...well. So well.

She stripped herself of her clothes and tugged a t-shirt to sleep in out of her little closet. Even with Nathanos curled against her side on top of her comforter, and even as worn out as she was, this just didn’t feel right. She stared at the ceiling for a while longer before finally giving up and reaching for her phone.

*Jaina? If you’re not asleep can I call you real quick?*

*I’m up. Call away.* How could she sleep when all she could think about was any and everything to do with Sylvanas?

Jaina slid the call open as soon as Sylvanas’s name appeared on her screen and lifted the phone to her ear. “Hey. What’s up?”

“Our much. I know we already said goodnight...like twice, it’s just. I guess I wanted to say it again.”

Jaina pressed the phone closer to her face, then, as though if it were a little closer - somehow, Sylvanas was, too.

“You can call every night if you want, you know.” Jaina murmured into the receiver. God, she wouldn’t mind. Not at all.

“Okay, but don’t be mad if I take you up on that.”

“Deal.”

Sylvanas let out a breathy little laugh that faded into a sleepy, content murmur.

“Good, because one of the things I’m missing most, right now, is your smile. If I’m being honest.”

“I’m sorry you can’t see it right now, then.”

“It’s alright. I can hear it. That’s almost just as good.”

“God, you’re too perfect, you know that?”

Another soft, slightly less coherent laugh from Sylvanas, then.
“Same, though. Good night.”

“Good night, Jaina. I’ll talk to you tomorrow. A lot of tomorrows, if you want.”

“Yeah. A lot of tomorrows sounds perfect.”
Sylvanas had to admit that, just about every time that door chime rang, she was looking up with a smile and secretly hoping that Jaina had found an excuse to visit her. It was stupid and corny and had left her feeling vaguely disappointed all day, as it had only been customers. But overall, it was a good thing. Yeah, she had decided it was a good thing.

Maybe it was that smile that had finally gotten that old Gibson off her wall and into the hands of an eager orc, who proved to be able to play the old guitar well-enough, and knew enough about it not to balk at the price. Maybe it had nothing to do with that smile, but Sylvanas couldn't care less. She just knew she was finally, just barely, in the black again—all thanks to that orc, the two grand he happily dropped on the Gibson, and maybe the smile that had been meant for Jaina instead.

“See, bud?” she said to Nathanos as she scratched at his ears and updated her books to show the sale. “We are gonna be okay. Things are looking up.”

Things which had nothing to do with a blonde nerd, blushing behind her freckles one minute, then boldly flirting the next. Nope, nothing at all. Nothing to do either with the fact that Sylvanas was trying to wrap up her closing duties as quickly as possible, so that when the time came, she could just
lock the doors to the shop and head upstairs to call Jaina as soon as possible. Definitely nothing to do with any of that.

She had already swept, wiped down the counters, restocked the records, and now had just finished updating her ledgers. All that was left to do was…

The door chimed again. Sylvanas felt her ears perk up at the sound, and that grin threaten to pull at the corners of her lips just one more time. Just maybe.

But instead, it settled into a scowl as she saw who it was. A face she knew well, and wouldn't soon forget, as much as she wanted to.

“You know, Genn,” Sylvanas said to the grey-bearded man that approached her with a condescending air, as if merely being in the shop did him some sort of harm or offense. “The polite thing to do when someone calls you is to call them back, not show up at their place of business a week later.”

“That's just the thing, isn't it, Ms. Windrunner?” Genn sighed as he leaned against the counter and flopped a fat manilla envelope onto it. “Your business is inherently my business, so it's best we talk here. Besides, I was in the neighborhood.”

“As you always seem to be when I ask for something that you don't want to give,” Sylvanas said, eyeing the envelope as it slid in front of her, but not moving to open it. “So go ahead and tell me. You're not going to budge, are you?”

“If it's about that ‘hardship clause’ you keep asking after, then prepare to be disappointed,” he told her. “I brought the paperwork along to show you that your situation here doesn't apply.”

Ah, of course. Of course that manilla envelope was far with reasons for her not to have the money she so badly needed, and not any of that money. Of course.

Sylvanas moved to take the envelope, but Genn put a hand on it and pinned it to the counter. “That's really for your lawyer to look at, you know,” he sneered.

“You know damn well I don't have a lawyer. And thanks to you, I can't afford one,” Sylvanas snarled back at him as she snatched the envelope out from under his grip.

“Don't thank me for that,” Genn said as he leaned back, a vicious smile spreading his grey whiskers. “Thank your dad. Maybe someday you will understand and appreciate why he set the trust up this way. I mean, look what happened when your sister got her share?”

“Don't you even fucking say her name,” Sylvanas threatened, rolling the envelope up and pointing it at his chest. “And don't you think for a second that I'm stupid enough not to know that you took his money and did whatever you wanted with it, then brought him a contract to sign when he was out of his mind. I might be young, but I'm not an idiot, Greymane.”

“You are at least smart enough to stay sober, I'll give you that. Better than most elves, certainly, and most Windrunners, definitely,” he spat in return, grin growing ever wider.

Sylvanas was trembling with rage. They both knew it. That's why he always came around--to make her angry, and to gather plenty of reasons why he couldn't disperse her trust to her, why she hadn't proved she was “ready” to inherit all that was left of her family's money. It wasn't a lot, not by New York standards at least. God no, but she knew it was enough to buy out her partner's share in the shop. It was enough to be free, to not be beholden to yet another debt, and enough to never have to see her face again…
But no. He always did this. He would smile and laugh and make light of the things that had caused her world to crumble, years and years ago. He would dredge up the past and hang it over her like a carrot on a string. Some days, Sylvanas thought it might be better just to forget about the trust, to try to move on without it, and without Genn Greymane and all the condescending letters she constantly received from his Gilneas Financial firm. Some days, she didn't want a reminder of what had happened. Most days, she didn't need it. Sylvanas lived and breathed the wreckage of her own life, she didn't need it flaunted in front of her.

“Leave,” Sylvanas said through clenched teeth.

The control she demonstrated in just keeping it to that word was immense. She knew it. Genn knew it too.

And that's why his smile transformed back into a scowl. “You don't want to invite me in for tea? To put on one of you records? A pity. Your father was always much more hospitable. You must get this hostility from your mother then.”

“I said leave,” Sylvanas commanded, the nails of one balled fist biting harshly into her palm.

But he didn't. Genn leaned on the counter again and said, “Do us both a favor. Wait until you're thirty. Don't call me. It's just three more years. Then you can have your damn money and blow it on whatever you want, and neither of us has to see one another again.”

“Leave!” Sylvanas shouted this time.

Both of them were too busy staring each other down to notice the tiny bundle of black fur and anger that had sauntered over to Genn from across the jewelry counter. Of course, they very much noticed him when Nathanos let out a surprisingly loud bark, then bit down on one of Genn's hands.

Genn yelped in surprise and easily shook his hand from the tiny dog's jaws, taking no heed to how that caused Nathanos to skid backwards over the glass. He would have fallen right off the counter, still growling and barking, if Sylvanas had not moved to catch him.

“Augh! See? See what thanks I get for trying to be clear and decent with you? Muzzle your fucking dog!” Genn said as he clutched at his hand dramatically. Despite his theatrics, and the little dog's ferocious snarling and attempts to escape Sylvanas hold, it was very clear that Nathanos’ bite hadn't even broken the skin.

“Get out of my store, Greymane!” Sylvanas shouted again.

He turned to leave. Finally. “You better fucking find the money for a lawyer now!” Genn called out as he pushed open the front door.

“Just leave!” Sylvanas screamed after him, almost surprised by how loud and shrill her own voice could get. Only almost.

She hadn't screamed like that in a long time. Well, not really all that long.

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Jaina tried not to notice how late it was. She tried very hard not to watch the digital clock on the microwave flip from three digits to four as 10pm rolled around. She tried very hard not to constantly look at her phone, but only made it to 10:05 before she gave in and closed her notes. At least packing those back up was a distraction.
But when she made her way to her room, there were no more distractions. She was free to lay in bed and wonder why Sylvanas hadn't called yet. She usually did as soon as she closed the store, and that would have been an hour ago.

Well, usually being like, just in the last three days. Jaina had to remind herself of that, constantly. With Sylvanas, everything felt like they had been doing it for forever. There was always a little awkwardness at first, but then things had immediately cemented themselves into standards that Jaina could relax into and feel comfortable with.

So yeah, 10:15 was kind of a thing.

Maybe...maybe she should call. Just to make sure she was okay. Sylvanas was probably just busy. But, one could never know…

 Fuck it. Jaina was already dialing her before she could second guess herself.

The phone rang again and again. Jaina was just about to try and think if she should bother leaving a voicemail when Sylvanas finally picked up with a soft, “Hey. Sorry.”

Oh no. Jaina didn't know what it was, but in just those two words, she could hear something was wrong. There was a rawness to Sylvanas voice, and a heaviness. None of which were usually there.

So of course, the first thing out of Jaina's mouth was, “Are you okay?”

Sylvanas was strong and light and totally had her shit together. She seemed to know everyone and everything around her and wasn't afraid to tell people they were being gross on the subway.

So the last thing Jaina expected her to say was, “No.”

“Sylvanas. Please. What happened? Are you hurt?” Jaina was already up and sitting in the edge of the bed, ready to leap off. To do what after that, she wasn't really sure. She just...whatever Sylvanas needed. That was what she had to do.

“Sorry it's...a lot to explain. And I don't really want to talk about it right now,” Sylvanas said. Jaina could hear her voice struggling to return to normal, an effort she was clearly putting on for her. “I'll be okay.”

“You were crying.” It was a statement, not a question. Jaina was sure of that now.

“I promise you, I will be fine. It's just a lot, okay? I will tell you someday, but…”

“Sylvanas."

“What?”

“I'm coming over, okay? You don't have to tell me anything, but I want to see you,” Jaina told her. She hadn't gotten changed into pajamas yet, so that was good. Now if she could only remember where she'd put her purse.

“It's so late. You don't have to--”

“Did you eat? You know what, I bet you didn't and honestly I was debating about finding a snack for myself already. You like Chinese right?” Jaina asked frantically as she found the offending purse and slung it over her shoulder.

“I mean, yeah, but Jaina…” There it was. There was that warmth, and maybe the tiniest hint of a
“No buts,” Jaina said as she slipped on a pair of sneakers and immediately flung herself out into the hall. “Do you hear that creak? That's my door. I'll be there in twenty.”

“You really don't have to,” Sylvanas told her, but Jaina could hear her smiling still.

“I really do,” Jaina said.

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Jaina learned two things on that walk over to the Undercity. The first was that the Chinese takeout place on Sylvanas’ street was open until midnight seven days a week, and that they delivered, which was really good news all around. The second was that it was really a lot harder to juggle a giant bag of takeout and a phone to text with, rather than to just find a spare appendage to ring a doorbell or a buzzer with. But Jaina managed. For Sylvanas, she did.

At your door with way too much food. Come let me in?

You really came? You are too sweet...Just a sec.

Jaina learned two more facts as she waited out in the street. Third, that whatever food was sitting where her left palm clutched at the bag was extremely hot. forth was that Sylvanas really needed to get a buzzer system installed, because it took forever for her to get down and get the door unlocked.

But it was worth the wait. So worth it. Sylvanas looked tired. Her eyes were definitely rimmed with red. Her hair was a mess. But she was smiling.

“Hey you.”

That was easily becoming Jaina's favorite phrase.

“Hey,” Jaina returned in kind. “I uh, may have ordered half the menu. I forgot to ask what you wanted, so I figured if I got a little bit of everything…”

Sylvanas took the bag from her and held the door. “You didn't have to do that. Really, you didn't have to come over either. I'm okay.”

Jaina slipped in beside her anyway. “But are you glad I'm here now?”

Sylvanas’ eyes didn't leave Jaina, even as she went to lock the door behind her. “Yeah. I am.”

“Then don't worry about it,” Jaina told her.

Jaina didn’t question that any of it was right. She knew it was. It felt right. Even two flights of stairs later, it still felt right. Even as she took over, opening the bag of food as Sylvanas set it down on the little kitchen table, she knew it.

“You can tell me to go home whenever,” Jaina said as she opened the first container, revealing some sort of lo mein within. “But you have to actually mean it.”

Sylvanas was watching her, half-leaning on against one of the two chairs, bathed in the same soft yellow glow of the lamp light that Jaina remembered from her selfie and that first night she’d spent way too long laying on the floor with her. She looked...small. Jaina was pretty sure Sylvanas was an inch or two shorter than her, and definitely a few pounds lighter, but she rarely seemed like it. But now, it seemed like all that confidence, that steady swagger that filled the empty space around her
was gone. Not forever, no, but blown away like clouds in a harsh wind.

Jaina set down a half-opened container of rice and reached out for her.

Sylvanas felt small in her arms too.

But she didn’t cry. She breathed out a heavy sigh into Jaina’s neck instead. An exhausted sigh. “I don’t know where to start,” she said, a slight rasp rattling her words as they spilled across Jaina’s chest.

“You don’t have to start at all,” Jaina told her. It only just dawned on her that Sylvanas was wearing a tank top. She could see the entire tattoo on her right arm. Orchids and feathers. Jaina kept hold of her, but let her left hand trace over the designs. “I’m just here to pig out on egg rolls with you. You can put on some music for us and tell me about the parts of your day that didn’t suck. Or not even that. I can bore you with more book stuff if you’d rather listen and talk. Or we can just listen to Nathanos snore. Whatever you need.”

“Oh, you can ask me anything anytime,” Sylvanas breathed against her. “Okay.”

Her arms wrapped around Jaina then, and one followed Jaina’s hand as it traced along the ink-stained skin.

“They’re beautiful, you know,” Jaina told her as she followed the lines of the flowers as they flowed into the feathers on the back of her forearm. “All of your tattoos are. You’ll have to tell me what they mean some day.”

“Yeah,” Sylvanas said. “Another day.”

“Another day,” Jaina agreed.

It would be a while before they let go.

But the food was still relatively hot when they got to it. The thing that had almost burned Jaina’s hand off turned out to be a container of wonton soup. There were spare ribs, hunan beef, and sesame chicken—with a pile of egg rolls that could have fed four people easily. This in addition to about four different noodle dishes, only two of which Jaina even remembered ordering, and both fried and white rice. And extra almond cookies. Of course. Always extra almond cookies.

They’d laid it all out in a glorious spread, and had started heaping their favorites onto the largest plates that Sylvanas could find in her cupboards.

“There’s no room left for us to actually eat,” Jaina laughed as she realized that they’d completely filled the little table, even minus their two plates of food.

Sylvanas just shook her head and headed off toward the sun room with her plate. She sat on the floor wordlessly, and patted a spot on the rug next to her.

Jaina had never considered herself to be a floor person. There were floor people and couch people. Jaina was more in the realm of a cozy armchair person. Neither nor. Well, she was becoming a floor person now, whether she liked it or not.

And she liked it.

She sat next to Sylvanas and picked up her chopsticks, twirling them in some noodles before a thought stopped her. “Do you wanna put some music on?”
“You can,” Sylvanas said as she twisted an egg roll around in one hand. “I know you know how to work a record player now. I trust you not to break anything.”

Jaina stabbed her chopsticks in the noodle pile and set her plate aside, turning toward Sylvanas as she asked, “But what if I pick the wrong song?”


“That’s a lot of pressure,” Jaina said, even as she stood and walked over to the console table that held Sylvanas’ record player, and on the shelf beneath it, a neat row of records, perfectly organized by some system that Jaina was sure she was going to ruin.

Even so, she thumbed through them carefully, looking for the handful of artist names that she might have a chance at recognizing. She was learning. She’d been trying to, at least.

But she didn’t know why half of these were so much smaller than the others. Smaller than the ones she had at her place. Jaina dug out one of the small ones, carefully remembering it’s place in the stack as she showed it to Sylvanas.

“What are these little guys?” she asked.

“Forty-fives, babe,” Sylvanas answered, as if that would explain anything.

Jaina turned back to the stack of records to try to avoid showing too much of her grin at what Sylvanas had just called her. No, not now. She could let Sylvanas enjoy that when she was feeling better. For now, she’d keep it to herself.

“They’re singles,” Sylvanas said after a moment, when she’d probably realized that Jaina would need a little more than that. “Just one song on each side.”

“Oh. Right.”

“Which one do you got?” Sylvanas asked, now obviously with a mouth full of egg roll.

“Uh,” Jaina hadn’t really thought about it. She’d just picked the first small one she laid her hand on. “Shambala? By Three Dog Night.”

Sylvanas didn’t say anything, but Jaina could hear her get up. She felt a warm hand on the small of her back first, before Sylvanas eventually said. “Come on then. I’ll show you how to change it for a forty-five.”

There was another needle, and a button, and a brief explanation about how the record spun faster at this size. That was why it was called a forty-five, after all. For the RPMs, or something.

Jaina tried to listen. She really did. She was still drowning in the feeling of Sylvanas’ hand on hers, though, as it guided her through the motions of adjusting the record player. Drowning in knowing that this was something she could have as much as she wanted. Like the massive spread of Chinese food on the table, it was just there for her to take.

But Jaina was still coming to terms with that, and it took a lot more thinking than shoving rice in her face would.

They got the record spinning at the correct speed, though, and were soon greeted by the warm strum of guitars.
“See, not so hard, right?” Sylvanas asked her as Jaina turned around to face her.

“Yeah,” Jaina answered, even though she was pretty sure she’d need to be shown how to do this again. “And the song choice? I did okay?”

“Yeah,” Sylvanas said. “Real good. Come on. Your noodles are getting cold.”

Jaina had never heard this song before. She was sure of it. Her noodles were definitely lukewarm, but still delicious.

Sylvanas, though. She was just twirling the same piece of sesame chicken in her chopsticks, just a few inches above her plate. Jaina watched her, watched the subtle cues she was learning, just like a record player. The way her ears were pricked toward the speakers. How far away her eyes were, with the glow seemingly dimmed, melding with the soft lamplight. She could almost see the hint of irises that she knew had to be there.

She was listening.

“Tell me about this song,” Jaina said, steady and calm, not quite a demand, but insistent.

“It was my dad’s favorite. He…” Sylvanas trailed off.

“He’s not around anymore?” Jaina asked, dropping her chopsticks again and reaching for Sylvanas’ hand.

“Yeah, he’s not,” was all the answer she was going to get, but Sylvanas squeezed her hand all the same.

“My dad’s gone too,” Jaina told her. “Another time, maybe we can talk about them. But, another time. Not now.”

“Yeah,” Sylvanas agreed. She squeezed Jaina’s hand one more time before letting it go. “I mean it, though. I’ll tell you. There’s a lot to tell. I’m sure you get that. I don’t…I don’t want to overwhelm you.”

Jaina nodded and went back to her noodles. “Everyone has their baggage. It’s okay. We’re still getting to know each other. You’ve been great about letting me take that slow. It’s the least I can do to return the favor.”

Sylvanas smiled and finally popped the piece of chicken into her mouth. “You’re really great, you know?”

“You are too, and so is the lo mein,” Jaina said as she waggled a chopstick full of noodles at Sylvanas.

“I think that’s the chow mein, actually,” Sylvanas informed her.

“Well, fuck.”

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The single had long since run out by the time they’d declared that Jaina had indeed ordered way too much food, and that there was no way that five people even stood a chance of finishing it, much less two. They stowed as much of it as they could in Sylvanas’ fridge, though. She would easily be eating leftovers for the rest of the week.
Nathanos had finally woken up in the chaos of them trying to put all the food away, only to brush up against Jaina to offer her a little hello, then to steal a half-eaten egg roll off the plates they’d left on the floor.

“He could choke on it,” Jaina said, expressing her concern as she moved to chase after the little dog.

“He’s a dog that lives in a store in New York City, Jaina,” Sylvanas reminded her. “Half of his diet is pieces of people’s pizza slices and hot dogs. He’ll be fine.”

“It can’t be good for him,” Jaina continued to worry even as she turned back toward the kitchenette.

“Yeah, but he’s an old man. Let him enjoy his golden years. He can get away with an egg roll or two,” Sylvanas said with a shrug.

“Watch him then, please. For my sake. I’ll wash up,” Jaina offered as she moved to the sink.

Jaina, who could spend half a grand on a book and not even blink. Jaina, who lived in a building with a doorman. Jaina, whose last name even sounded like money. Jaina, who was already squeezing out dish soap before Sylvanas could think to object.

Who was this woman, even?

“Oh okay,” was all Sylvanas could say to that.

She looked so normal, so natural and at home. Jaina had every right to act differently. She should have. She never did, though. Even when they didn’t know one another at all, she’d fit right into Sylvanas’ little loft—like a piece of furniture that the room had always been missing. Only this piece of furniture was very pretty, and very kind. God. It was everything Sylvanas could do not to just go kiss her. That’s how much she appreciated having her here.

And Jaina hadn’t even cared what it was about. She never pried. She didn’t even try to bring it up as they got to talking normally again. She didn’t care. She was just here because Sylvanas sounded upset. It hadn’t mattered what she was upset about.

Sylvanas found herself at the record player again. She thought about changing the album out, or even flipping to the B side of the forty-five, but...no. She wanted to hear it again.

“Shambala” echoed through the loft a second time just as Jaina turned off the sink. Sylvanas watched the record spin, furiously as forty-fives did.

And through it’s tones, she heard Jaina come up behind her. She felt her hands slip around her waist, slowly, as if asking a question that her stillness answered.

“It was a happy song for him,” Sylvanas explained as she leaned into that touch. “Old hippie shit. Dad liked the idea of there being a better place, where things were good and people were kind. He was always looking for it. He never found it, though. He...he fucked up a lot of things for us. Really fucked them up. But I don’t think he meant for it to happen that way.”

“It’s a pretty song,” Jaina muttered into her shoulder. “And a pretty idea. Not a bad thing to go looking for.”

“It makes it easier to think about him, to remember him for that, and not for what he did.” The words were pouring out of her. She’d never really thought about it that way. But that’s what it was. The records. The music. Too old for her. There were already cassette tapes by the time she was born, even. No, this was her parents’ music. Her family’s music.
It was what she still had left of them.

“I just...it’s really hard sometimes, to try to keep the good, when everyone wants to remind you of the bad.”

Jaina didn’t say anything to that. She didn’t have to. She just leaned her head on Sylvanas’ shoulder, and kept her arms around her. They listened to the rest of the song that way, until the scratchy end of the recording crackled over the speakers.

Jaina left one arm around her waist as she came up to Sylvanas’ side and lifted the needle off the record. “Show me how to change it back to the bigger one?” she asked.

“An LP, babe. Or a thirty-three and a half. Either of those is good,” Sylvanas informed her.

“You did it again,” Jaina told her with a grin.

“What?”

“Nothing,” Jaina laughed.

“Seriously, what did I do?” Sylvanas asked.

“Called me babe.”

“Shit,” Sylvanas said, even as she found herself grinning along with Jaina. “Too much? Is it worse if I tell you I didn’t even notice?”

“No. I like it. And thank you for making me feel better about doing it before,” Jaina told her. She grabbed her hand and set it on the record player. “Now. Show me how to change it back to an LP?”

Fuck. It was getting really hard to not just kiss her already. But no. Not yet.

Soon, though. It was going to have to be soon.

Sylvanas showed her how to change the RPM back. She put on another Led Zeppelin album for her. Physical Graffiti, because why not. And Zeppelin because Jaina seemed to genuinely like them. Well, she genuinely liked everything that Sylvanas had given her to listen to, actually. Sylvanas knew it. She just knew.

It just seemed like Jaina didn’t have any exposure to it. Well, Sylvanas guessed that not everyone’s dad wanted to be a rock star. Some were content with their lives. They were happy to bankers or salesmen or whatever other dad jobs there were. That was enough for them. They didn’t need to be something else. They didn’t need to try, at least.

So yeah, she probably just hadn’t heard all of it yet. But she didn’t mind hearing it. She liked it. She liked Sylvanas’ music, and Sylvanas.

They were laying back on the rug again, a minute or so into “Houses of the Holy” before Sylvanas even thought about the time. “Hey it’s--it’s way fucking late. Do you have to go?” she asked.

Jaina was face up, looking at the few stars that dared to sparkle through the New York haze. “I don’t have to. Do you want me to go?”

Sylvanas was not used to this. She was not used to people doing anything for her. She was not used to them caring about her. Not genuinely, at least. Not when they didn’t want anything from her in return. And she was not used to getting the option to be selfish about it.
“No,” she answered.

“Then I’m staying,” Jaina said matter-of-factly, as she rolled onto her side to face Sylvanas.

She had a smile that was just for her too. Sylvanas could tell. A little crease of her eyes. A different bend in her lip. Just a little different. Just a little softer, a little more.

And despite her continued insistence that she wasn’t sleepy at all, Jaina was out like a light when it was time to flip the record. Sylvanas was careful not to wake her as she stood up and shut the record player off. Careful too as she dragged the comforter off of her bed and laid it over Jaina’s sleeping form.

She looked over at the bed for a moment, only a few feet away. But she didn’t go to it. Instead, she shut off the lights, and found herself back on the rug next to Jaina, carefully stealing a bit of comforter back for herself.

And smiling in the dark.

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Sylvanas tried her best to savor it. The feeling and the sounds of Jaina sleeping so close to her. Her quiet, even breathing and occasional rustling as she moved to get more comfortable now and again. She was so exhausted, though. Exhausted and...comfortable. Even on the rug that was the only thing between her and the hardness of the floor.

One more look. One more glance over at Jaina as her eyes began to drift shut. Just so she could remember the smile that had been on her gently parted lips such a short while ago. The special one that she wouldn’t really have been able to forget even if she’d tried.

With thoughts of that smile, came the memory of the warmth of Jaina’s arms around her. Of the acceptance and kindness that poured from her as emotions and memories she hadn’t shared in so, so long spilled, unbidden, from her very thoughts. Still, Jaina had held her. Still, she’d murmured gentle words against her shoulder. Sylvanas could almost still feel the gentle pressure of her lips there. Just above her shoulder blade.

They were the sweetest thoughts she’d been graced with in as long as she could remember. Thoughts that soothed the frayed, raw edges of her nerves almost as surely as the sweetness of Jaina’s presence in the darkness did.
Her dreams were just as sweet. A blissful blur of color and laughter and warmth. Of dusty barns and hole-in-the-wall diners and freckles and glasses and books. The type of thing people looked for all their lives. Hippie shit, maybe.

Only, when she woke - Jaina was still there. Looking no less like a dream.

And she was way, way too close to her. Her sleepy eyes widened with the sudden realization that, sometime during the night, she’d gotten all the way under the comforter with her. Carefully, she scooted away under the blanket and sat up slowly once she was out, just looking at the slight mess that had become of Jaina’s hair and the red spot on the cheek not pressed against the rug. She must have turned over or something. It was...so fucking precious. So much so, that Sylvanas was worried about waking her and ruining the moment.

Still. Sylvanas was still. For a long time, with her arms wrapped around her knees after she’d drawn them to her chest - and her chin resting on top of them. God, she was...so perfect. What if she moved and the magic of this moment disappeared?

Breakfast. She should make Jaina breakfast. She could do that quietly, right?

Her thoughts flashed to her few pots beneath her small kitchen counter and how they were stacked together and she winced, looking around the loft for a moment before shuffling quietly over to the record player. Music. Soft music. Music Jaina could sleep to that would drown out whatever noise she made. At least for a while.

She flipped slowly through her records before pulling out an old, familiar favorite and slipping it out of its sleeve. Van Morrison. She glanced over her shoulder at Jaina, then, as she slipped the record onto the spindle of her player, and smiled warmly. Sweet Thing. She wanted to hear Sweet Thing. Because that’s exactly what Jaina was.

Jaina only stirred slightly when the music started, turning her face towards her arms on the carpet and settling back down beneath the comforter as Sylvanas walked around her to her bathroom. God, she was a mess. Her eyes were slightly bruised - her hair was all over the place. Oh, well. She did what she could. Brushed her teeth, quickly ran a comb through her hair. It was better than nothing.

When she made her way back towards her little kitchen, Jaina was still as she left her. Good. She deserved the rest. She was so wonderful...so fucking wonderful.

She eased into the simple routine of cooking as Nathanos moved around her feet. It was so familiar, all of it. So strangely familiar - that she started singing softly along with Van for the last few bars of the song.

It was her voice that finally drew Jaina from her sleep. Her voice that drew the softest blue gaze in her direction while she swayed in front of the stove and the eggs frying in the pan. Jaina had never seen her look so easy. So happy. It took the first few of her waking breaths from her. It put that special smile on her face. The smile she only gave to Sylvanas.

Both the track and the light, silky tone of Sylvanas’s voice died out and she frowned softly, pushing herself up and making her way over to the record player in the sunlight that filtered into the room. She found the line. The line in between the tracks that was a little thicker. The line she was starting to find almost effortlessly.

Sylvanas’s eyes darted towards her as the beginning of the same song began to play and she looked almost stricken. “I didn’t mean to wake you. I’m sorry.” Sylvanas sounded so genuinely remorseful
that it made Jaina smile. It made Jaina smile in that special way that made it hard for Sylvanas to continue feeling bad.

“I woke up to you singing.” Jaina responded quietly. “It was like waking up into another dream. What are you doing?”

“Cooking us breakfast.” Sylvanas responded quietly as the last drops of coffee hit the already brewed pot and she reached into her upper cabinets for a loaf of bread.

Jaina wanted this. She wanted to walk into the kitchen and see Sylvanas obviously cooking and still ask her what she was doing, anyway. She wanted Sylvanas to tell her anyway. To smile almost shyly after she did. She wanted to watch her drop bread bag ties on the floor and reach for them quickly so Nathanos wouldn’t get ahold of them.

She wanted this.

Jaina had thought about this...she’d lost count how many times she’d thought about it. It was nothing like she’d imagine. It was just her walking across the floor towards the kitchen and taking the tie from Sylvanas so she could make their toast. It was her fastening it around the end of the bread and placing it back where she’d seen Sylvanas pull it down from.

Then, it was her hand coming up to rest on Sylvanas’s chest. It was the faintest tremor in her fingertips as Sylvanas looked first at that hand and then at Jaina. “Hey.” Jaina whispered.

Sylvanas saw how Jaina’s eyes left her own to find her lips. Her own did the same. “Hey, you.” She offered quietly in return. Then, those lips were on hers. And...Jaina’s lips were so, so soft. Like she’d imagined they would be. Like she’d imagined and so much more. It was a quick, shallow kiss with a quiet sound as Jaina pulled back with furrowed brows to look into Sylvanas’s eyes. Seeking something.

Sylvanas answered with hands on either side of Jaina’s face, tucking some of her wild hair behind her ears as she held Jaina’s gaze carefully.

“How was that?” Sylvanas asked softly - ignoring the toast, for the time being, as it popped up at the end of its timer.

“Soft.” Jaina murmured, watching Sylvanas’s lips quirk in the gentlest little grin.

“What were you expecting?” Sylvanas asked in response, just barely touching Jaina’s full lower lip with the pad of her thumb.

Jaina had never liked kissing, really. It had always been so...gross was a harsh word. But it had. Nothing like this. Nothing like how Sylvanas’s fingertips traced the lines of her face. Nothing like the warmth of lips that matched the smile they always wore. And it had never left her own tingling like there had been some sort of magic involved.

“Not that. Nothing like that.” Jaina finally responded, letting her hand fall from Sylvanas’s chest so she could grasp her shirt against her slender side beneath it.

“Can I kiss you again?” Sylvanas asked. Of course, she asked. And, of course, Jaina wanted her to.

“For sure.” Jaina murmured, tightening the hold she had on Sylvanas’s shirt as the other woman shifted closer. Jaina almost thought, for a moment, that Sylvanas had missed - as she felt the softness of her lips against the corner of her mouth. It became clear she hadn’t, though, as her fingertips trailed down the side of her face to the line of her jaw and her thumb traced where her lips hadn’t.
The touches weren’t firm enough to actually move her. They were just...there. Before Jaina’s eyes fluttered shut, she noticed Sylvanas’s already had as the tips of their noses brushed together. “Too much?” Sylvanas asked against Jaina’s lips.

“No.” She whispered, a bit breathless. “Not enough.” Jaina wasn’t sure she’d ever been that honest in her life. But it was true. It wasn’t enough. Not until Sylvanas really kissed her. Really kissed her. For the first time.

Not until they were both breathing sharply through their noses and Jaina’s arms had slipped around Sylvanas’s back to gather more of her shirt in her hands. When Sylvanas’s tongue brushed her lips for the first time, Jaina parted them - only to find Sylvanas hadn’t been seeking entrance. Only for her tongue to retreat and the warm silk of her mouth to return - cradling Jaina’s lower lip before she finally pulled back.

Jaina didn’t let her go. Sylvanas didn’t want her to. Instead, Jaina leaned into her - slowly releasing her shirt so she could, instead, stroke gently along her back. She could feel the older woman’s pulse pounding in her neck against her cheek as she rested her chin on her shoulder. A heady feeling. Too heady. A feeling she didn’t want to lose...but that caused a fire of nerves to burn along her scalp.

“Are you okay?” Sylvanas asked in a whisper as Jaina caught the slight shift of her ears from the corner of her eye.

“Yes, I’m...I am. I promise. That was just…”

“A lot.” Sylvanas offered quietly.

“So much.” Jaina agreed.

“Let me finish breakfast, okay?” Sylvanas asked though she made no move to unwrap herself from Jaina’s hold until, finally, she released her, herself.

Sylvanas could finally see her eyes, then. The slightly dazed look...the flush on her cheeks. It left her licking her suddenly dry lips as she turned to grab plates for them with slightly shaky hands.

“Hey…” Jaina murmured, reaching out to cover the top of one of Sylvanas’s hands with her own. “Let me help.” She stroked over her hand for a moment before reaching into the fridge for the butter to finish their toast and once their plates were ready she carried them both to the little two-person table and made their places while Sylvanas watched her from the kitchen. More doing things she could have easily felt above doing. Placing their food down on a table barely big enough for both of them to eat at. Pressing a kiss to Sylvanas’s shoulder as she reached past her towards the lone drawer the kitchen had - correctly assuming that’s where her silverware was.

“Come eat.” Jaina murmured as she lifted her head and took one of Sylvanas’s hands in her own, touching along the tops of her fingers lightly.

“Okay. Sorry.” Sylvanas offered her a smile and walked with her towards the table, taking the chair Jaina hadn’t sat in and glancing down at Nathanos as he grumbled at her feet. “Shit, his breakfast, one sec, just let m-”

“I’ll get it. Just relax.” Jaina cut her off and leaned down to kiss the top of her head, squeezing her shoulder as she walked past.

Sylvanas didn’t really relax, though. She turned slightly in her chair and watched as Jaina looked
through the cabinets until she found his food and made her way over to his dish. She listened as Jaina asked if he was hungry and apologized for distracting his mom. It was too perfect. Too good. And she was terrified again, suddenly, of fucking it up.

As though she sensed a shift in Sylvanas’s mood, Jaina looked over her shoulder at her as she stroked along Nathanos’s back while he ate. The expression Sylvanas wore caused her to get up and move to stand behind her chair. In the next moment, Jaina’s arms were draped around her shoulders from behind in a loose hug and Sylvanas lifted her hands to wrap around the other woman’s wrists before she tilted her head down to kiss them each in turn. “Jaina?”

Jaina murmured her response into Sylvanas’s hair - not words. Just a gentle urging.

“Don’t let me mess this up, okay?” There was real fear there, in her voice. Beneath the softness of the moment. Beneath emotions she couldn’t turn into words just yet.

“I can’t promise we won’t ever mess up. I can’t promise I won’t hurt your feelings...or that you won’t hurt mine. I can’t promise we’ll never disagree. But I can promise to always do my best, if those things happen, to fix it with you. I can promise that if I’m wrong when I realize it, I’ll apologize...and that even if one of us does mess it up, it doesn’t have to be forever.”

Sylvanas let out a breath that Jaina couldn’t really decipher. Had it been a laugh? A huff? When Sylvanas tilted her head back - her smile had returned. And when Sylvanas reached up to stroke Jaina’s cheek - she bent down further and kissed her. A soft, sweet, simple kiss, before she sat down and finally began to eat eggs that she didn’t really mind were cold.

Jaina helped her wash up and straighten what little mess they’d made - had even carried her comforter back to her bed and made it for her, before they wound up sitting on Sylvanas’s couch together with a fresh record on the console. It was just background noise, really. An unintelligible soundtrack to the way Jaina traced her fingertips along tattoos she’d only just fully discovered the previous night while Sylvanas watched her with an arm between her lower back and the couch.

It was impossible not to watch Jaina. She couldn’t remember anyone ever being so fascinated before...so enraptured. But, then, she was guilty of the same. Jaina knew she was watching her. She saw the glow of her eyes shifting from where her fingertips were on her skin to her face and back again.

“It’s nice to be able to touch you.” Jaina murmured as she finally leaned into her with her head on her shoulder. Gradually, she drew her legs up into Sylvanas’s lap and the other woman held them there as Jaina lifted herself slightly so she could free her arm.

“Agreed.” Sylvanas murmured as her hand found Jaina’s braid and began working it free slowly. “Let me fix your hair.”

Jaina wouldn’t have stopped her for the world. She just sat, half-curled in her lap as Sylvanas began to re-braid her hair. “Did you have any plans today?” Sylvanas asked when she tied off the end of Jaina’s braid when she was done.

“Mm. I was supposed to tutor Calia like an hour ago. She didn’t even text. I’m assuming Kinndy already talked to her.”

“Shit, baby, I’m sorry.” Sylvanas murmured, moving to get up before Jaina tugged her closer almost immediately.

“I’ve never missed a session with her, Sylvanas. I’ve...never missed anything. She’ll live. It was so
worth it.”

“Are you just saying that because I’m a good kisser?” Sylvanas asked, settling back down and leaning her head against the back of the couch once again as Jaina relaxed, as well.

“A little. Nobody’s ever kissed me like that.” Jaina glanced down as she felt Sylvanas twining their fingers together. It was all so incredibly good. Being close to her...touching her. Not being ashamed about it and not feeling confused and conflicted. “I never even really liked kissing. I kinda thought, y’know, it wouldn’t be that bad. To kiss you. Especially if you liked it. Then it would mean I could be closer to you. Like this. Like we are right now. Guys are...shit. At kissing.”

Sylvanas chuckled softly as she lifted Jaina’s hand to her lips and pressed her smile against it. “They are, yeah.”

“It’s so different with you. You’re so fucking gentle, Sylvanas. And so soft.”

Sylvanas turned those lovely words over in her head for a while as they sat there half curled together on the sofa.

“You deserve that.” She finally responded.

“Hey.” Jaina breathed, turning Sylvana’s hand over so that it rested on her own thigh so she could trace the lines of her palm. “So do you, you know.”

It was easy to doze like this - in the warmth of their togetherness and the sunlight. A time or two, Sylvanas woke to a gentle kiss against her collarbone. Every now and then, Jaina’s eyelids fluttered and she smiled when Sylvanas kissed her brow or her temple.

All good things came to an end, though. And Jaina sighed quietly as she pulled her phone out when one of her alarms began to go off. “Study session with Anduin and Kinndy. It would probably be best if I didn’t miss this, at least.” She explained sleepily as she shut the alarm off and tucked her phone away, again.

“I’ll walk you home, then.” Sylvanas responded immediately, helping Jaina slip off her lap and find her balance as she stood and stretched with a groan.

Before they made it to Sylvanas’s door, though, Jaina had to make sure to find Nathanos where he was curled up in the sunroom and give him a few scratches.

“I’m glad you like my ugly dog, Jaina.” Sylvanas murmured in amusement as they headed for the first floor of the shop so she could punch her alarm code in and let them out onto the sidewalk outside. She really was glad. Nathanos was one of the only things she had left. Nathanos and her music, and Jaina just...liked all of it. Appreciated all of it. Maybe one day she’d be able to put into words how much that meant to her, but today - she just walked beside her with a smile. A smile of appreciation and adoration and so much more.

The walk was quiet, though. Almost subdued. It was difficult to let go of what they’d just shared - even temporarily. And this goodbye in front of Jaina’s doorman was, perhaps, the most difficult one so far.

“Is it okay if I miss you?” Sylvanas asked with furrowed brows and an almost forced smile - one that Jaina found easy to return. Her own was faint yet reassuring.

“Yeah. But you know I’m gonna miss you, too, right?”

Sylvanas grinned, then, as Jaina pulled her closer. This was an easy grin. A happy one. Not weighed
down by the thought of being without Jaina soon. “I might.” Sylvanas murmured as Jaina bent her head slightly to kiss her.

“Uh…” Sylvanas looked over at the unfamiliar voice as she pulled back from the kiss - already visibly bristling defensively, only to see the girl from the party standing there - looking considerably less...angelic than she had the other night..

“Calia!” Jaina greeted her as she squeezed Sylvanas’s arm before letting her go. “I’m so sorry. I would have texted you this morning to reschedule but I slept in a bit.”

The woman looked from Jaina to Sylvanas and then back again. “Yeah, uh...it’s whatever. Who’s this?”

Jaina knew Calia had seen them together at the party. She knew Kinndy had probably told her where she’d been. Jaina just couldn’t help but wonder why Calia was being so weird about it.

“Calia Menethil, meet Sylvanas Windrunner.” Jaina smiled as she gestured towards Sylvanas, who held out a hand that Calia reached for. Sylvanas didn’t miss the look of distaste on the young woman’s face before she hid it again, carefully and shook her hand.

“She owns the vintage shop a few blocks over. We’re, uh...we’re dating.” Jaina felt awkward, suddenly, before Sylvanas bumped her gently with her hip and smiled over at her.

“Yeah. We’re dating. It’s nice to officially meet you, Calia.”

“Same...I’m sure.” Calia responded. “Anyway, Jaina...just let me know something next time, yeah? I mean...whatever you do in your free time is your business, or whatever, though.” She looked over at Sylvanas, again, who - by now - was feeling rather strange and out of place.

“Yeah...sure.” Jaina responded, watching Calia turn to leave back towards her own apartment.

“You don’t have to tell people, you know.” Sylvanas said quietly once Calia was out of earshot. Jaina turned to look at her with a faint frown.

“Is it okay if I do, though? Like...does it bother you?” She asked - a bit of worry touching at the edges of her voice. “Why are they doing that?” She asked as her attention shifted to Sylvanas’s ears and the way they rested a bit lower than usually.

Sylvanas thought about playing the question off. Or maybe telling Jaina she didn’t know or some dumb shit like that. But she settled on the truth, instead. “It doesn’t bother me at all. ...Oh. My ears? Ahh...I was worried.” The explanation was soft and simple, but Jaina heard it loud and clear.

“Don’t be, then. You’re the last thing in the world I would ever want to hide. Alright?”

Jaina laughed quietly at those ears again as they lifted - almost one at a time - a bit higher. It caused a flush to rise in Sylvanas’s cheeks.

Sylvanas eventually joined her in her quiet laughter, too, though. With their goodbyes and promises of good night phone calls made, they parted ways and Jaina headed up to her apartment. She was so elated she didn’t even have time to worry about what awaited her inside.

“Aunty! You did it!”

She nearly dropped her bag as she slammed the door shut behind herself and looked into the living room at Anduin, who, for some reason - was standing on the couch grinning from ear to ear with his
fists clenched at his sides in his excitement.

“Did what?” She asked, confusion evident in her voice. The confusion was so obvious and genuine that Anduin lowered himself back down onto the couch and looked over at Kinndy, then back at Jaina.

“It. Like. You were at her apartment all night. You...spent the night with her. You did gay shit. Like. Right?”

Realization dawned on Jaina, then, and she rolled her eyes as she headed to the kitchen to grab herself a soda out of the fridge.

Kinndy and Anduin were both eyeing her curiously as she made it to the living room and sat on the floor by the coffee table. “No. We didn’t do ‘it’, Andy. That’s...pretty personal, anyway. To be honest.”

“Alright, alright, my bad. Why, uh...why are you sitting on the floor?”

Jaina hadn’t really noticed that she had sat on the floor. She’d just...done it. “No reason.” She responded as she cracked open her drink and took a sip.

“Well...sorry that Anduin is such a nosey bitch, but, uh...is there anything you would like to share with us?” Kinndy asked as she slipped out of the chair and moved to sit behind Jaina on the floor, pulling her too-heavy book along with her so they could look at it together.

“We’re...dating. I think.” Jaina winced and reached for Kinndy’s book after placing her drink on the table, ignoring the painfully sarcastic look of shock on Anduin’s face, as well as the genuine one on Kinndy’s.

“What does ‘I think’ mean?” Anduin asked - trying to stifle any possible laughter that might escape in the midst of his attempt at a genuine question.

“Like...Calia came down while we were saying goodbye because Sylvanas walked me home like she usually does. And I introduced her and told her we were dating without really even thinking about it. I must have looked...weird or something, because Sylvanas said we were, too. Right after that, and...I dunno.”

“Congratulations, Aunty. I’ve never been more proud in my whole entire life.” Anduin moved onto the floor with her, as well - as strange as he thought it was that they were all ignoring perfectly good furniture.

“Are you happy?” Kinndy asked - suddenly seeming like she was taking all of this a little more serious, perhaps, than she had been in the past.

Jaina stopped pretending to flip through pages long enough to give Kinndy’s question the thought it deserved before she answered. “Very. Extremely. She’s...wonderful.”

Jaina looked down, then, as Kinndy did her best to wrap her arms around her in a hug, and she smiled down at her softly before returning the gesture. “Thanks, Kinndy. And thank you, Andy. For being there for me.”

Anduin nodded and opened the notebook he kept his notes in, glancing over them to try and remember where they’d left off the last time they’d gotten together.

“Guys, was Calia weird? When she was up here?” The suddenness of Jaina’s question caused them
both to look up at her.

Kinndy was the first to respond. “Um...now that you mention it, maybe a little? Why?”

Jaina shook her head as her brows furrowed. “Maybe she’s just mad at me for not tutoring today. It isn’t like she needs it all that much, I just...I dunno. She seemed so weird about meeting Sylvanas. I could just be interpreting it wrong.”

Kinndy nodded in agreement. “Calia can be a little...stuck up sometimes. But, you know that. It’s probably a combination of that, and how fresh all this is with Sylvanas. I’m sure you’re just a little overprotective and on-edge right now. It’ll get better.”

That made Jaina feel a little better. It made sense. It was logical. And it allowed them to get on with their studying.

Even if her mind was a few blocks away...with Sylvanas’s hands in her hair or her arms around her and the lyrics to a certain song running on repeat through her mind. The sound of Sylvanas’s voice singing them in her kitchen. Singing her awake.

*Oh sweet thing, sweet thing.*

“Jaina, you’re humming again.” Kinndy remarked as she read over the same passage for what felt like the twentieth time.

“Oh...sorry.” Jaina responded though that did little to wipe the smile from her face.

She wasn’t. Not at all.
“So Lockwood's tale in the beginning here is really just a frame for the actual story,” Jaina said, shifting in her chair at the front of a small circle of desks, currently occupied by her discussion group. “The real meat of ‘Wuthering Heights’ is the old family drama that Nelly is about to spill. Well, if you can make it past all the spelled out accents.”

She didn't need to TA. She certainly didn't need the stipend. She could have put it off another year, but why bother? This was what she wanted to do, what she had always wanted to do. She wanted to teach literature, to share the stories that had inspired her, that had kept her company when no one else did, and lulled her back to sleep after every nightmare. She wanted to give others the opportunity to understand and appreciate them fully. Maybe she could bring someone else the peace that she had found there, hidden in the pages of books, in the fantastic lives of made up people, places, and things.

So yeah, sitting in front of twelve bored-looking undergrads on a Friday afternoon was kind of the first step in all of that, and one Jaina didn't mind taking. One that she was honestly still excited to be taking. It wasn't her fault that it was 4pm and they were all much more excited about what parties
they would be heading to that night than learning about Emily Bronte's classic gothic novel. It wasn't her fault that she couldn't even get a chuckle out of them about the accents…

Right?

“Anyway,” she tried again. “Does anyone have any thoughts on why a frame narrative was used? What that might add to the work as a whole?”

She scanned the room, looking through the small microcosm of undergrads that made up her class. She was trying her best on the names. Nomi was the Pandaren, supposedly a culinary school dropout. She was sure of that one. There was a young troll man who she still wasn’t sure if what she had on her attendance sheet for him was right. Zekhan was the name on her sheets, but his friends just called him Zappy Boy.

Oh, and Anduin's friend. The high elf with the crazy long hair and the green tinge to her eyes. Valeera.

Jaina looked pleading in her direction, hoping to get her to answer.

Valeera just stared back at her for a moment, then at her notebook, which seemed to be pretty conspicuously blank. Jaina knew that she was just taking this class to fulfill a gen ed requirement. Most of her students were. But damn, they could at least try to engage. And she knew Valeera. Well, sort of.

And the of course, the only one that she did have that cared, was already raising her hand.

“You don't have to raise your hand, Taelia,” Jaina reminded the young human woman for probably the third or fourth time that day. She had stopped counting after the second class. “This is a discussion session, not a formal class. And I was hoping to see if someone else had any thoughts, but go ahead.”

“Oh uh, well yeah,” Taelia started regardless as she lowered her hand. “It allows Nelly’s point of view to be counted for, even though the story isn’t about her. She can classify things how she understands them, like talking about how someone acts more like a servant, since that’s her frame of mind and…”

Jaina listened to her, nodding when appropriate. Taelia was giving all the right answers, of course. The girl tried so hard and was very passionate, about everything really. Jaina could only imagine that she had probably been that same annoying undergrad herself, not so long ago. The smart ones would be taking notes on what she was saying. They would pick up that this is what their papers were supposed to be about.

And the lazy ones would just get those same points from the internet and just change the words around enough to escape the plagiarism checks. Oh well.

At least she had Taelia. Otherwise, this would have been another day of talking to herself.

“I have to stop you there, Taelia,” Jaina interjected when she finally paused to take a breath or two, “but thank you for sharing your views, yet again. We’re almost out of time for the day. Next week, we will be discussing the entire novel, so please make sure you finish it before then. I’m sure you all have way more thrilling plans for the weekend, but I promise it’s a quick read from here on out. We’ll start talking about the topics for your next paper as well, so please come prepared.”

As it always was, the cacophony of desks being slid back and backpacks being stuffed took over the room. Everyone was so eager to leave. Always. Most days, even Taelia didn’t stay to bother her or
ask questions. Jaina was trying not to be disappointed.

Trying being the key word here.

So she was surprised to find Valeera taking her time, shooting a few looks in her direction as she slid that empty notebook into her bag. Jaina couldn’t help but notice the cant of her ears. Being with Sylvanas as much as she had been lately had taught her to look there. It seemed like an elf’s ears always told the truth of what was on their mind, even if their mouths didn’t.

And Valeera’s were set low and tight against her head, weaving in and out of that wild golden hair. And maybe a little red at the tips.

Well great. Jaina had no idea what that meant.

“Hey uh, teach,” Valeera said when she was finally the last one left in the room. “Do you have a minute to chat?”

Now Valeera was the last person that Jaina would expect to have a question, or really even give two shits about the class. What had changed?

“Oh yeah, I’m not in a rush. What’s up?” Jaina asked as she slid the last of her own papers into her messenger bag.

Well, she was sort of in a rush. Well, trying not to be in a rush. Maybe. She had a date with Sylvanas planned. A real date. Not one where she’d be asking what it was, or wondering that the entire time leading up to it. But that was hours from now. She had plenty of time to get ready, and to freak out about getting ready. Plenty of time to bother Kinndy as she made her look at fourteen different outfits, and asked if her makeup looked okay just as many times.

Certainly time enough to allow for a question or two.

“First things first,” Valeera started as she swung her bag over her shoulder, but kept leaning against her desk all the same. “It’s not about the book, so um, don’t get too excited.”

“Okay,” Jaina replied cautiously.

“At Anduin’s party. Um, the girl you were with. Are you guys...together?” Valeera stumbled through the question.

“I…” Jaina almost wanted to draw a line here. Was that appropriate even? It wasn’t like she was a professor. Not yet. No. But, she was still an authority figure here. Well, maybe. A little.

But this was Anduin’s friend. One she didn’t know very well, but would no doubt see again outside of her class. It was okay. Jaina decided it was okay to be a little bit personable.

“Yeah, we’re dating,” she finally answered.

“That’s cool,” Valeera blurted out in reply. “That’s really cool. I just...I wanted to let you know something, about her. It’s not a big deal, really. But like, it’s something you should know. I’d feel kind of guilty otherwise, since it’s all sort of my fault. Not really, but--”

Jaina’s phone cut her off, as it rang loudly from within her purse. Fuck. She’d forgotten to turn the ringer off again. At least it hadn’t been in class.

“Sorry! Just one sec!” she said as she fished for it to silence the damn thing.
Only to find that the contact name said Sylvanas. Jaina had a hard time deciding whether or not she should answer that or hear Valeera out. What did the girl have to say about Sylvanas anyway? And her fault? But Sylvanas had said she didn’t know her...

Jaina hung up the call. She could call her right back.

“Sorry, you were saying?”

“Don’t freak out or anything, but—”

The phone immediately started ringing again. That was...unusual. It was Sylvanas. Again. Dread immediately clawed its way up Jaina’s throat. She was really trying to get a hold of her. This could be serious.

“I’m sorry, let me just take this really quick?” Jaina asked.

Valeera huffed, but gave her a nod all the same.

Jaina answered the call, listening for a second for any sign, any clue, before she finally said, “Hey. I just got out of class, but was answering some questions. What’s up?”

There was soft music on the other end of the line. Just enough notes to gather up a melody, and for Jaina to hear it was elevator music, and not anything from the seventies. Then Sylvanas finally spoke. “I gotta cancel. For tonight.”

Her voice was hoarse, coming out like her throat was made of sandpaper. Jaina could almost feel it.

“That’s okay. Are you okay?” Jaina asked her, knowing better.

“I don’t know,” Sylvanas said. “I won’t know for a while. I have to do something. I’m sorry.”

More sounds leaked through the other end of the line. Other voices. The ding of an elevator. A garbled voice over a loudspeaker.

“Where are you?” Jaina asked.

“I…” A mechanical hum now joined in with the rest of the noises.

“Please, just tell me. I don’t care if you can’t make it out tonight. I promise. I just want to be sure you’re okay,” Jaina pleaded, holding the phone close and talking low, even though there was no way that Valeera wouldn’t hear her.

Another voice. One she was sure said, “This way, Ms. Windrunner.”

“Please,” Jaina asked again.

“Mt. Sinai. The hospital. Not for me, but…” Sylvanas muttered over the sound of footsteps on tile.

“Why then?” Jaina asked. “You’re not hurt or anything?”

“No. It’s a lot to explain. More of that...shit I was talking about before. I’m heading to the morgue, Jaina. I’m going to lose signal soon down here,” Sylvanas explained, her words rushing out, as if she were afraid she wouldn’t be able to let them out if she held them in any longer.

“I’m going over there. I’ll grab a taxi now,” Jaina said as she scouted out her possessions and made sure she had a hold of everything.
“You don’t have to,” Sylvanas mumbled.

“You know I do,” Jaina told her.

“I...thank you. You are so--”

The call dropped with a muted tone. Jaina kept a hold of her phone for a second, just holding it tight in her hand as she lowered it. Then she shot Valeera an apologetic look. “I have to go. I do want to hear what you have to tell me, but now is not a good time,” Jaina told her.

“It’s never going to be a good time,” Valeera spat as she propelled herself off of the desk she was leaning on, then out the door.

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I’m here.

Just two words. Nothing else. Two words that meant the world to her, in that moment. Sylvanas felt worn out in more ways than one. Her body felt like a shell--no, not that hard or rigid. A sack. A sack that all the contents had been poured out of. She was limp and listless. That sack had been filled with fear and grief and relief several times over that afternoon. It was empty now. Just empty.

Sylvanas answered the text.

I’m in the park out front. By the statue of the composer guy.

Okay, I’ll find you.

No requests for further details. No asking her to move. No requests for her to be somewhere she wasn’t. Good. She didn’t know if she could handle that right now. She’d found this bench after leaving the morgue and hadn’t moved from it. She wasn’t about to now.

The path lights were just starting to flicker to life when Jaina found her, illuminating the park in their golden glow.

She didn’t say anything at first. Not even her trademark “Hey”. She just sat next to her and put a hand on hers. Just that. Only that. Just to let Sylvanas know that she was here. That she cared.

And she didn’t even know what she was caring about.

That felt wrong.

Sylvanas’ fingers worked their way through that hand, twining with it, squeezing it.

“I’m sure you can guess what I was doing in the morgue. Why though, you can’t really guess,” Sylvanas said as she finally looked toward Jaina, to the soft blue eyes that were shining with concern from beneath the lenses of her glasses.

“You don’t have to tell me,” Jaina stopped her as she squeezed back.

“I do. I do have to tell you. I owe that to you,” Sylvanas said, then stopped her from objecting by pulling her into a hug. “And no, owe is a bad word. You deserve to know, though. You deserve so much.”

Jaina just hugged her. Sylvanas could feel her racing heart beat. God. She’d run here, hadn’t she? She’d run from the hospital to the park. Fuck.
The words started falling out of her and into Jaina’s hair, “They wanted me to identify a body. This hasn’t been the first time I’ve been called, and probably won’t be the last. Apparently there are several blonde female high elves with a face tattoo that are likely to have died from an overdose in New York. Who would have known? But...she wasn’t my sister this time.”

“What’s her name?” Jaina asked as she finally pulled away, but kept hold of Sylvanas’ shoulders.

“Alleria,” Sylvanas told her. “She was one of the reasons I came out here. We were...we were supposed to get her help. I lined up the best rehab program in the country for her. She just had to wait a few weeks to get in. But...I lost her. I went out one day to buy groceries and she was gone, along with all my cash. I know she’s still around, and still in New York. People tell me they’ve seen her all the time. She would call me sometimes too, always from a different number. But it’s been a while. I thought...maybe this time it might actually be her.”

“It wasn’t, though?” Jaina questioned, her eyes still gentle and caring, but intense as they absorbed all of this.

“No. Not even close. And I was happy about it. Of course I was. But then this time, a part of me was also...I don’t know. Frustrated. Like, if she were dead, it would be over. I wouldn’t have to worry. And that was just the worst thing I’ve ever thought. I’m so angry that even went through my head. I’m so mad at myself,” Sylvanas went on. Finally, the sack was filled again. This time, with the thing she had been avoiding putting in it. Anger, at herself. Disgust, even. It filled her like black bile and vinegar. She shivered from it.

Jaina didn’t shudder away. She didn’t make a face. She just kept hold of her and asked, “How long has it been like this?”

“Almost four years,” Sylvanas told her. “She was my big sister. I looked up to her. Well, until I didn’t. When dad died...she didn’t take it well. She was always his daughter. Makes sense that she followed in his footsteps.”

And there it was. That was the point where it felt like too much, but she’d said it anyway. What would Jaina think of this life of hers, if she knew it all? These ruins she inhabited? All of it seemed grand from the outside. She owned a business, well, partially, but that was another thing Jaina didn’t know. She had connections. She had hobbies and interests.

But she also had a broken family. She had massive amounts of debt. She had a black wake of destruction that she left behind wherever she went, and a great fear of continuing to broaden it, until she’d darkened the entire sea of her life. Sylvanas wasn’t ready to bring that to Jaina. She didn’t want it to taint the only good thing she truly had now. The only thing she could really hold up and say was all positive.

But at the same time, this was her. Jaina deserved to know that. She did really deserve everything.

So Sylvanas would let her decide.

“Dad was an addict too. Different drug of choice, though,” she kept going. “We had money. A real nice house. I took archery lessons and had a horse. That kind of money. Then dad snorted that money up his nose. He would go here, the New York, on business all the time. He died here. Well, not in the city. He had a cabin he would go to, up in the Adirondacks. We found him up there when he didn’t come home for a while.”

She paused to catch her breath, shrugging out of Jaina’s hold on her shoulders. Sylvanas reached up to wipe away tears she knew were there. Not heaving, liquid sobs, but the slow leak that came with
old pains. Slow and steady. Muted, but not forgotten.

Jaina waited for her to keep going.

“Funny thing is, though, our mom was a police officer. Sheriff, actually, in the little town we grew up in. I think she knew, though. She looked the other way for dad. For that and a lot of things. But I guess the money part hit her hard. She wasn’t expecting it to all be gone. Dad set aside some for us kids in a weird trust. Not a lot, but some. But the rest of it was gone. Mom had to raise four of us on a Sheriff’s salary, which isn’t a lot. No more archery lessons. No more horses. I got a job delivering papers instead. But I didn’t mind it. I wanted to help,” Sylvanas continued.

“Four of you?”

Sylvanas nodded. “Alleria, me, my other sister Vereesa, and our brother Lirath.”

She hadn’t said that last name in years. It surprised her how easy it was to say.

“There’s just three now,” Sylvanas said, as if to correct some mistake she felt she’d made. “Well, maybe. Mom worked so hard. She did everything she could to make sure we still had the best life possible. Alleria didn’t try, though. She gave up. She found heroin instead. I stayed and tried to help— with everything. Vereesa did too. And Lirath, well, he was still just a little kid.”

And finally, her throat closed. Finally, blessedly, the numbness subsided. She filled again, this time with so many emotions she couldn’t name them all. Fuck. Of all the things, this part of her story still felt so raw, so fresh. Like a wound rubbed with salt. The tears stun at her eyes now. The sobs threatened to bubble up, but Sylvanas fought through them.

No. She wasn’t done yet.

“Mom was killed by a drunk driver. She was taking Lirath to soccer practice. He lasted a few more days, but died in the hospital. So yeah, there’s...there’s a lot of reasons why I don’t drink. A lot of ‘em.”

Sylvanas swallowed hard.

Jaina was still waiting for her. Patient. Concerned. Listening.

“I was in school then. Was going to get my masters, like your are now. But, I couldn’t be there anymore. I couldn’t be in her house. I couldn’t walk past my brother’s room. I couldn’t get ready in the morning without missing her humming as she made us breakfast, without her insisting I at least have some coffee and toast before I went out. So two things happened. Alleria came home. And my girlfriend at the time told me she wanted us to move to New York,” Sylvanas rambled.

She breathed out a sigh, feeling that time in her life fade from her. Faded with the words that had professed it. But she still wasn’t done.

“This place was supposed to be a new start. I was going to get Alleria help. I was going to open the store I had always been talking about. I was even going to see about doing my masters at NYU. But, well, you can see how that worked out. Alleria’s gone again. Vereesa thinks I abandoned her and won’t talk to me anymore. The girlfriend left me for a younger woman. I never went back to school. My shop is...a whole ‘nother story. Really, all I have left are my records and my ugly dog.”

That was it. Or well, most of it. A very simplified and stripped-down version of it, anyway. Enough to fit into a cold autumn evening in New York. Enough to encase in the glow of the pathlights and the distant music of a bubbling fountain.
And too much, really.

“And me,” Jaina told her. “You have me.”

Sylvanas couldn’t get a hold of her fast enough. She settled for just gripping at her arm. She searched those sea-blue eyes, the color of the ocean at dawn—the color she remembered from better days, walking along the beach with her family, laughing, not knowing anything of pain or loss.

What she was searching for, she didn’t know. She just knew that she found it. It wasn’t a sparkle or a shimmer. Not even a blink. No movement at all, really. But that was it. Jaina just held her gaze, stark and steady. She knew. She understood.

And Sylvanas knew that when she was ready to listen to it, and when Jaina was ready to tell her, she’d have a tragic tale to tell that would match her own.

Or God, maybe even exceed it.

“Even with all this baggage? I wanted to take you on a real date. I wanted to make you feel special. Instead I’m just dumping all my problems on you and making us freeze our asses off out here. You still want me, after all that?” Sylvanas asked her as she gathered the too-thin fabric of Jaina’s jacket sleeve in her fist.

“Would you have told me, if you didn’t think I would?” Jaina asked her back.

“I...no. I guess not,” was the only reply Sylvanas could offer. Her grip on Jaina’s sleeve slackened. She was right. She was absolutely right.

And that was both wonderful and terrifying. Sylvanas wasn’t used to that. She wasn’t used to life dealing her hands she could play with. She wasn’t used to people genuinely caring about her, expecting nothing from her in return.

But damn, she really needed it.

“I wanted it to be Alleria this time,” Sylvanas said. “Just for a second. But I wanted it to be her. It would be easier if it were her. After all this, all I’ve lost, I wanted to lose her forever. And you still want me, even after that?”

Jaina pulled her into her arms again. “But you didn’t really,” she whispered against her neck. “You love her. You loved them all so much. I can see that. You care so much.”

She did. She missed her. She missed the Alleria that would slide across the kitchen floor with her, slipping along in just socks and pajamas, playing air guitar to dad’s records. She missed her mother’s stern, but caring gaze. She missed her dad’s laugh. She missed picking Vereesa up and spinning her around while she giggled. She missed Lirath just getting into his teens and being too cool for everything, but still giving her hugs when no one was looking.

Fuck. She missed it all so much.

Jaina let her cry that out on her. She didn’t complain. She didn’t even shiver in the cold. As night descended around them—falling on the city like a thin blanket, not enough to muffle out the constant sounds of city life, but enough to darken it all—Jaina held her. She kissed the top of her head. She waited.

And when Sylvanas ran out of tears, Jaina lead her along. First, to a Starbucks. It was no hipster coffee house. There were no rare tea blends or fancy pastries. Just a warm cup of hot chocolate that
was pressed into her hands. Then into the back of a cab. Then home.

Sylvanas still felt hollow as she opened the door to the shop. A good hollow, though. This time, an emptiness deserved. She had poured and poured. And Jaina was still here. Still following her up the stairs.

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“You have a lot of responsibility on your shoulders, young man,” Jaina said.

Nathanos didn’t seem to take her comment seriously. He was too busy sniffing at the tiny patch of grass around planter on the sidewalk, as he had been for the last five minutes. Sylvanas had warned her that he would take a while to do his business, but Jaina had insisted on taking the little dog out anyway.

“I need you to watch over her when I’m not here,” Jaina went on. She was lucky it was late, and that the street was mostly empty. Otherwise, this scene would have looked even more ridiculous than it already was to a passerby. With her, talking down to this ugly dog as he panted and sniffed at the end of his rainbow-striped leash.

“I’m serious,” Jaina told him. “I don’t think you comprehend how much you mean to her. Well, I don’t think you comprehend a lot of things. Definitely not how to pee. That’s a given.”

As if to prove her wrong, Nathanos finally lifted his little leg and relieved himself on the side of the planter.

“Well, at least there’s that,” Jaina sighed. “But seriously, bud. We have to take care of her. Promise me you’ll do your part, all right?”

Nathanos sneezed and scuttled away from his own mess.

Well, that was as much of a promise as she was going to get.

Jaina brought him back upstairs, being very proud of herself as she successfully managed to lock the door behind her and armed the alarm--thanks to Sylvanas’ careful instructions. Well, and the fact that she’d already watched her do it a handful of times.

“We all have our problems, buddy,” Jaina explained to the little dog as she carried him up to the second floor. “I think your mom thinks she has more than most. I mean, she’s got a lot. But, problems are just things to be solved. My friend told me that once. Her having a lot of problems just means that we need to help her solve them.”

Jaina juggled the dog from one hip to the other as she reached for the light switch, casting them into relative darkness as she shut off the last lights in the shop below.

“But I know what that’s like. She probably thinks she doesn’t need help, or that she doesn’t deserve it. But we know she does, right?” Jaina asked him as she slid the pocket door open.

Nathanos didn’t even have a sneeze to offer this time. In fact, he was falling asleep in her arms. Well, so much for that.

Jaina came up the stairs to the loft to find a record playing. Soft, meandering guitar. A woman singing. A sad song. Well, maybe not entirely sad. There was a hopeful bend to it. Heavy, but hopeful.
And Sylvanas laying on the rug again, looking at the night sky through the sunroom’s windows.

Jaina didn’t say anything. She set Nathanos down. She found his food in the lower cabinets again and scooped some into his bowl. She went to the bed and swept the comforter off of it. She dragged it to the rug and pulled it over Sylvanas before dropping to the floor herself and settling in beneath it, next to her.

“Where did you come from, even?” Sylvanas asked when Jaina bent to give her a soft, chaste kiss.

“Long Island,” Jaina replied, using the joke reply that Sylvanas had used on her on that rug before. “But that’s a story for another day.”

A story that didn’t need to be told now. A story of problems mostly solved. Well, those that could be. A story of why she understood. Why she knew that there was so little she could say right now. Why she knew it was better that she didn’t try to think of anything to fill the silence with. No, the music would do just fine for now.

Jaina knew enough to know that actions spoke louder than words. She knew that a warm embrace was enough. It would explain. It wouldn’t fix anything, but it would speak what she dare not say out loud. Not yet, anyway.

Not quite yet.

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Another balled up scrap of paper in the trash. Another sigh. This one more frustrated...more desperate than the last. Just a touch of a tremor at the end as Sylvanas wiped against the burning in her eyes with the heels of her palms before she pressed the button that would transfer the painfully small sum of money from her account into her business partner’s by way of app.

Better to not see each other. Better to not talk. There was just too much there. Too much to face. Well, for Sylvanas at least. Her partner didn’t really act like she gave a shit how her actions...how her words affected Sylvanas. In fact, Sylvanas couldn’t necessarily remember a time when she had acted that way.

“Don’t worry, bud.” Sylvanas murmured in response to the quiet grunt Nathanos gave her from her lap. “It’ll be pretty tight this month, but you’ll get your dinner. And your breakfast. Promise.” She might not...but he would. Always. At least she had her goodnight phone call with Jaina to look forward to.

The evening crawled by. Seconds felt like minutes, and minutes...god. No texts in regards to the short share this month. No texts from Jaina, of course. She was busy today. Sylvanas had started
remembering more and more of her schedule. It was hard, sometimes, to leave her alone when she was busy...and deep down, she knew Jaina wouldn’t have wanted her to. She managed, though. Somehow.

Her spirits even lifted somewhat when she took Nathanos out one last time for the night. Just an hour or so before closing. A few passersby even made comments about how cute he was. “You hear that, bud? You’re cute today.” She smiled and shook her head as he made his best attempt at marking the base of a little tree planted along the sidewalk. “Alright. Inside. It’s getting cold.”

As Sylvanas looked up and began to turn back towards the shop, she caught a glimpse of the last person she wanted to see right then from the corner of her eye. She then promptly went inside, anyway.

There were things Jaina liked about her TA position...and things she didn’t. Grading papers when she could have been talking to Sylvanas? Not exactly her favorite. She glanced up at the clock as she flipped yet another page and then looked back at her task again. At least her ‘to-do’ stack was gradually getting smaller. Albeit at a snail's pace. Maybe...maybe a text wouldn’t hurt. Just one. That wouldn’t be too big a distraction, right?

Hey, babe. Thinking about you. Just thought I’d let you know :).

Just pressing the send button was enough to make Jaina smile. Enough to get her through the rest of the monotony of papers that she’d admittedly put off just a little too long. Time went by more quickly, then. Between the excitement of almost being finished and the waiting for Sylvanas’s response - over an hour passed without her realizing it.

Over an hour with no response. Maybe the shop was busy today. She knew Sylvanas needed it, even if she wouldn’t tell her. The shop was almost never busy...and at times like this, when she had a moment to get stuck on that fact, it worried her.

Jaina did her best to push that nagging concern to the back of her mind - seating it firmly next to the slight worry about Sylvanas’s lack of response. Sylvanas always texted her back. Always. And that was when Sylvanas wasn’t texting her first…

The prospect of walking to her apartment felt almost unbearable. Instead, she spent an equally unbearable ride in an uber with her phone in her lap. She found she had to stop herself from glancing at it every few seconds. Especially when she noticed her text had been read. Especially then.

Could it be Alleria? Could it be something worse? How could anything be worse than that…

Jaina didn’t realize there was an anxious lump in her throat until her driver stopped across the street from her apartment and told her to have a good one. She nodded quickly and rushed to get out of the back seat of the car. Rushed past her doorman. Anything to outrun the creeping feeling of fear that was prickling at the base of her skull.

It didn’t go away, though. Not in the elevator. Not in the doorway to her apartment. Not with the soft click of her bedroom door shutting behind her.

Two hours.

Was she being too clingy? Fuck. Fuck, maybe she was. She slid her phone open and checked her texts with furrowed brows as she sat on the edge of her bed. No. No, they hadn’t talked since that
morning. Nothing unusual. Less, maybe, than usual, actually. Maybe she’d gotten a rush, then. Just forgotten to respond.

*I made it home. You close soon, right? I’ll talk to you soon.*

“Are you seriously ignoring me right now?”

Liadrin’s voice was low and agitated as Sylvanas quickly slid her phone back into her pocket and leaned back against the counter they were standing in front of. “I got a text. Why do you care?”

“Why do I care?” Liadrin asked as she crossed her arms over her chest and stared almost blankly for a moment. “Two grand. You just paypal’d me two fucking grand. I’m going to be dead five times over before I make my investment back at this rate and you’re more worried about your phone than this conversation.”

Sylvanas’s ears hung even lower, then, than they normally did in Liadrin’s presence. “Sorry. I didn’t… I didn’t mean to make it seem like I-”

“You’re always sorry, Syl. Always. You don’t fucking market, you have no social media presence, and this place smells just as much like mothballs as it usually does.”

Each sentence Liadrin spat out felt...almost physical. Like a blow being levied against her. It was always like this. It had been like this for a long, long time. “Yeah. I’ll work on it. Next month will be better. Maybe...maybe you should go, though. Give me a few more days to work numbers and I’ll shoot you an e-mail. I...I can’t really handle this right now, Liadrin. I really can’t. I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, and I can’t handle my fucking bank account, right now. I could’ve made you sell. I *should* have made you sell. I should’ve made you go back home where you belong instead of carrying on with this pipedream. A second-hand store in fucking New York. So original. I’m surprised you don’t have a line around the block.”

Liadrin faltered as Sylvanas looked away and physically winced. A low growl drew her attention away, though, and she glared down at their feet where Nathanos seemed to be giving her a warning.

“I’ll take him upstairs.” Sylvanas whispered hurriedly as she reached down and grabbed him. She took the steps two at a time - her heart hammering in her chest. Anything to keep this from turning into a knock-down, drag-out fight. *Anything*

Liadrin looked away from the retreating woman slowly - focusing, instead, on nothing in particular as something uncomfortable edged at the corners of her senses. Fuck. Why. Why was she doing this?

“Just let me answer this text and I’ll get the ledger out if you want and we can-”

“Is that it?” Liadrin’s attention snapped back to Sylvanas as she uncrossed her arms and turned to look at the woman pausing at the bottom of the stairs. “Who is she? Must be pretty damned good if you barely profited this month.”

That was it. Right where it hurt. Jaina. Sylvanas pushed her phone back into her pocket roughly.

“What gives you the right?” Sylvanas asked - her voice quiet. Quiet in a way that was almost dangerous. “What gives you the right after what you did to-”
“Here we fucking go.” Liadrin rolled her eyes and threw her hands in the air. “After I dragged you out here, right? Is that it? Took you away from your family and ruined your life? I’ve heard it before, Sylvanas. God, I’ve heard it before.”

“After you...you dragged me out here. And...and…” Sylvanas’s face was getting red. So were her ears. If she’d been less pissed she might have noticed the pain in her jaw from gritting her teeth together.

“Oh, adding something new, this time?” Liadrin asked - her tone a mixture of exasperation and indignance.

“Fuck you!” Sylvanas’s voice was hoarse...raw like it was being dragged over broken glass. “New!? You left out the part where you were fucking someone else, Liadrin. You fucking...you left out the part where you fucking left me for her. You left me with nothing and you have the balls to ask me who the fuck I’m texting.”

Liadrin narrowed her eyes, then. Narrowed her eyes against that uncomfortable feeling that was once again rising in the back of her throat. “I was there, Sylvanas. I know what the fuck I did. Trust me.”

“Get out.” Sylvanas grated out, her hands trembling with the effort of not balling them into fists.

“Get. Out.” Sylvanas persisted, moving closer to her and then brushing past her to hold the door open for her. “Before I say something I’m going to regret.”

“What the fuck could you possibly say to me that I haven’t heard a hundred times already?” Liadrin demanded as she walked towards the door. “You don’t wear regret well. You always expected me to. Isn’t that right? The only way you’ll ever be happy is if I drown in the guilt you want me to feel.”

“You’d have to have a heart for that, I think.” Sylvanas breathed - breathed because anything louder, she couldn’t trust.

“Fine. I’ll be looking for your e-mail by tomorrow at noon.”

“I hope you choke on it.” There it was. Fuck, there it was. Something Sylvanas was going to regret. Another piece of kindling...to add onto the pyre of her seemingly endless stream of mistakes.

“Get the numbers together, Sylvanas. I don’t like coming here. I never did.” Liadrin was outside, now. She had a hand on the edge of the door, though, and Sylvanas’s ears were pinned back so tightly it was physically uncomfortable. “I could go the rest of my life without seeing any of this shit again. I could go the rest of my life without hearing another stupid Seventies song.”

Liadrin saw the fire in Sylvanas’s eyes die out completely. Saw her gaze drop to the ground between them and her lips part - though no words came. Not in anger. Not in hurt. Just nothing. And she left. She pushed her hands into the pockets of her jacket...and she left.

Alone. Sylvanas was alone. Alone as she looked up at the retreating, once familiar form in the darkness. Alone as movement across the street caught her gaze for just a moment. ...Calia? Jaina’s friend? But she ducked her head and moved along.

Sylvanas shut the door slowly, resting her fingertips against the deadbolt before she turned it and faced the interior of the shop. “It’s...it’s not mothballs.” She whispered to herself. “It’s the smell of paper decomposing. A lot of...a lot of people like that smell.” She walked numbly towards the counter - stopping as her hand brushed a new box of records she’d stacked near it to be gone.
"It’s the same as your records...the jackets, anyway - just more concentrated." 

As the memory of Jaina’s voice - of the gentle warmth in her explanation - faded, the box of records hit the floor. Hard. Hard enough to break open and for the contents to spill out across the floor.

Decomposing.

Because that’s what this was, really. The realization was crippling, as she looked from the mess she’d made to the dingy, crowded shop around her. This was her holding on to what little she had left. Of her father. Her sister. Her family. Of the memories that got dimmer every day.

Jaina reached for her phone so quickly when it buzzed, she nearly dropped it. Her heart sank, though, when she realized the text was from Calia.

Walked past your girlfriend or whatever's shop tonight. She was having a screaming match with some elf chick. Thought you might wanna know.

Her mood shifted from disappointment to sudden, intense worry.

Did she have a tattoo? On her face?

Fuck, had something happened with Sylvanas’s sister?

Not that I saw. Red headed chick. Older than us. Why?

I thought it might be her sister…

Jaina...they certainly weren't sisters. It wasn't that kind of argument.

What’s that supposed to mean?

Nothing. I don't want to be in the middle of whatever this is. Maybe I shouldn't have said anything.

Jaina felt hot, angry tears burning in her eyes as she dialed Sylvanas’s number. She felt them begin to slip down her cheeks as her call went straight to voicemail. No. There was no way this was happening. Not now, god damnit.

That’s all she kept telling herself. Not now. Not now. As though there could ever have been a good time for...for whatever was going on. Yet, as terrified as she was, she had to know. She absolutely had to know. She’d never felt...anything like this before. If Sylvanas was…

Jaina shook her head as she wiped her face clean with the collar of her shirt before settling her glasses back against the bridge of her nose when the doors of the elevator shut. 

Sylvanas glanced down at her phone as it rang again and Jaina’s name came into view on the screen. Not now. Not now. She didn’t want her to hear her like this...not again. She didn’t want to dump that much more baggage on top of what Jaina had already accepted.
Now’s not a good time. I’ll call you later.

Shit...shit, she sounded like an asshole.

Sylvanas tossed her phone back onto the floor and reached for the next record - swallowing thickly past the lump in her throat as she looked at the crack that now ran through the vinyl. She carefully slid the ruined record back into its sleeve and brushed her fingertips over the cover. Jolene. This had been one of the albums her mother actually enjoyed when her father played it. Fuck. It was a good album...

She slid it into the box that she’d done her best to shape back into some semblance of usefulness. Well. That was one mess she’d made that she’d managed to clean up tonight...she hadn’t even had a chance to see if she’d feel some small bit of satisfaction when the chime above the door went off.

“...Jaina? What are you doing here? I was going to call you. I told you I’d call you.”

There were certain cues Jaina might have otherwise noticed that she missed right then. The exhaustion on Sylvanas’s face - hidden in the delicate lines of it. The dimness in the glow of her eyes.

“Am...am I interrupting something?” She asked in a tone Sylvanas didn’t recognize. A tone that caused her to look away for a moment.

“What would you be interrupting?” Sylvanas managed to look back at her - and it seemed almost hesitant. It was. Just not for the reasons currently wreaking havoc on Jaina’s mind.

“You’ve been ignoring me all night.” Jaina’s voice was almost a whisper and it was trembling faintly. In her exhaustion, all Sylvanas could feel was...confusion.

“I haven’t...I didn’t mean to, Jaina. I can explain.” The frustration was coming off of her in waves. Frustration at everything. At Liadrin...at herself...just everything.

“Can you?” Jaina was still so quiet. Almost...hurt?

“Jaina, what’s going on? Why are you acting like this?” Sylvanas took a step towards her, then. She stopped, though, when Jaina took a step back.

“Calia saw you. With...whoever. I was scared to death, you know? I thought it was Alleria. I thought you’d had a fight with her or something. It wasn’t Alleria, though, was it? I’ve...I’ve been waiting for you to text me for hours. Then you sent me to voicemail. Twice. Then I show up here and you ask me why? You said I was always welcome. You said that. You said a lot of things, Sylvanas. A lot of things that I believed.”

“Believed?” Sylvanas asked as her eyes narrowed - as everything threatened to come crashing down. It was too much. Too heavy. It was all so fucking heavy. “Is that past-tense for some reason? What did Calia even tell you she saw?” Still, she tried to hold it together. To hold on to what she had. To what Jaina had told her she had. She believed in this. How could she not?

“That there was a woman here with you and that the two of you were arguing. I asked her if the woman had a facial tattoo like you said Alleria does. Like your sister. She said you weren’t arguing like sisters.” Jaina’s voice cracked, then. So she stopped trying to use it.

“So, what do you think Calia saw, Jaina?” There was anger, now. Anger that tried to push its way past the scalding burn of hurt wedging its way into her chest. Into everything that she was. “Please enlighten me.” She ignored it. The inner voice telling her to stop. To stand down, here. Telling her
this didn’t need to be this way. That it didn’t need to be a fight. Jaina was young. She cared. Sylvanas ignored it. All of it.

“You tell me.” Jaina breathed - her cheeks flushed and her eyes burning once again, though she refused to cry. Not now. Fuck, no. Not now.

“Maybe you should go.” There was...nothing. Nothing in Sylvanas’s voice now. It was unreadable. As unreadable as her expression.

“What?” It was Jaina’s turn to take a step forward. Sylvanas’s turn to take a step back. Then another. Jaina didn’t follow. She was frozen. Overwhelmed with what was happening and what it could mean.

“I said maybe you should go.” A little louder this time. A little more raw. “If this is how well you know me, then maybe-” She drew in a sharp breath. A breath that hurt as it clawed its way into her lungs. “Just go, Jaina. I can’t do this with you tonight.”

Perhaps they were both equally surprised when that’s exactly when she did. But that’s what she always did. She went when people told her to. Usually away. ...Always ‘away’.

Jaina didn’t really even remember the walk home. She didn’t really remember kicking off her shoes and getting into bed, either. All she knew was she was alone. Again. It should have felt familiar. It should have been something she could handle. It just wasn’t, this time. There was a new kind of ache in this loneliness. One that years of being pushed into the background hadn’t really prepared her for.

Maybe this was so hard because she’d allowed herself to feel safe with Sylvanas. For the first time in such a long time, she’d allowed herself to feel safe. With this person she wasn’t just a painful reminder. She wasn’t an inconvenience or a burden or the hundred other terrible things she’d been in her life. Sylvanas had wanted her. Sylvanas had missed her when she wasn’t around. That had been real. Hadn’t it?

She replayed the night in her head over and over as she stared at the dark wall on the far side of her bedroom with the covers pulled up beneath her chin in an attempt to decipher what had happened and where she’d gone wrong.

Jaina had never even imagined Sylvanas sounding the way she had earlier. She’d meant she’d said. She had to have meant it. Sylvanas didn’t want to deal with her. It was a simple as that. But deal with what, exactly? She wasn’t the one who’d been ignoring texts and calls. She wasn’t the one Calia had seen with another woman.

The hurt came back, then. Full force. Sylvanas still hadn’t explained that. Was that even fair of her, though? They hadn’t had any conversations about not seeing other people...

Suddenly, the thought of Sylvanas with another woman penetrated her thoughts and Jaina vehemently regretted going down that path in her mind. No. No, no, no. Sylvanas would have told her, right?

Jaina flopped onto her back and tried to clear her head just to make room for even one logical thought only to find it filled, instead, with a quiet knock on the door.

“Jaina?” Kinndy leaned her forehead against the door outside and sighed heavily. “Can I please come in? You’ve been crying for half an hour straight. It’s killing me.”

Had she?
Jaina sat up in bed and touched her own face with her fingertips to find it tear-streaked and hot. Her eyes were even sore and puffy. Well, fuck. Maybe she had been…

“Yeah. Yeah, I’m sorry.”

Kinndy opened the door slowly and made her way over to Jaina’s bed to tug herself up on the edge of it. “What happened?”

Jaina had never really heard her so…concerned before. It did little to help the unbearable lump in her throat. Jaina shrugged softly and looked away as she tightened her lips when the lower one began to tremble. Her shoulders only shook once when Kinndy reached for her hand.

“Is it Sylvanas?” Oh, no. Oh, god, no.

Jaina nodded and took a series of breaths that she’d intended to be slow only to wind up rushed and shaky.

“Tell me what happened.” Kinndy urged as she scooted a little closer.

“I dunno.” A sharp sniff and another purse of her friend’s lips had Kinndy patting her arm lightly.

“I guess…I guess she’s either cheating on me or I just fucked up real bad. Real bad.” Jaina felt a tug on her arm and found herself leaning awkwardly against Kinndy as the smaller woman tried her best to hold her as close as she could.

“Why would you think that?” Kinndy asked in a whisper as she pulled back slowly to look into Jaina’s reddened eyes.

“Calia.” Jaina mumbled in reply as she pulled back to prop herself against the headboard.

“...What?”

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Quiet. It was so quiet. So quiet, in fact, that it was deafening.

No records playing on the turntable across the room to soothe her to sleep. No sounds this late on the streets outside the shop.

The only thing that reminded Sylvanas she hadn’t somehow been transported into another dimension was an occasional snore from Nathanos. She hadn’t even bothered to get undressed - much less get herself under her blankets.

She felt so numb. So empty. Yet, somehow, her chest wouldn’t stop burning. It felt like someone had lit a fire there. A fire that would never go out.

“I’m sorry.”

The words slipped out of her before she really thought about them. Slipped out before she knew why she was saying them. Maybe to Liadrin. Why? She didn’t know. Maybe she was sorry for not being enough. To Jaina? Definitely, definitely to Jaina. Yes, she’d jumped to one hell of a conclusion…but she was also the best thing Sylvanas had, and she’d probably never forget the way the younger woman had looked when she’d raised her voice at her. Sylvanas hadn’t meant to do that. She really hadn’t.
She could have picked up the phone. Jaina had heard her cry before. She’d heard her upset before - and she was still here. Or, at least she was...but now-

“You did that.” Sylvanas whispered to herself, gritting her teeth as her eyes slipped shut. Yeah. She’d done that, alright.

She was just...so fucking sorry. The kind of sorry that would only go away if she were no longer conscious. Yet sleep wasn’t having her. Not even close. It was difficult to relax enough to rest when the weight you tried your best to carry for years and years suddenly crushed you.

Sylvanas scarcely recognized the noise of discomfort that she made as she slid her phone open and went through her photos - scrolling until she was looking at Jaina. At that very first selfie. Before they’d kissed. Before Jaina had held her and expected nothing in return. Before she’d dared to hope that this time she could be enough. That this time could be different.

Too much. This was too fucking much.

Her phone was resting face down against her chest once more, soon. How could she fix this? How could she ever even hope to fix this?

Sleep, it seemed, wasn’t on the agenda for either of them that night.

A few blocks away - a few blocks that felt, suddenly, like an ocean right then, Jaina had assured Kinndy she’d rest. That it was safe to go to bed. That she would definitely be fine.

She just wasn’t entirely certain any of that had been the truth. Her conversation with Kinndy hadn’t exactly made her feel sure of herself - though she’d come to that realization all on her own. Kinndy had only listened. Only told her they could talk more tomorrow, after she’d slept. She’d seemed...off. A little irritated, maybe. Though it hadn’t felt like it had been directed at her.

A call or a text felt like the worst thing she could do right then. For herself. She wasn’t sure, anymore, what to believe. What she wanted to believe was that she was wrong. Wanting to be wrong was an altogether new experience for her.

All she knew was that she wasn’t ready to let this go. Not at all. Not even a little. She could handle being unwanted. Oh, she was adept at that.

Not wanting Sylvanas, though?

That was another story, altogether. A story that her aching heart and her exhausted mind wanted no part of.
Valeera had been sitting on the sofa for what felt like years. It had really only been half an hour, give or take. She hadn’t moved. She even hadn’t leaned forward to retrieve her phone from the coffee table when Liadrin had called her.

It was all she could do to just breathe. Breathe, and keep clutching the polaroid she was holding in her hand. Her eyes slipped shut as she heard the door unlock. They stayed shut as she listened to Liadrin struggling with what must have been groceries while she locked it back behind herself.

“What’s wrong?” Valeera asked - a genuine look of shock on her face. “Did you just ask me what the fuck is wrong?”
Liadrin blinked and shook her head as her thoughts raced to catch up with what was happening. What was happening?

“Are you fuckin’ mute, now? Like...really? Or did she just fuck you real good tonight before you came home to me?” The photo was half-balled into her fist now and the anger was coming off her in waves so strongly Liadrin could’ve sworn she could feel them. So much so that her voice was a whisper when next she spoke.

“Valeera, what the hell are you talking about?”

A quiet calm came over the younger woman, suddenly. An almost terrifying one. Liadrin watched her look down at whatever she was holding. She watched the slight tilt of her head as she turned it around so Liadrin could see it, too.

A picture. Just a picture. But, god, why did it have to be that one? She didn’t have to look long to recognize it. She’d been there. She’d been the one lifting Sylvanas in her arms and kissing her in front of The Undercity on the day they opened.

“Business partners?” Valeera’s voice was almost inaudible, yet Liadrin could still hear the tremor in it. “Fucking business partners?”

Oh, she’d lied for so long. To Sylvanas. To Valeera. To herself. She just couldn’t, anymore. She just fucking couldn’t. Especially not to Valeera.

“Yeah.” Liadrin responded quietly as she walked around the edge of the couch and lowered herself slowly into the armchair situated nearby. “We’re business partners. We were just more than that...for a long time.”

Valeera had been expecting excuses. She’d been expecting anything but this, really, and she didn’t know how to respond. She looked deflated as she stood there with her head hung and her face still red with hurt and anger.

“How long?” Valeera asked, lifting wounded eyes to Liadrin’s. “You were with her when we...” A sound that was a mixture of laughter and a sob left her throat as she reached for the arm of the sofa and half-fell down into the corner of it.

“I was.” Liadrin breathed. “And I’m so, so sorry. Please just talk to me, Valeera.”

“Are you...are you still...”

“No. No, I’m not.” No lies. No more lies.

Valeera released a shuddering breath and her hand darted up to catch the tears that had begun slipping down her cheeks as she stared up at the ceiling. “When did you end it?”

Liadrin averted her eyes, then, and licked her lips when she suddenly found them dry. “Maybe a month ago.” She whispered, clutching her hands into fists so tightly against her legs her knuckles were going white.

Valeera wasn’t going to cry. No. Not now. Absolutely not. “Fuck.” She leaned forward, instead, crossing her arms between her thighs and her stomach as her hair fell into her face. “Liadrin, we’ve been together for six months.”

Liadrin nodded and swallowed thickly. “I know, baby. And I’m...I’m so sorry. I don’t know what to say to make this go away. I don’t know what to do.”
Valeera didn’t respond for a long time, and Liadrin didn’t move, as much as she wanted to. There was almost nothing in the world that she wanted more than to hold her. To wrap her in her arms and undo the destruction she’d wrought.

Yet, when Valeera finally looked at her, she almost flinched away from what she saw in her eyes. “Do you love me, Liadrin?”

Liadrin felt a glimmer of hope. The faintest bit of warmth touching the freezing cold that had settled in the pit of her stomach. “What kind of question is that, Valeera?”

“A question I need a fucking answer to.”

“Valeera, of course, I-”

“Were you still fucking her?” Valeera stood. She stood and paced near the end of the sofa.

“What do you mean by that?” Liadrin asked as she shifted to the edge of the chair. She didn’t stand, though. She wasn’t sure she could.

“I mean were you fucking us both at the same time?” Liadrin winced at the shrill quality of Valeera’s voice. She’d never heard that before. She’d never heard her so undone.

“No, I...babe, please. Please let me answer you, I-”

“Is that where you were those nights in the beginning?” Valeera demanded, wiping her face roughly with the back of her hand. She was pissed at herself for that small weakness she couldn’t help but display, and she only grew more angry with each tear that betrayed her. “Huh? When your phone was off? That time or two you bailed on me when we had plans? When did you decide to cut her off? Did it take you five months to decide the fucking pussy was worth it?”

Liadrin did stand, then. She stood and moved towards Valeera only to find her hands pushed away roughly when she reached for her. “Don’t touch me. Don’t you fucking dare.”

“Valeera….Valeera, please-” Liadrin’s voice was more of a gasp than anything else as the other woman tugged her jacket on and turned towards the door without answering her.

“Where are you going? Please, I’m...god, please.”

“Fuck you.” The door slammed with such finality that Liadrin flinched away from it. Her ears were still ringing when she could no longer hear the sound of Valeera’s footsteps going down the hallway outside.

She turned around slowly to the emptiness of the apartment. To the lights of the city that filtered in through the windows overlooking it. They were blurred. So was everything else. Every few steps towards their bedroom she had to collect herself just to continue on.

Calling Valeera wasn’t an option. She needed her space. She deserved her space. She deserved to never come back again and Liadrin knew it. Her suit jacket and dress shoes were left on the floor in a trail along the way to the California King that seemed so big tonight. Too big. And she forced herself beneath the duvet in the darkness and found a pillow to rest her head on.

Valeera didn’t go far. Just to the bar a couple blocks down where they’d first met. The very first time Liadrin had taken her to their apartment. She didn’t even drink. Couldn’t bring herself to. She just sat near the end of the bartop and stirred whatever she’d ended up ordering.
“Hey, baby.”

Valeera cut her eyes slowly to the irritatingly deep voice that had made itself known over her shoulder.

“You look upset. Something I can do for you?”

“You can fuck off if that’s alright with you.” She responded flatly, slowly turning her attention back to the glass in front of her as the man lifted his hands and walked away.

Liadrin didn’t know what to do. She didn’t know what to do. Nobody knew what to do. All Valeera knew was this hurt. That argument had hurt. Being away from Liadrin hurt. She’d only just gotten back into town the day before and she’d fucking missed her. Missed her like she always did when she was gone. Sure, the apartment was nice. Nicer than any place she’d ever been in. So was the money. The credit cards, the clothes, the shoes. All of it was real nice.

But that wasn’t why she’d fallen in love. Not at all. And that wasn’t what had her closing out her tab and gathering the courage to go back to her. To face this instead of running from it.

Nobody had ever treated her like Liadrin did. Plenty of people had bought her things...but nobody had loved her like this if they ever had at all, and she’d definitely never felt the way she felt about Liadrin about anyone else. If this had been anyone else...she’d have been gone the minute she found that picture.

Now? Now, all she wanted was to go home. So she did.

Liadrin hadn’t slept at all. She was still laying just as she had been. At least the tremors that had been wracking her body had died down somewhat. It was strange how certain things could trigger reactions you’d been doing so well at containing. The quiet click of a bolt unlatching and a doorknob turning could make your heart hammer in your chest. The sound of footsteps in your apartment could cause your breath to catch in the back of your throat.

Still. Liadrin was so still. As though she would somehow break this even further if she moved...until Valeera was standing at the edge of the bed. Liadrin’s eyes shifted slowly - first to the way Valeera’s knees were pressed against the edge of the mattress, then gradually higher - to the almost lost look on the younger woman’s face.

“I was worried about you.” Liadrin’s voice came out husky with both fatigue and emotion.

The barely audible whimper that met her ears in response as Valeera all but scrambled into the bed beneath the covers and pressed against her drew Liadrin out of her half-dazed state. She turned to meet Valeera instantly, wrapping her in her arms as she felt her bury her face against her chest. There was nothing Valeera could do, now, about the tears. They just came. They came with harsh, ugly sobs that shook her entire body. Sobs that bordered on something that threatened to choke her every so often. There was nothing pretty or poetic about the way her pain tore from her - nothing delicate about the way she clutched the front of Liadrin’s shirt in her fists as she tried to curl both into herself and further into the older woman’s face.

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It was only raw. It was only the agony and anger of betrayal that poured from her mixed with a desperate, illogical need for Liadrin to take it all away. Take it all back. To tell her she was only waking up from some terrible nightmare.

The words never came. Valeera had to make do with hiding from this in the arms of the very woman
that had brought it all crashing down around her. They were the only arms she’d ever really sought comfort from. The only ones that had ever given her any.

It was a long time before the tears finally dried - leaving her tensing and shaking in waves as Liadrin buried her face in her hair and stroked and kneaded at her back.

“Can we talk?” Valeera asked in a weak whisper.

“About anything, Valeera. Anything you need. Anything at all.”

“Alright. Alright, just...gimme a second.”

Liadrin did. Of course. She just laid there as Valeera turned her head towards the sheets and fought to regain control of her breathing. Laid there as each burning gasp of air that broke the terrible silence in their bedroom drove the hurt she’d caused the younger woman that much more deeply into the gaping wound in her chest left there by her own regret.

“Okay.” Valeera swallowed thickly as Liadrin’s ears twitched forward - working to pick up the muffled sound of the other woman’s voice muffled as it was. “My question. From earlier. Please just tell me the truth. Were you still sleeping with her that night you took me home? That first night?”

“No.” Liadrin murmured as she looked over Valeera’s head at the windows that lined the far wall of their bedroom. “That was...not a part of our relationship for quite some time at that point.”

Relief flooded her. Shameful, selfish relief. Valeera recognized that fact. She just didn’t care right then. She nodded. “You promise?”

“I’m telling you the truth. I’d swear it on anything. No more lies, Valeera. Never again.” Liadrin looked down as she felt Valeera shifting against her. She held the glow of her gaze as the younger woman lifted a hand and stroked along her neck towards her face. Again, she didn’t dare move. That seemed to be a theme of this night. This terrible, awful night.

“I don’t understand. I don’t understand why you didn’t...why you felt like this was the right decision.”

Liadrin shook her head and released a trembling breath as Valeera’s thumb passed over her lips before her hand withdrew entirely. “I know, now, that it wasn’t. I know that I was a coward. A selfish coward for what I did.”

“Tell me. Please. I’m tired of asking questions, Liadrin. Just tell me what happened.”

Liadrin faltered. Just for a moment. Her hand stilled where it had begun stroking Valeera’s back again - then, gradually, her thumb began shifting over the material of her shirt. “Alright.”

It wasn’t a story she’d told before. It was all so fresh. So heavy. But she was going to tell it, now - as Valeera’s lips parted against the collar of her shirt so she could breathe more easily. As the fists that had been holding onto it so tightly slowly relaxed.

“It didn’t work.” Liadrin began - her voice so quiet Valeera almost had to strain to hear it. “It never did. We tried. God, we tried for so long. I was the reason she came out here. I’m the reason she’s alone, now. We didn’t fit. It was like...trying to sort through pieces of a puzzle without knowing you were looking at pieces that never went together at all. I think we thought if we opened that store together, things would fall into place. They only fell further apart. She needed more than I could give. I needed more than she could give, too. Those needs just...didn’t coincide. We always wanted different things. In the beginning, we were too blind to see it. That changed. It changed into us not
wanting to see it. Then the bitterness came. That’s when what little good there was left began to escape. We were both so alone. Even in the same room as each other. I stopped wanting to come home when I went away for business. I started staying in my apartment more often.” Liadrin trailed off as she felt the integrity of her voice begin to fail her.

“How long was it like that?” Valeera asked quietly, feeling a desperate need to fill the sudden silence with something. She hadn’t really ever heard Liadrin hurting. She didn’t need to. It read like the plainest words in the tone of her voice and her entire demeanor. Part of her was angry - angry that Liadrin would have the audacity to be upset...and part of her wanted to tell her that it was okay. That she loved her. That she wasn’t going anywhere. She just didn’t know if that was true. The last bit, anyway.

“Years.” Liadrin admitted - almost more to herself than to Valeera. “For a long time, the bitterness was just an undercurrent. Until it wasn’t. Until it poisoned every aspect of our lives. It started to turn us into people we both hated to be. People that we absolutely weren’t. That night, when I met you at the bar...I’d just had enough. I needed...I needed something. Anything. To be touched and accepted and needed. Even for one night. And then it turned into another night...and another. I could and should have told her sooner. I could have ended it months and months ago. Before I ever even met you. I was trying to do the right thing by staying and, fuck...fuck, it was the worst thing I’ve ever done. I knew at a certain point that there was no going back. That I loved you and that this was what real love was. That you were...absolutely everything I needed. That if I’d met you in a different time and a different place it would have been so, so perfect.”

Valeera’s eyes fell shut, then. An errant tear or two slipped down her face. She didn’t say anything, though. Not yet.

“I understand...I understand how badly I’ve hurt you. How badly I’ve fractured this. But everything I’ve ever said...every time I told you I love you and every word I’ve said to you aside from that, I’ve meant. With all my heart.”

“Yeah. Yeah, I get that. And I love you, too. But, you...you really…”

“I fucked it up, didn’t I?” Liadrin asked quietly, trying to ignore the fear that was causing her heart to hammer painfully in her chest.

“I don’t know, Liadrin.”

“I’ll get myself a room. If that would help. You can have the apartment to yourself for as long as you want. If...if you decide that I have...that I really have taken this somewhere we can’t pull it back from, you can just have it. I’ll keep paying the rent. You can stay here and finish school and-“

“Stop. Please.” Valeera whispered as tears burned threateningly in her eyes again. “Don’t say that. Fuck. Don’t say that. Why would I ever want to be here without you…”

Another length of silence fell over them. Every now and then, Liadrin would feel a balled up fist press against her chest or her stomach. Almost like punches, though they didn’t hurt. They weren’t meant to. They were slow and soft. Conflicted. Because that’s exactly what Valeera was. More so than she’d ever been in her life. She’d never been angrily in love before. That sure had changed tonight.

The pieces of her that felt sorry for Liadrin were warring against the pieces that knew just how wrong what she’d done was. Not only to her, but to that other woman. “How do I even know you’re who I think you are anymore? When I’m not even sure I know who that person is or was?”
“I’ve never been anything but myself with you. I’ve never had to be anyone else for a single second. I’ll show you, though. I’ll show you every day. I swear to God I will. No matter how long it takes for you to believe me again. To know me again.”

“I wanna believe that. I wanna believe everything you’re telling me. I think mostly I do. And I’m sorry, Liadrin. I’m sorry you felt like you had to live that way for so long. That still doesn’t mean that I’m okay with this. If I told you I was, I’d be lying to you.”

“I understand.” Liadrin watched as Valeera slowly pulled away from her and stood beside the bed, looking almost numb as she began to undress herself. “What are you doing?”

“Me?” Valeera asked as her eyes flicked up to Liadrin before she dropped her top on the floor and began tugging her jeans off. “Tonight, I’m sleeping in my bed. With my girlfriend. Tomorrow, I’m getting a hotel room for a few days.” She cut her eyes as Liadrin seemed as though she was about to put up an argument. “Don’t. I’m telling you what I need. Don’t. Maybe I’ll get there and realize a night away is enough. Maybe I’ll need a month. Who knows. All I know is you’re gonna give me space while I’m gone. Take your stupid suit off, please. It’s scratchy.”

Liadrin pulled herself out from under the covers and stood next to Valeera, reaching immediately for the buckle of the belt holding her trousers up to remove the apparently offensive article of clothing.

Valeera didn’t miss a single thing as she watched her. Not the way her jaw kept flexing as she clenched it...definitely not the way her breath seemed to catch every now and then. The tears that seemed barely under control weren’t lost on her, either. Liadrin had always been so strong. Since the night she’d met her she’d felt that. Not just physically. Though, as the pants hit the floor followed by the shirt - that much was apparent. With Liadrin, though, the inside matched the outside. “Why are you acting like that?” Valeera asked as Liadrin turned her tired, weary eyes to her now that the remainder of her clothing was in a pile on the floor. “Keeping everything down? You’re gonna pass out or something if you don’t stop trying so hard.”

“Because I don’t deserve to be upset, Valeera.” Liadrin responded - her voice slightly choked.

“Doesn’t have anything to do with ‘deserve’.” Valeera was so close, now, she could feel the heat coming from Liadrin’s skin. It caused her to duck her head slightly before she all but fell against her and tugged her close. She held onto her so hard her nails left little crescents in Liadrin’s back where they dug in. “Don’t you ever fucking do that to me.” Valeera whispered as Liadrin winced and buried her face in the younger woman’s neck. “I’ll fuckin’...I...don’t. Don’t you ever...ever do it. You leave my shit in the fucking street and change the locks before you do that to me.”

“I won’t.” Liadrin urged in desperation as the sting of nails in her back gradually lessened. “I swear, Valeera. I’m not...god, I know it sounds like bullshit, but I’m not that person.”

Valeera rolled those words around in her head as she pulled back and bit her lower lip in thought. With a quiet sigh, she moved back into bed and gave Liadrin’s wrist a gentle tug before turning away from her. Liadrin wrapped an arm around her from behind almost tentatively and let out a slow, measured breath as Valeera shifted backward against her so they were pressed together.

“I know...I know I’m not in a position to ask anything of you right now. I know that. But can you text me at night before you go to bed while you’re gone? Just to let me know you’re okay?”

Valeera nodded more quickly than Liadrin had expected, not that she’d expected a positive answer to begin with. “Of course I will, Liadrin.”

“And you have my card? You have everything you’ll need?”
“I do. Go to sleep.”

Liadrin fell silent, then, and just tried to savor the feeling of Valeera’s back moving against her chest with each breath she took.

Valeera did go. Liadrin watched her pack a bag in silence the next morning. She returned the kiss Valeera gave her by their door. And she did her best to hold that moment close as a day turned into a week...and then another. Still, every night - she got the text. Every night it was almost the same.

_I’m in bed. I’m safe. And I still love you._

Every night, her response was almost the same, too.

_I’m so glad. I love you more than you know._

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Tired. Liadrin was tired of this meeting. Tired of not sleeping. Just...fucking tired. She listened to her fellow investors ramble on - stumbling over one another in a bid to see who could finish a sentence first. She didn’t need to be here. Not really. It was always the same. She didn’t have anywhere else to be, though. Her empty apartment? Sure. There was that. But she hated it there, now. It had been nearly three weeks. Three weeks of doing everything she might normally have done with Valeera alone. Three weeks of waiting for the small comfort of her nightly texts. Waiting for that swell of hope only to feel it slip away as no further correspondence came.

She looked up over the edge of her frameless glasses as she realized the argument had now shifted to what was going to be had for lunch. Enough. She’d had enough for one day. “Gentlemen, if you’ll excuse me.” She stood, then, as most of the eyes in the conference room turned to her. She commanded attention. Always had, though she rarely used that gift unless it was necessary. Right now, though? Leaving was very, very necessary.

Once she had her papers in the leather case she favored - the one that went with the black suit she was currently wearing - she left the room and took to the hallways towards the elevator as her heels clicked sharply on the polished marble floors.

She checked her watch on the ride down - her eyes focusing on the time that flashed across the little screen before it dimmed as she lowered her wrist.

“Ma’am.”

Liadrin nodded at the intern who stepped onto the elevator beside her - expecting that to be the end of their conversation. She was more than a little surprised when it wasn’t.

“I was just coming up to find you. The phones on your floor were ringing through to the front desk, and there’s someone downstairs waiting for you. She doesn’t have an appointment, though, so I didn’t think it was urgent enough to interrupt you until she corrected me.”

Liadrin glanced over at the young women and lifted a brow. “Did she give you a name? I don’t have anything scheduled for today.”

“Miss Sanguinar, I believe.”

Liadrin suddenly found herself searching for the air that felt as though it had just been knocked out of her lungs as the elevator doors opened. “Ah, there she is.” The intern gestured in the direction of the
stark, severe lobby towards a shock of life and color that seemed so out of place there. Valeera.

“Thank you.” Liadrin whispered hurriedly before making her way out. The sound of her heels was what alerted Valeera to her approach from across the room - starting with a shift of her ears before she turned to face her more fully.

It was Valeera’s turn to feel as though she’d lost all of her breath. Liadrin looked so strangely severe like this. Between the tailored suit and the heels along with the side sweep of bangs that were pulled up with the rest of her hair. And then the glasses. Damn those glasses. But none of it could hide the emotion building in her expression more and more the closer she got.

Valeera left, though. Not far. Just a step or two outside the doors she’d been standing near. A mixture of dread and, perhaps, a foolish sense of optimism flooded Liadrin as she pushed her way through the spinning doors and found herself standing in front of the younger woman. Suddenly, she didn’t know what to say. After all the nights of wishing for this moment - of planning and preparing for it, she had no idea what to say.

“We haven’t seen each other in three weeks.” Valeera began. “Are you gonna, like...I dunno, kiss me or something? Isn’t that how this shit goes?”

Before she could even attempt a smirk, Liadrin’s briefcase hit the concrete below and she found Liadrin’s hands in her hair and the warm, soft familiarity of the older woman’s lips against her own. Fuck, Valeera missed her. She’d missed this. This fire. These magnets just beneath their skin that always pulled them together.

“I love you.” Liadrin whimpered against her hair as she slid her arms around her and pulled her into a blissfully tight hug.

“Yeah. I know. I love you, too. But we still got a lot of things to work out, you know.”

Liadrin pulled back slowly - her brows furrowed as she tried to keep her disappointment at bay. “It...it’d be a lot easier to do that if you came home.” She mumbled - and if Valeera hadn’t been watching her speak she might not have heard her over the noise of the city.

“Yeah. My bag’s in the trunk. I’m sure the driver is pretty over waiting for you to go grab it by now.”

Liadrin turned just in time to see an older man leaning against a cab a few feet away with his arms crossed over his chest. “You’re...” Liadrin turned back towards Valeera as the very corners of her lips starting to turn up in a tentative smile. “You’re coming home?”

“I told you I needed time. I still do. But I also need you. So, yeah.”

“Okay.” Liadrin whispered, taking a step back, though she was still holding Valeera by her arms. The smile shifted. From something careful and controlled into a grin that used muscles in her face she’d nearly forgotten were even there. “Okay. I’ll...”

Liadrin trailed off and turned, half-jogging in her heels rather impressively through the throng of people that separated them from Valeera’s belongings. The way the older woman looked for her through and sometimes over the crowd more than once on her way back only further cemented her decision in her mind. How the fuck could she not come back to this?

This was everything. Even damaged as it was...it was still everything.
Jaina didn't miss things. She kept promises. She was always on time.

Yet she didn't feel guilty as she typed out a brief, starkly worded email to her professor, excusing herself from running the afternoon discussion group for today. No, she would not be doing that.

She was struggling still with the idea of getting out of bed, and it was already noon. She hadn't slept for more than hour, and maybe not even that. Still, she wasn't going out. She wasn't getting up. She was going to try to sort through the thoughts that kept whirling through her head, but honestly, that wasn't going so well either.

It would be easier, Jaina decided, if she didn't feel like she was wearing a lead weight around her neck. If her chest would stop being so tight. If she could just take a breath, a real breath, without wanting to cry.

This, at least, was a familiar feeling. Not a good one, but familiar. A feeling that belonged to a smaller, younger Jaina. A feeling she had hoped she had grown up and out of, only to prove that assumption wrong.
If only another assumption could be so easily ruined. Well, would that be better or worse? After all the things she'd said. After the hurt that had seethed from Sylvanas’ eyes when she told her to leave.

And read even more plainly when they watched her go.

She thought about that look for a while. A long while. Even as she dragged herself into a shower that didn't help. Even as she forced herself out into the kitchen to find something to shut her stomach up. She replayed that scene over and over, with every bite of the sandwich she’d made for herself, with every sip of juice she drank. And every time, it seemed worse.

So Jaina went back to bed. She tried to sleep. She tried to bring blackness instead, or even her nightmares. They were better than this. They were familiar, at least. She knew how to fix them, or at least how to shake herself awake. But there was no sleep. No, this nightmare wasn't just going to end with a lingering flash of fear and a cold sweat dripping down her spine.

And that was precisely why it was so bad.

Afternoon was streaking its last rays of sun through her windows as it threatened to turn into evening. Jaina heard Kinndy come in to the apartment. It was only a few minutes later when she knocked on the door to Jaina's bedroom.

“Please tell me you ate?” Kinndy asked softly from the other side of the door.

“I ate and showered. I promise,” Jaina told her, not bothering to untangle herself from her blankets.

“Even when you're sad, you are still way too functional,” Kinndy joked. She laughed awkwardly to herself for a moment before she continued. “Listen, don't be mad at me, but I may have accidentally run my mouth off about all this when Anduin was uh, nearby. He might be in his way over here right now with ice cream. Maybe.”

“He would have been even if you didn't tell him, Kinndy,” Jaina assured her. “Maybe not tonight, but by tomorrow for sure. It's okay.”

“We're just worried about you,” Kinndy said so softly that Jaina almost couldn't hear it.

Well, that got her to sit up at least. “I'll be okay,” Jaina replied as she rolled out of her blankets. Fuck. When had it gotten so cold in this apartment?

She was tired of this, though. She was tired of being the one that needed to be watched, that needed to be worried over. That was another thing she had sworn she outgrew. She had been trying so hard not to be that girl anymore, not to always be a victim.

That's why she had decided it would be worse if she was right. If Sylvanas was cheating on her, or even if she was the side girl. Then she would just be hurt again, just wronged for the thousandth time. And she should know better. Fuck. She should really know better by now.

Jaina had barely managed to put on a bra and brush her hair out before she heard Anduin bursting through the front door. Wait, was he talking to someone else?

He was. A female voice Jaina couldn't recognize through the door. That was unexpected.

Unexpected enough for her to crack open the door to find out why.

“Holy fucking rich kids, Batman!” Valeera was admiring Jaina's living room, which wasn't particularly nice. Well, until you took into account that it was in Manhattan. Then yeah, an airy,
spacious room with large windows and a nice view, complete with designer furniture that her mother had insisted on buying...okay yeah, it was nice. Fine. Really nice.

But why the fuck was Valeera here?

“Are all your friends millionaires, Andy?” Valeera asked as she ran a hand over the quartz countertops in the kitchen.

“Can you chill for a sec, please?” Anduin pleaded as he set down a plastic bag full of snacks. “ Didn't you want to come here to 'do the right thing'? I can tell you that asking about someone's net worth is not a good way to start that conversation.”

“I just didn't know old teach was one of your rich kid club, that's all,” Valeera told him. “She doesn't dress like it or anything.”

“I'm pretty sure that's kind of the point,” Anduin stated as he produced a few pints of Ben and Jerry's from the bag and set them on the counter. He took one and found a spoon to go with it. “I have to give Kinndy her tax. Stay here. Right there. Do not move or touch anything.”

“Afraid I'm going to break something?” Valeera sneered, even as she obeyed stayed leaning against the counter.

“Yes, my friendship. With either you or Jaina, or both. Now shush, please,” Anduin commanded as he walked over to Kinndy's room.

From her crack in the door, Jaina was at a loss for what was going on. It seemed like Anduin didn't want her here. So why was Valeera here? What had he meant about doing the right thing.

Fuck. Valeera had been trying to tell her something about Sylvanas last week. She'd totally forgotten that, in the chaos of getting to the hospital and listening to Sylvanas' story.

Fuck. She should have listened.

Jaina didn't want to put it off any longer. She had to know. She knew this was probably going to be Valeera telling her that she'd been had. That she was an idiot.

But she had to know.

“So you do live here then,” Valeera said with a smirk as Jaina opened her door fully and stepped out into the living room. “I was starting to think Andy was playing a joke on me.”

“What are you doing here?” Jaina asked her plainly.

“Not coming to talk about books,” Valeera told her. “But thanks for letting me skip a class today. I'm here to talk about that, actually. Or at least what Andy told me when I asked why you weren't there today.”

“About what you were trying to tell me before. About Sylvanas?” Jaina continued walking into the kitchen, until she was staring at Valeera over the island.

“Yeah,” Valeera said. Her swagger seemed to quickly flood out of her. Jaina was almost certain there would be a puddle of it on the floor of she looked. “I uh, really wish I got to finish before. Now it seems like I'm a little too late.”

“I shouldn't have been such an idiot, Valeera. That's my own fault, not yours. I appreciate you trying
to tell me, but I should have known she was seeing someone else,” Jaina sighed as she slumped against the island and cradled her head in her hands.


“What?” Jaina lifted her head up only slightly, just enough to look up and Valeera through a cascade of her own blonde hair.

The elf quirked one long eyebrow at her. “I mean I don't know her, like, at all, but I'm pretty sure Sylvanas wouldn't cheat on anyone. No. Her ex cheated on her, actually. With me.”

Jaina was standing straight up now. “Excuse me?”

“Listen, I didn't know I was the side piece for a while. Not that it makes it any better. I know it's fucked up. I'm still trying to figure it all out,” Valeera told her as she rocked back and forth on her heels, pushing herself on and off the counter as she spoke. “But she and Liadrin were on the rocks for years. They didn't like, hurt one another or anything. Physically or whatever. But it wasn't good.”

“Who is Liadrin?” Jaina asked at the unfamiliar name.

“My girlfriend. Sylvanas’ ex. About this tall, reddish hair, fit and way too fucking good looking? She owns half of the shop,” Valeera reported. “That's who Calia saw last night.”

“You're still with her? Wait, half the shop?” Jaina wondered out loud.

“Yeah that first bit is part of what I'm still figuring out. That's my problem, though, not yours. And yeah, she helped Sylvanas open the shop when they came to New York. Actually, most of it was her money. I'm pretty sure at least, but she says they own it 50/50. Sylvanas is supposed to pay her out every month. But she hasn't been paying enough the last few,” Valeera went on.

Of course that's what it was. Of course. Jaina had tried not to pry. She has tried not to notice. But she did. She could see Sylvanas was very careful with her money. Very concerned with how much she made in a day. Very worried about the piles of colored envelopes that littered the counters in the store, it the little space next to the turntable in her apartment.

Of course it was about money.

Valeera cleared her throat and kept on. “They are history, though. Liadrin left her a year or so ago, after Sylvanas found out about me. I'd just found out about her too then. She uh, doesn't know who I am, though. I'd rather keep it that way. At least until I can...figure all of that out. Look she's not a bad person. Liadrin, I mean. She's actually very sweet to me, very patient with all my bullshit. I just think that her and Sylvanas were real bad for each other. You know how sometimes people have a baby to try to save their relationship? Well, I think that's what the Undercity was to them.”

The Undercity. Sylvanas’ refuge of nostalgia and memories. Her kingdom of seventies kitsch. Hell, even the cozy loft apartment above it, where Jaina has already spent so many hours with her just laying on the floor. None of it was all hers. Fuck.

And Jaina had thought she was cheating. Fuck. No. She had been having a horrible time. Liadrin must have gotten angry about the money and gone to complain.

She wasn't ignoring her. No. She'd been upset. Sylvanas wasn't trying to push her away. She needed her.

“What have I done?” Jaina whispered to herself.
“You didn't know,” Valeera answered for her, almost as softly. “I know what that's like. I wanted to
tell you before, because fuck feeling stupid like that. It's not fair, but this is shit you don’t ask about
either. I know. Man, believe me I know. But I'm tired of seeing people get fucked by stuff like this.
And I owe it to Sylvanas. I owe it to her for all the shit I put her through, even if she doesn’t know
my name.”

“Thank you. Just...thank you.” Jaina found herself on the other side of the island, wrapping the elf in
an awkward hug. It was all she could think to do, even as Valeera tried to squirm out of it. “I've
really fucked this up. But now I know I was wrong. I have to...I have to fix this with her. Thank you
for telling me, and for trying to before.”

“You don't even really need TV in this place, do you? The drama is real.”

“Yeah, lately it's felt a little like a soap opera. A good one, though.”

“Oh yeah. For sure.”

Anduin and Kinndy were commenting from in front of her bedroom door. She was standing on an
end table, and they were passing the pint of ice cream back and forth as they watched the
conversation in the kitchen unfold.

When Jaina finally let Valeera go, she fished out a Pringles can from the bag of snacks and threw it
at Anduin.

“Hey! That almost hit me!” Anduin complained as he sidestepped the can. “You should be thanking
me too! I brought Valeera here, even though she wouldn't tell me what she had to say to you so
badly that she followed me here…”

“It wasn't your business,” Valeera retorted as she pulled a small bottle of soda from the bag and
twisted the cap off.

“Valeera, honey, everything is my business. That is just a fact,” Anduin told her as he waved the
half-eaten ice cream at her. “Now, are we going to eat junk food and help Jaina brainstorm a way to
fix this, or what?”

Jaina waved that notion off immediately, “You guys really don’t have to--”

“Aunty, fuck off with that now. You are head over heels for this girl and I’m not leaving this place
until I know you two will be okay,” Anduin told her as he walked over and plopped himself down
on one of the chairs at the kitchen table.

Kinndy followed suit, dramatically jumping down from the end table as she declared, “Yeah! We got
you into this mess and we are gonna keep you in it!”

Jaina found herself smiling all the same. The raw, hollow feeling in her chest was gone now,
replaced with a soft warmth. God. She had really good friends, didn’t she?

She chanced a glance over at Valeera, who had managed to find a family-sized bag of chips and was
already digging in for a handful.

Valeera blinked at her once, but shoveled a chip in her mouth anyway. “Oh don't worry about me,”
she said between bites, “I'm sure this will be highly entertaining.”

Jaina had a thought. A smile crept wearily onto her features. A cautious smile. A tired smile. But a
smile all the same. She turned back to the table and asked, “Kinndy, do you still have that bluetooth
speaker that looks like an old boombox?”

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*Please open your kitchen window.*

Sylvanas almost jumped out of her skin when her phone finally buzzed on the nightstand.

It had been a day. Just...a fucking day. She’d managed to open the store for a few hours. She went through her ledgers and accounts, and came up with the exact answers she knew were there. She had all the proof in the world to show Liadrin that she couldn’t give her anymore and expect to stay afloat.

Not that that would help anything. Not that that would fix it, or make Liadrin happy, or even make her go away. She had a right to be angry. It was her money. She had made it clear from the start that this hadn’t been a gift. It was supposed to be partnership.

Well, it was clear how that had worked out.

But her phone. Shit. Who was it even?

Sylvanas almost dropped it when she read the name of the contact, and again when she read the message. Hurt bubbled up in her, threatening to overtake anything else. Despite trying to drown herself in numbers, she couldn’t forget the way that Jaina had stood over her and accused her. Accused her of cheating. And with Liadrin, of all people. Liadrin, who had broken her fucking heart more times than she could count, even before she was the one to cheat on her.

But Jaina didn’t know that. Sylvanas had to remind herself that she’d really only known her for a month, maybe two? She’d just told her about her family. So could she really blame her for what she didn’t know?

She didn’t. She didn’t at all. She rolled a grumbling Nathanos off of her and got out of bed, and went to the window above her sink. She’d never opened it before. You didn’t open windows in New York. Even three stories up. But she managed to figure it out.

Sylvanas slid the window open to find that it was raining harder than it had sounded on her skylight. And that Jaina was standing on the sidewalk, outside the locked door to the Undercity, and holding up a boombox.

A boombox that was blasting ABBA. Take a Chance on Me. Really? Really Jaina?

It was all so ridiculous and sweet that the hurt immediately vanished. A laugh replaced it. Light and wonderful. Everything that she needed.

“Babe, that’s the wrong decade! Serenading me with a boombox is eighties, not seventies!” Sylvanas yelled down to her as she leaned over to stick as much of her head out of the window as she could.

“I fucking know, okay?” Jaina shouted back up at her. “But the song is seventies! And I got your attention. Give me some credit!”

She looked like a drowned rat out there. It was pouring, and the rain was cold. It was November, after all. Sylvanas could see her shaking, but Jaina still stared up at her and held up the boombox all the same, as if demanding an answer to a question that she hadn’t yet asked.

But she would. She was asking it now, actually. And it was perfect.
“Go stand under the awning, Jaina,” Sylvanas called down to her. “I’m coming to let you in.”

“Oh, thank God,” Jaina said as she ducked for the safety of the doorway.

Sylvanas was wearing a grin and holding a towel when she opened the door. She couldn’t help the grin, and smothered Jaina with the towel as soon as she dragged her inside. “How long were you standing out there?”

“Long enough to realize that you couldn’t hear the music and that I couldn’t throw a rock that high,” Jaina told her, her voice muffled by the towel as she dried off her face.

“Too long,” Sylvanas admonished as she stopped Jaina on the rug, which she was dripping on.

Too long indeed. Too long for her to go feeling like this, mixing pain and regret. Replaying the things that were said, and all that should have been said instead. Too long worrying if she had driven her away. Too long being afraid to find out.

So long that when Jaina almost dropped the towel, Sylvanas caught it, and wrapped it around her shoulders, and then wrapped herself around Jaina.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered into the terrycloth.

“Sylvanas, what are you sorry for even? I’m the one that was just standing outside with a boombox in the rain?” Jaina asked, even as she returned the hug.

“Yelling at you,” Sylvanas mumbled. “I was just--”

“Upset. I know,” Jaina finished for her. “I know that now. And I know how wrong I was. So I’m doing what I promised. I messed up. I know better now. So I’m going to apologize to you, if you’ll let me.”

“I thought I scared you away. I thought I fucked it up,” Sylvanas told her, still not letting her go.

“I was scared, but not because of you,” Jaina admitted. “Look at me, please.” Her voice was so raw and honest. Emotional, sure, but strong. Stubborn.

Fuck. She wanted this still. She was fighting for this. For them.

Sylvanas could count the times that anyone had fought for her on one hand. And honestly, all of them had happened over a decade ago. Usually she was the one fighting. No. Always. She’d been fighting a battle that never seemed to end. She finally lifted her head from Jaina’s shoulder to look her in the eye.

“I fucked up, Sylvanas. I fucked up and I’m so sorry about it. You have no idea. I mean, you look like you might, but still. I promised you I’d try to make things right, if I ever messed up. And well, I’m trying,” Jaina told her. There were still raindrops on the lenses of her glasses, which had fogged up a little with the difference in temperature. “What we have here, I know it’s new and all, but I think it’s worth working on. I hope you think so too.”

Sylvanas answered by ducking her head into Jaina’s neck. “So worth it. Fuck. I’m sorry too. I really am. I should have just told you. It’s my...my ex, she--”

“Liadrin was mad about the money,” Jaina puffed against the top of her head.

“Wait...how did you...?”
Sylvanas backed up enough to see her face again. How did she know? Well, how did she find out? Because she certainly hadn’t known yesterday.

“I’ll explain better one day, I promise, but um, a friend of Anduin’s knows all about it,” Jaina said as she leveled her gaze. “And I’m not mad you didn’t tell me about it. I don’t care. You hardly even know me, Sylvanas, so why would you even want tell me about your money problems? I just want you to know that I understand, and that I know just how fucking wrong I was. And I feel horrible about it.”

“I should have explained myself, instead of raising my voice,” Sylvanas told her. “But...I’m really glad you’re here, even if you can’t throw a rock far enough to hit my windows and your taste in ABBA songs is questionable. You should come up. Get warm and dry. I think I have another Zeppelin shirt you can steal.”

“Are you sure?” Jaina asked, tilting her head to get a better view of Sylvanas around the water that still clung to her glasses. “It’s okay if you need some space. I can get a cab home.”

“I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life,” Sylvanas replied before she brushed a gentle kiss to the tip of Jaina’s nose.

And in the matter of fifteen minutes, Jaina was dry, well, except her hair, which was developing a really cute little wave to it from the moisture. She was wearing Sylvanas’ only other Led Zeppelin shirt, the one with the blimp and bold text, and a pair of worn and faded flannel pajama bottoms. They were patterned with little penguins. Sylvanas was pretty sure that she’d gotten them for Christmas before she even left California.

But it didn’t matter. None of that mattered. The past didn’t need to hang over her. It didn’t need to control her life. Not when she had a beautiful woman wandering around her apartment in her pajamas. A beautiful woman that was carrying her ugly little dog around and asking him what record she should put on for them.

No, not when she had this, right here and right now. Not when Jaina wanted it too. Not when she didn’t care, even now that all of Sylvanas’ skeletons were out of the closet--all her problems laid bare.

Sylvanas watched her from the bed. Watched her so at home here, blending in with the rest of the clutter. Moving in time with the music of this place, even before the record started to play.

Nothing had changed. No, that was wrong. It had changed. There was even more certainty in Jaina’s movements, an extra hitch to her smile as she set the needle to the record. An extra glint to those gorgeous eyes as she turned to beam at Sylvanas as another ABBA song started playing softly behind her. A sigh of relief hidden in as she laughed and Sylvanas laughed with her.

Jaina set Nathanos down on the bed, but seemed to hesitate for a moment. She stared at the comforter she’d slept under twice before now. But on the floor. She ran the tips of her fingers along its geometric-patterned surface.

Fuck. She was waiting to be invited, wasn’t she? She was...so good. So cautious. So caring.

“Come on,” Sylvanas said when she finally got over that. “I’m not making you sleep on the floor tonight.”

She thought she was prepared for the image of Jaina crawling into her bed. She thought she was prepared to watch her slide under the covers. She thought she could handle her rolling over to her to
give her a quick kiss and a soft smile.

But she could not. She could fucking not.

Just like she couldn’t handle Jaina settling against her and asking, “We’re okay, right?”

They were. They were so okay. Jaina had kept her promise. And she had been honest. She fucking cared. She actually fucking cared about her.

“We’re okay,” Sylvanas responded, daring to put an arm around her to draw her closer.

Jaina obliged, scooting in until her head rested on Sylvanas’ shoulder.

“Good, because this is really nice. Really fucking nice,” Jaina whispered.

“Yes, it is,” Sylvanas agreed.

As much as she loved the seventies, ABBA was just not her favorite. But she definitely listened to that whole album that night. She listened to every comy disco song as she ran her hands through Jaina’s damp hair, as she felt their bodies mold together comfortably, as Jaina played with the sleeves of her shirt. They didn’t talk. Not anymore. Not now. Not yet.

There would be time for that. All the time in the world. Sylvanas knew that. She was sure of it now.

She only got up when the record hit the crackling end of its last track. When Nathanos had curled up into a snoring pile on the edge of the bed, and Jaina was half-asleep herself, dozing with her curling hair splayed out on the pillow. Sylvanas turned off the the record player, then the lights, and found her way back into bed by memory and moonlight.

“Hey,” Jaina mumbled sleepily as Sylvanas slid in next to her again.

“Yeah?”

Jaina reached across her to pull Sylvanas closer. Her hand wrapped in the hem of her shirt as she asked, “Promise me something, okay?”

Sylvanas kissed her forehead. Well, maybe her forehead. Maybe her cheek. She couldn’t see that well, even with the help of her glowing eyes. “What’s that?”

Jaina kissed her demands into Sylvanas’ shoulder. “Promise me that you’ll let me help, okay? Not all the time. But, sometimes. If you need me, just let me help. You’re not alone Sylvanas. You don’t have to be.”

“I...okay…”

It was all she could do to get just those words out. Anymore, and she’d definitely cry. She didn’t want to cry. She didn’t want to distract from this moment. She just wanted it to be. She wanted to let it ring out, loud and proud, like the last notes of an anthem.

Jaina yawned one last word before falling asleep against her, “Good.”
Jaina wiped her brow after she slid the last box into the stack she’d been working on for the better part of an hour. She could still hear Sylvanas humming quietly in the rows of odds and ends she’d been wiping down behind her. Or, at least, she could still hear her until-

“Wanna take a break?”

Jaina leaned back against Sylvanas as she felt the other woman’s arms wrap around her. “What kind of break?” Jaina asked in response as she reached behind herself to give Sylvanas’s ear a feather-light caress. Her smile only widened into a grin when she felt it shift slightly against her touch - a reaction that came with a slight hitch in Sylvanas’s breath. That was new.

“Just...you know. The record needs to be turned and I thought you might wanna come upstairs with me.” Sylvanas responded quietly as she rested her chin against Jaina’s shoulder.

Having Jaina in here on a Sunday was unexpectedly...wonderful. In fact, everything had been wonderful. She’d prepared herself for, well...anything but this. Something about them felt stronger, now. Surer. The storm had come and instead of leaving destruction in its wake - had shown them both how hard they really would be to break.
Jaina turned in her arms, staying as close as she could, and stroked along her sides over her shirt for a moment before her head came to rest against the smaller woman’s shoulder. Jaina had grown used to how small she really felt beneath her hands under the flannel and the band tees. More than used to it, in fact. She craved this feeling, now. She craved the feeling of Sylvanas seeking her out like she just had.

“Alright. Let’s go turn the record.” Jaina finally murmured as she pulled back only to get caught in the way Sylvanas was looking at her. They stayed like that until, finally, Jaina turned away and took Sylvanas’s hand, leading her up to the record room and only releasing her hand to go flip the album Sylvanas had put on when they’d started cleaning. “Did...did that bother you?” She asked as she slowly turned around to find Sylvanas sitting on the couch nearby. “Your ear, I mean. It moved when I touched it. I didn’t mean to...I don’t know. I hope it didn’t hurt you or anything.”

Sylvanas shook her head. “It doesn’t hurt, babe. I promise.” She paused as relief washed over Jaina visibly. “When it’s soft like that it feels...it feels good.”

“Oh.” Jaina felt the blush rising in her cheeks even as Sylvanas watched it.

“Do you want to come here?” Sylvanas continued.

Jaina answered by walking over to the couch and standing against the edge of it, touching Sylvanas’s fingertips with her own before their fingers were twined and Sylvanas pulled. Gently. So, so gently. Jaina carefully moved to straddle Sylvanas’s lap, lowering herself down as Sylvanas brought her hands to rest along her thighs. “Would you tell me if anything I did did bother you?” Jaina asked as Sylvanas lifted her gaze to meet hers and nodded.

“You’d do the same for me, right? If something was too much for you?” Sylvanas leaned her head back against the couch as Jaina stroked her hair from her eyes and tucked it behind her ears.

“Yeah. I would.”

There was something about this that had Jaina’s heart racing. Whether it was the way Sylvanas was looking at her - or the way those hands felt on her thighs, she couldn’t guess. It just felt different. It felt like...more. And she wanted more.

Sylvanas seemed to recognize this and responded by reaching up and tracing her fingertips along the side of Jaina’s neck, slowly slipping them to her nape to guide her down until their lips met. Oh, this was different, too. Sylvanas had always been the softest kisser. The most careful. This time, though, when she felt the tip of her tongue and parted her lips for her - there was no pulling back. The older woman’s tongue found her own and brushed against it slowly in a way that caused Jaina to make a quiet noise against her mouth - a noise that made Sylvanas falter. She might have pulled away, even, if Jaina hadn’t responded to her hesitation by reaching around to splay her hand along the back of her head.

It was considerably different, now. Sylvanas recognized the quickening of Jaina’s breaths as they came in sharp puffs from her nostrils. She slid her hands around to the small of Jaina’s back as the other woman settled down against her lap more fully. Jaina, meanwhile, had no idea where to put her hands. The one on the back of Sylvanas’s head had moved to rest against her shoulder and the other rested awkwardly against her own leg. Until Sylvanas gave her thighs a sudden, firm knead and then reached around to trace the lines of the back pockets of her jeans before pulling her even closer. Then, Jaina moved that hand between them as Sylvanas broke their kiss breathlessly and tilted her head down - just ghosting her lips against the side of Jaina’s neck and causing the redness in her cheeks to increase tenfold. Her fingertips trembled slightly as they lifted the hem of Sylvanas’s shirt - as they found the silky skin of her stomach and brushed along it until the muscles flexed and jumped
beneath her touch.

She’d been about to ask if Sylvanas was okay when she felt an unfamiliar sensation against her neck. A parting of lips followed by a wet, gentle sucking that made her eyelids flutter and a choked sound make its way past her throat. Bravely, she removed her hand from Sylvanas’s tense abdomen and slipped it lower - over the front of her jeans to the seam that ran along her inner thigh. Higher and higher until the side of her hand met an unfamiliar warmth through the denim - causing Sylvanas’s legs to spread slightly beneath her.

Jaina pulled her hand back like she’d been burned as Sylvanas’s hips jerked slightly. “I’m sorry.” Jaina whispered urgently - embarrassment and worry flooding her face as the wet spot on her neck began cooling against the air in a way that made her shiver now that Sylvanas’s lips were gone from it. “Was that too much?”

Sylvanas didn’t know. She just...didn’t know. “Maybe?” She responded breathlessly, her brow furrowed and her ears still canted higher than Jaina had ever seen them. “But I didn’t want you to stop.”

There was...something. Something in those words that made Jaina’s heart leap into her throat as she moved her hand from Sylvanas’s shoulder to her chest. She could feel the older woman’s heart pounding against it as she nodded. “Maybe...maybe we should stop, though. If we’re still going out tonight.”

She cut herself off, then and leaned into Sylvanas - melting into the hug she found herself wrapped in. “Will you tell me?” Jaina asked as Sylvanas pressed her face into the crook of her neck and let out a breath that seemed to ease some of the tension Jaina could feel in her. “When it isn’t too much anymore?” It occured to Jaina, then, that she really had no idea what she was doing. That she’d just really enjoyed the way Sylvanas responded to her touching her.

“We’ll figure it out.” Sylvanas breathed against her neck as she trailed her fingertips up the line of Jaina’s spine over her shirt before helping them both stand up.

It wasn’t that Sylvanas didn’t want her. God, she did. She couldn’t really remember ever having felt like this. Her knees were weak, her heart wouldn’t catch up with her head, and the way Jaina looked right now as she stared down at their feet with her slightly swollen lips parted was...yeah. That was too much, too. In all the right ways.

Jaina looked at her clothing, then, and shook her head before she looked Sylvanas over, too. “We’re both a mess. We should probably shower.” She hadn’t really thought about how that would sound coming out of her mouth. Nor had she thought about how much she would want what could be inferred from it. “I...I didn’t mean...If,”

“We’ll take turns.” Sylvanas murmured as she reached up to stroke Jaina’s shoulders before her hands moved higher to cup the sides of her face. She pressed a kiss to her forehead and then the corner of her lips. “S’that okay?” Anything to keep her comfortable. The last thing in the world she wanted to do was push Jaina into something she didn’t want. If only she knew.

Jaina nodded a bit distractedly, glancing down as she felt Sylvanas taking her hand into her own to give it a gentle squeeze before she headed for the stairs. “I’ll go grab Nathanos from downstairs.”

Sylvanas shot her a smile on her way to the bathroom and Jaina returned it before making her way to the little dog who could likely care less about where they’d been all this time.

“Hungry?” Jaina asked him as she slid the door to Sylvanas’s loft shut behind herself and headed for
the kitchen. She placed him on the floor and fed him before plopping down next to him to pat him while he ate. He really did seem to like that. She just sat there with him for a long time - listening to the sound of the shower running through the thin wall nearby.

“Can I tell you a secret?” She gave the tuft of hair on top of his aging head the gentlest of tugs when she’d finally had enough of the quiet. He didn’t even look up from his meal. “Your mom is the best kisser. I know - gross, right? Nobody wants to hear someone talk about their mom that way. It’s true, though. She really is.”

“What are you two talking about?” Sylvanas asked with a grin as she walked out of the bathroom.

“I was just telling Nathanos that his mom is really good at kissing, that’s all.” Jaina responded as she looked up with a grin of her own in response. A grin that fell immediately as she was met with the sight of Sylvanas with just a towel wrapped around herself.

Sylvanas was stuck somewhere between feeling pretty good about that compliment and feeling amused at the way Jaina was staring at her. “My bad. I forgot to bring a change of clothes into the bathroom with me. Anyway, it’s your turn.”

Sylvanas walked past where Jaina was still kneeling, then, towards the little closet most of her clothing dwelled in. “You’re a really good kisser, too, by the way.” She announced from across the room as Jaina still stared after her, trying to make out the lines of ink that began between her shoulderblades and seemed to trail down along her spine, though the towel obscured most of the newly discovered tattoo.

“..Thanks. I...yeah. Thanks. What’s that one?”

Sylvanas frowned as she looked over her shoulder at Jaina - still holding the pair of jeans she’d pulled from their hanger. “What one?” She asked as her brows furrowed in confusion.

“The tattoo on your back. Between your shoulder blades.” Jaina stood after giving Nathanos one last pat.

“Oh, shit. I’m sorry. I forget about it sometimes.” Sylvanas smiled sheepishly and shrugged. “It’s an arrow. The shaft runs along my spine. I got it before I left home.”

“Oh.” Jaina responded quietly, lifting her brows at the thought of how painful that must have been...and how gorgeous the rest of it must be. “Every time I see a new one it’s just as lovely as the last.”

“There’s plenty more for you to see. Don’t worry. All the mystery hasn’t been ruined just yet.”

As though that statement weren’t bad enough, Sylvanas followed it with a toothy grin. One that caused Jaina to narrow her eyes slightly. “You’re gonna fuck around and I’m going to jump you one of these days. You and those precious little fangs.”

Sylvanas looked appalled. “Precious?” She demanded - feigning indignance expertly, though she was trying not to laugh.

“Yeah. Precious. I’m going to take a shower.”

Sylvanas tilted her head as Jaina winked and disappeared into the bathroom. Only then, did she finally laugh. Oh, Jaina was perfect. So unbelievably perfect.

Sylvanas was dressed before Jaina was out of the shower. Just a simple pair of skinny jeans and a
jersey knit shirt that hung from one of her shoulders - black like the loosely laced boots she was wearing. She checked herself quickly in the mirror and then moved to the outfit Jaina kept stowed here now.

“Jaina?” She called out as she stood outside the door of the bathroom. “You decent?”

“Yeah, babe! Still showering, sorry. I was real dusty.”

Sylvanas cracked the door and reached in to leave the clothing on the sink counter. She couldn’t help the moment of hesitation as she heard Jaina go still under the spray of water. What she could do, though, was quickly step back out of the little room and shut the door behind herself.

God, this was becoming a problem.

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“It’s gonna be fine. You know that, right?” Jaina asked quietly as she looped her arm through Sylvanas’s and stroked along the denim of the jacket she was wearing.

Sylvanas looked over at her and gave her her best attempt at a smile. “I know. I’m sorry I’m so...it’s just been a while, that’s all. Since I’ve gone out. And they’re your friends, y’know? They’re so important to you.”

“They sure are. But so are you.” Jaina smiled at the way Sylvanas’s ears lifted from where they’d been hanging rather sadly for the duration of their walk from the subway. “I’m gonna figure all that out some day.” It sounded like a warning, but there was an almost teasing smirk on Jaina’s face - one that she found mirrored back at her.

“It’s a lot to figure out. Maybe I’d rather you not know certain things, what then?”

Jaina simply shrugged and tugged Sylvanas a little closer - though she made sure the older woman still had room to walk comfortably. “I guess that’s just too bad.”

All too soon, for Sylvanas, anyway, they were walking through the door of the karaoke bar Jaina had been telling her about. Apparently, it was Anduin’s favorite place.

“Jaina! Hot Elf Lady!”

Ah, speak of the devil.

Jaina released her arm and gave it a gentle squeeze with her hand before she walked ahead of her to give her friends the hugs they appeared to have been expecting. Sylvanas, meanwhile, hung back near the edge of the table they’d taken up - gazing around the room almost carefully.

“Well, introduce us!” Anduin said with a grin.

“Andy, you already know her.” Jaina admonished with a look akin to a glare.

“I mean, yeah. I know her. Kinda. Like...I know Mysterious Pretty Lady with no social media presence that Jaina Is Crushing On. I don’t know Sylvanas, though. Like...girlfriend Sylvanas, you know?”

As much as her nerves were eating away at her - Sylvanas couldn’t help but smile at that. At both how genuine Anduin seemed and the title of “girlfriend Sylvanas”. As though he were drawn to the
fact that he got a positive response out of her, Anduin all but pushed past Jaina and held his arms open. “Hug. I feel almost like I’ve been dating you longer than Jaina has.”

Sylvanas usually wasn’t the type to hug people she wasn’t close to...but right then, she found she really didn’t mind. She was relieved, actually. Relieved that Jaina’s friend seemed so open to her presence here with them. It made her feel a little less like she was intruding upon something and more like she was wanted.

Once Anduin pulled back, Kinndy beamed at her once she came into view - standing in her chosen chair with a drink in her hand. Sylvanas noticed there were already a couple empty glasses on the table and she couldn’t help but remember the incredibly drunk piñata from the night of the Halloween party. “Hi, Kinndy. It’s so strange to see you without a tail.”

Sylvanas’s eyes widened as Anduin nothing short of cackled in response to what she’d thought had been a bad attempt at a joke - all while Jaina watched her with a heavy, swelling feeling in her heart. One she’d known the word for for a while, now.

“Oh, yeah. I left the tail at home, today. Got tired of people stepping on it, you know? People have a hard enough time not stepping on me as it is.” Kinndy climbed down off the chair and then plopped down in it as they all took her cue and found seats of their own. They didn’t have much of a chance to talk before one of the waitresses walked up to their table to clear Kinndy’s glasses and place three additional drink orders down in front of Anduin, Jaina and Sylvanas.

“Got you guys some Long Islands.” Anduin explained cheerfully. “Nothing will loosen you up enough to sing in front of a shit ton of strangers like a good, strong Long Island.”

Any and all ease Sylvanas had felt come over her over the past few minutes evaporated as she looked at the drink in front of her. Fuck. God fucking damnit. She hadn’t even thought about this. About how most people actually drank when they went to bars and how she was weird enough as it was without adding this on top of everything. She’d been about to reach for it. Just to hold it - to look normal until she could figure out what else to do. Die of thirst? No. Dramatic. Then, suddenly, she felt warmth against her thigh and looked down to see Jaina’s hand - then the glass she’d been reaching for was gone. Placed, instead, in front of Anduin.

“Can we have a glass of water, please?” Jaina asked the waitress, who responded with a smile and a quick nod.

“Oh, my bad, Girlfriend Sylvanas. I have a bad habit of assuming everyone is as much of a lush as I am.” Anduin winked at her as he lifted his glass and took a sip from the colorful straw protruding from it and then glanced towards the stage as the DJ announced the waitlist for singers would be opening in ten minutes.

So, it wasn’t a big deal? This wasn’t going to ruin everyone’s night?

As though in answer to her unspoken question, Jaina leaned over and kissed her cheek - more so she could speak quietly near her ear than anything else. “Relax, babe. They don’t care. Promise.”

Sylvanas nodded faintly and found Jaina’s hand on her thigh with her own, twining her fingers together and taking a blessed sip of the water that was brought to her shortly thereafter.

Their conversations were lighthearted and fun to listen to. Easy to feel like she didn’t need to get involved in. By the time Anduin began talking about song choices, she was about as relaxed as she could be in this situation - though Jaina had taken to touching her almost constantly. Her knee, her hand, even a brush of the back of her hand along her side now and then. Sylvanas was surprised at
how comforting she found it. How much she liked Jaina reminding her she was there. That she was close.

“Dancing Queen.” Anduin finally said - a little loudly. Like it was some sort of revelation.

Kinndy rolled her eyes as Jaina shook her head and chuckled. “Really? First song choice is the song written specifically about you?” She quipped as she toyed with her straw in her teeth.

“Bitch!” Anduin responded with a hand on his chest. “Frankly, I’m offended that you’re surprised. I thought you were my best friend.”

Kinndy was in absolute hysterics, and the display had even drawn a quiet - less controlled laughter out of Sylvanas. A laugh Jaina loved. Yeah...she loved that laugh.

“Anyway, of course you and Kinndy will be singing with me. Sylvanas?”

All the color drained from her face and she shook her head quickly. “No, no. ABBA...I...No, but I’d absolutely love to watch the three of you kill it. For sure.”

“Babe...don’t make me do this.” Jaina complained quietly as she turned to look at the other woman, who was wearing a rather impish grin, suddenly.

“I’ll go next if you sing with them.”

Jaina positively beamed at that offer - and that smile made everything worth it. Sylvanas scrunched her nose at her as she got up and walked with Anduin and Kinndy towards the karaoke screens across the room.

Soon enough, Sylvanas was leaned back in her chair listening to the familiar first bars of perhaps the most overplayed ABBA song, in her opinion, in the history of the universe. Yet, as the three of them laughed and nudged each other and helped Kinndy up onto a stool between them she couldn’t help but keep right on smiling.

Anduin really was a good singer. Jaina, though, surprised her. She could barely hear her over Anduin’s rather theatrical projection and Kinndy’s...caterwauling, but...she had a beautiful voice. Soft and low and gentle in a way that had the one ear that wasn’t pressed back to avoid the occasional off-pitch, off-time notes from Kinndy lifting to better hear Jaina.

It didn’t take long for Anduin to start dancing around the stage. He really knew how to get a room’s attention. He was absolutely ridiculous and wonderful and Sylvanas was so incredibly glad, suddenly, that Jaina had him.

By the time they were all heading back for the table, Sylvanas had all but forgotten she’d promised Jaina she would sing. She was too stuck on the way Jaina was giggling and grinning at whatever Anduin and Kinndy were saying to her. Too busy returning the kiss Jaina pressed to her lips before she sat down and reclaimed her hand.

“So what song did you pick?”

Oh. Shit.

“Uh...I...I hadn’t really thought about it. I was distracted.” Sylvanas responded with a wince as Jaina leaned her shoulder against her own.

“You don’t have to, baby. Not if you aren’t comfortable.” Jaina’s reply was quiet but Sylvanas could
tell she was purposely keeping any disappointment from her voice.

“No, no, just. I’ll think of something on my way up, don’t worry.” Another kiss. A quick one. An easy one - the kind they’d only recently begun to share that they both still relished.

Her mind raced as the DJ glanced up at her upon her approach. Shit, even her palms were sweaty. What was she, in High School? No. She’d been a lot braver in High School.

“Hey, there. Haven’t seen you around before. Got a song and a name?”

Sylvanas glanced towards the blank monitors and then back toward the man waiting for her response. “Uh, yeah. Sylvanas. I’m gonna do Save Me by Queen.”

Both his eyebrows shot up as he began typing her name in and then searched the song. “You, uh...you sure about that one?” He asked as he handed over the mic and Sylvanas took it from him, tapping it gently against her palm to make sure it was on.

“Yeah. Turn me up.”

“Shit...alright, then.” He responded with a chuckle, toying with the slides on his station as she made her way to the would-be stage and moved the stool to the side.

Sylvanas didn’t look at the monitors after they counted her in. She just turned away, lifted the mic and...sang. She didn’t have to work to get anyone’s attention. In fact, even a bit of the bar’s rowdiness died down as her clear, clean voice crooned through the speakers during the gentle first bars.

“Fuck.” Anduin whispered as his eyes widened and his mouth fell open. Kinndy was standing in her seat - oddly still as she rested her hands on the back of the chair and looked over the heads of everyone in the bar to watch Sylvanas.

“Is...is she riffing?” Anduin asked to no one in particular. “To Queen?”

Jaina shifted in her seat as her brow furrowed when the power grew in Sylvanas’s voice along with the emotion. “Yeah...I...”

When the first ‘Save Me’ came, well...nothing really could've prepared her for it. She’d heard Sylvanas sing along to music. She’d heard that plenty. But this, god. This? She felt a flush of emotion rising along her neck as a slight growl found its way into Sylvanas’s voice. Right where it was appropriate. She felt it spread to her cheeks as it faded back into gentle pleading on the next verse.

‘Rollercoaster’ didn’t even begin to describe it. Sylvanas didn’t really...perform the song. She didn’t have to. It was all in her expression and her tone and...god, she meant those words. She meant them. Even if no one else in the bar could tell, Jaina could.

Sylvanas lowered the mic as the last piano chords played her out. She quickly made her way over to the DJ to return the mic to him amidst raucous applause - no little of it coming from Anduin.

She walked past him with a quick, almost shy smile and settled into the haven of her seat as Jaina turned to look at her, still in a fair amount of shock. Sylvanas’s ears sank slightly as she returned the look. “What?”

“I didn’t know you could sing like that. It was...you were...”

“You’re doing a duet with me.” Anduin announced, pulling them both out of the moment rather
abruptly, much to Jaina’s dismay.

Sylvanas laughed softly as Anduin grabbed her hand and tugged her back out of her chair. “Grease. You know Grease, right?” Anduin looked slightly worried as he looked back at her, faltering halfway to the DJ booth.

“I’m not a savage, Anduin. Of course I know Grease.” Sylvanas didn’t really have time to work her way out of the situation. She didn’t really have time to worry. Anduin filled up all that space with his presence and his excitement, alone.

“Perfect.” He flashed her a grin and pulled her the rest of the way to the DJ, who didn’t seem to mind their approach in the least. In fact, he was smiling.

“What’ll it be?”

“You’re The One That I want. Grease soundtrack, please. Thanks.” He handed Sylvanas a mic without waiting for the DJ’s response and turned to face her. “I’m Sandy, by the way. I’m always Sandy.”

“Uh...guess I’m Danny, then.”

“You sure are, stud.” Anduin responded almost giddily as Sylvanas couldn’t help but roll her eyes and laugh.

As it turned out, neither of them needed the monitors for this one, either. And Anduin made it very clear as he snatched a straw from someone’s drink at a nearby table and brought it to his lips with a hand on his hip that he was absolutely going to act this out. Alright. He wanted dialogue. Fine.

But she was laughing as she lifted the mic and Anduin lifted a brow at the same time.

“Sandy?!”

“Tell me about it. Stud.” God. The teeth lick and everything?

Really? She mouthed at him as her eyes narrowed and her amused smile widened into a grin.

Anduin just winked. All she could do was start the song. All she could do was keep up, really - as Anduin walked up to her during the first verse and tossed his jacket to the floor.

Maybe a couple times when she was supposed to dance backwards, she walked, instead - away from him as he waggled his shoulders at her.

Their harmonies were perfect, though. And the bar was full of knee-clapping and laughter before they were even halfway through what Anduin had turned into a full musical number - strutting across the stage and occasionally brushing the underside of her jaw as he turned away and...made eyes at her before dancing in the opposite direction.

Kinndy was beside herself with laughter.

Jaina was beside herself with what could only be described as relief. Maybe joy. Just seeing Sylvanas loosen up like this. Just seeing her have fun was one of the best feelings she’d ever experienced. Especially when Anduin began prancing over to various tables to get the audience involved in the “Oo-oo-oo’s”.

Both Sylvanas and Anduin were still grinning ear to ear when the song was done and they were
Sylvanas barely plopped back down before Jaina tugged her close and kissed her. Hard. Before pulling back and looking into her eyes. The feeling was there even if the words weren’t. “You’re really wonderful, you know that?” Jaina asked, instead, as Sylvanas shook her head.

“So are you. So are your friends. Thank you for inviting me.”

Sylvanas was sung out for the night, though. Kinndy and Anduin did a number, but Sylvanas didn’t pay much attention. Neither did Jaina, really. They were too wrapped up in one another - talking softly about Grease and guessing where Nathanos might currently be curled up - most likely snoring. All the while, their fingers were twined and their legs touched beneath the table.

“Are you ready to go?” Jaina asked quietly. Suddenly.

“Uh..yeah. Yeah, sure. You want me to walk you home?” Sylvanas asked as worry flashed across her features.

“I mean...I meant could we go to your place. Sorry. We don’t have to. I shouldn’t just assume-”

Sylvanas watched the confidence melt away like so much ice in the summer sun and she squeezed Jaina’s hand. “We can go to my place. Of course, we can.”

Jaina didn’t know if that answer was better...or worse, considering the way it set her nerves ablaze along with every inch of her skin.

Sylvanas hadn’t been expecting the little thrill she’d felt when Anduin snatched her phone from her as they said their goodbyes and typed his number in. “If you think we aren’t doing this again, I regret to inform you that you’re terribly mistaken.” He told her as he handed her phone back and tugged her into a hug.

Jaina clung tightly to Sylvanas’s hand in the seat on the subway car they’d tucked themselves into and stayed as close as she could during the ride. The thought of not touching her was suddenly unbearable, and Sylvanas had found herself in a similar state.

“What’s on your mind?” Sylvanas asked almost in a whisper as Jaina stared out the window they were seated next to at nothing in particular.

Jaina shook her head quickly. “Nothing.” God, that couldn’t have been further from the truth. “A lot, actually. If I’m being honest. Sorry.”

Sylvanas frowned and reached up with the hand Jaina wasn’t currently gripping to stroke some of Jaina’s hair from her face, letting the backs of her knuckles brush against her still flushed cheek. “Talk to me.”

“I just really like you, Sylvanas. A lot. God, so much. I don’t wanna be...I don’t wanna disappoint you.”

Sylvanas knew it had taken a lot for Jaina to get that out. God, she knew. “You won’t, Jaina. Not ever. No matter what it is that you’re talking about. But nothing needs to happen tonight. Nothing needs to happen ever. You’re enough. You’re so much enough. This.” She lifted Jaina’s hand and kissed it. “Kissing you, laying with you...I couldn’t ask for anything more. Especially if you aren’t ready.”

Jaina looked over at her almost quizzically for a moment but she found nothing but genuine openness. Like always. She felt the weight lift from her and she leaned closer until her head was
Sylvanas had meant what she’d said. She absolutely had. But hearing that? Knowing that Jaina did feel that way? Brought a flush to her own cheeks as she turned her head to kiss Jaina’s hair. “Yeah. Is it okay that I want you, too? But that I want you to be sure?”

“God, yes. Yes, it’s okay, Sylvanas.”

Jaina was fairly certain she’d never seen a sweeter, softer smile than the one that earned her. They discovered, when they finally made their way up to Sylvanas’s loft to find Nathanos sleeping on the rug near the record player - that the night’s activities had well and truly exhausted them. Sleepily, they each got their night clothes on with their backs to each other before they found their way towards the bed. It was a little different this time. Jaina crawled in right after her and propped herself up on an elbow - just appreciating the faint glow of the older woman’s eyes as they peered up at her in the darkness.

“You did so good tonight, you know.” Jaina murmured as Sylvanas reached up and traced the line of Jaina’s collarbone just past where it disappeared under the worn collar of the shirt she’d chosen from her closet to sleep in, drawing a faint shudder from her.

“I tried.”

Jaina nodded and rested a hand against Sylvanas’s stomach, glancing down as she trailed it higher and traced the feeling of her ribs beneath her shirt, stopping just shy of her chest as she watched the way her touch caused the other woman to hold her breath for a moment.

“You’re tired.” Sylvanas whispered, moving her hand to cradle the side of Jaina’s neck, allowing her thumb to graze the front of her throat.

“Fuck.” Jaina murmured under her breath in a way that caused Sylvanas to stop, to move her hand, instead, to rest on Jaina’s shoulder. “Yeah. I am.”

Still, though, Jaina leaned down for a kiss. It lingered, this time. It lingered in a way that made Sylvanas want to guide her onto her back. In a way that made Jaina press closer until her hips were against Sylvanas’s side. “Thank you.” Jaina whispered before kissing her again. “Thank you for trying for me.”

Sylvanas nodded. She buried the ache in her body even deeper than it already was and Jaina rested her forehead against hers. Neither of them acknowledged how heavy their breathing was or how they could both hear their own pulse in their ears in the quiet, dark comfort of the room. “Good night.” Sylvanas murmured, watching Jaina slowly pull away so that they were no longer touching.

She turned onto her side, then. Away from Jaina - her eyes focused on the pattern of her patchwork quilt as she tried to think about anything that wasn’t the way Jaina’s hips had pressed against her - however brief of a moment it had been.

Her ear shifted slightly, though, when she heard and felt movement behind her, followed by an altogether different kind of warmth than the one that had begun on the subway as Jaina moved to press along her back. Sylvanas stayed absolutely still as Jaina wrapped an arm around her middle and settled in behind her in a way that allowed her just a little space. Enough space that she shifted one of her legs backwards so that her calf was between Jaina’s.

“How about that I’m okay, too?” Jaina asked - her voice sleepy yet careful.
“This is so okay.” Sylvanas responded, her brows furrowed and her eyes burning suddenly as she rested her arm over Jaina’s and tangled their fingers together against her own stomach.

Jaina kissed the nape of her neck, then. Just... the softest, simplest kiss. Yet it made Sylvanas’s eyes fall shut as she turned her face towards her pillow. Oh, god. This was so much more than okay. This was safe and warm and good and... everything she hadn’t had in as long as she could remember.

And it was hers.
Jaina woke to the sun just beginning to shine in from the sun room and over her eyes. No alarms. No sounds, save for Nathanos snoring by her feet and Sylvanas' steady, even breathing beside her. Just light and warmth and good company.

She laid still for a while, just slowly waking up and listening. It was so peaceful here. She almost wanted to drift back to sleep, but she knew that would only ruin the moment. She knew it would only lead to alarms blaring, her scrambling to shut off her phone, and then a hurried exchange of her getting decent enough to walk home, and Sylvanas saying goodbye.

But she didn't want that. Not yet. It was still very early. Too early, but it meant she had time. She could enjoy this.

Which then of course lead to her opening her eyes, then running her hand through the platinum hair in front of her, which she already knew was soft, but she still wasn't over the feel of it in her fingers. Which then lead to her revealing a bare shoulder as she pushed that hair aside, one that had wiggled free from Sylvanas' too large t-shirt in the night. A shoulder she had to kiss. A kiss that woke an elf, who turned over to her with a sleepy smile.
Fuck, that smile.

As if that weren't enough, it was followed by a gravely, sleep-laden, "Hey you."

"Hey," Jaina answered, but barely had time to get the word out before crashing into a kiss.

A kiss that didn't care about morning breath or the spot of sun that was now assaulting her eyes. A kiss that proved just how little difference a night's sleep had made in what they had awoken yesterday. But she wanted it. She wanted this. She wanted to wake up here every day. She wanted to follow the fire that woke from where their lips touched, follow it down to where her hands moved up Sylvanas' sides, and their knees brushed under the covers.

Jaina had never wanted someone like this. It was never the first thought in her mind on a quiet morning. Yet it was all she could think about. She just wanted to touch Sylvanas, in any way she could. She just wanted to feel the heat of her breath against her neck. She just wanted to hear the subtle sounds she made as Jaina's hands grew bolder and the kiss got deeper.

It was probably too much. It certainly wasn't wise. This was not something that she had ever seen herself doing, just rushing headlong into lust. But here she was, sliding one leg over Sylvanas, straddling her even as she captured her mouth's attention still. Then leaning back, sitting up, resting her full weight on the other woman. Letting loose a stray sigh as she could feel the warmth of her strong thighs through the fabric of her shorts. Jaina felt herself grinning down at her girlfriend.

Her girlfriend, who looked up at her with half-lidded eyes and wet lips. Her girlfriend, who was glorious in the morning sun. Her girlfriend, who she didn't want to stop touching.

But only if that was what she wanted too. Jaina slid impatient hands back to the hem of Sylvanas' shirt. She left them there, warm and waiting. "Can I--" she started to ask.

"Jaina," Sylvanas almost whispered. "If you keep looking at me like that, then you can do whatever you want."

"It's not too much?" Jaina asked again, even as she dared to slide her fingertips along the taut skin of Sylvanas' stomach.

"No. God no," Sylvanas told her.

Jaina's hands stopped, but only because she leaned down to kiss her again. To swallow the sounds that came from Sylvanas as her hips rolled into her. To brush her lips gently over her jawline when her hands did start to move up again, inch by inch.

Jaina had no idea what she was doing, sure, but she knew what she liked. She had hoped Sylvanas had similar tastes, and clearly, well, she must have.

Fuck, this was fun. Hot, and really fun. And really, really hot. Fuck.

Jaina leaned back again to sit up, just as she could feel the tips of her fingers brushing the curved underside of Sylvanas' breasts. Just barely. Just enough to know to stop again.

She wanted to see her.

And from the way that Sylvanas was looking up at her, Jaina was pretty sure that she wouldn't mind that at all.

And of course, that was when her phone alarm finally decided to go crazy. The electronic tones were
turned up way too loud. Jaina was normally a heavy sleeper, so she needed it. But that annoying sound took them from that intense moment into an immediate fit of laughter. Jaina had to regrettably move her hands to make sure she didn’t fall over. Even then, she did, and Sylvanas caught her as they laughed together. Nathanos even joined in after a moment or two, as he began barking at her alarm.

Jaina rolled over in Sylvanas’ arms, still laughing as she said, “Let me just...get that.”

Sylvanas was still laughing as she followed her across the bed, and kissed at her shoulder while Jaina dismissed the alarm.

And while she read the handful of texts that had come in late last night, after they’d fallen asleep.

I assume you will be coming for Thanksgiving on Thursday?

Well, since you’re not answering, it’s the same as usual. 3pm. Turkey, wine, your family. Tandred wants to see you, of course.

You may bring someone, if you have someone to bring. You never tell me anything.

But if it’s more than two of your group of strays, please give me some warning, for the cook’s sake.

Laughter instantly left her, slowly descending into silent dread as she read through all of the messages. Fuck. Fucking...shit. She hadn’t even thought about the date, or her mother, in so long. She didn’t want to. She didn’t want to be anywhere but here, or think of anything that wasn’t Sylvanas. She just…

She just wanted to forget about that. And she had been forgetting. She had been moving on. She’d been living her own life, doing what she wanted to do.

She didn’t need this. She didn’t want it either.

But not going would cause more of a problem than going and sucking it up would…

Fuck.

“Babe?” Sylvanas asked as she propped herself up a little more and wrapped an arm around Jaina. “What’s up? You just got really tense. Are you late for something?”

“No,” Jaina answered. “I…”

She didn’t want to think about it. She didn’t want it to be happening. She just...she just wanted to stay here. She wanted to erase those texts from her mind.

And God, she didn’t want to talk about it. She didn’t want to explain. She didn’t want to have to tell the same damn story for the thousandth time, or cover it up with smiles and vague words.

But, that felt terribly unfair. She knew about all of Sylvanas’ problems. All about her family issues. And honestly, hers seemed to pale in comparison.

She took a breath. She swallowed hard. She turned and faced Sylvanas, still clutching her phone in a white knuckled grip with one hand. “No, it’s not that,” Jaina explained. “It’s just my mom reminding me about Thanksgiving. I...really don’t want to go. But I have to. I know you probably think that’s horribly ungrateful of me. It is, kind of. But, we don’t have a great relationship. She’s just going to spend the day low key insulting me, but I’ll never hear the end of it unless I show up and just...be a
good girl for a few hours.”

How many times had she heard her mother say that phrase over the course of her life? “Just be a good girl, Jaina.”

How many more times would she have to endure it?

Sylvanas pulled herself closer and rested her forehead against Jaina’s as she replied, “It’s not ungrateful. I’m not going to be the one to shame you for having family you don’t want to spend time with. And if they make you this upset, well, then they don’t deserve you.”

“It’s a lot to explain, but I have to go,” Jaina sighed against her. “I didn’t even think about what fucking day it was. I just knew that I didn’t have anything on my schedule on Thursday or Friday and thought about what I could do with you instead.”

Sylvanas planted a quick kiss on her cheek before she laid back down and said, “I mean, you could spend those days with me still. Are guests allowed, or will that cause more trouble?”

Guests were always allowed. Hell, they were encouraged, as Katherine loved the opportunity to show off to more people. Jaina rarely brought them. Tandred always seemed to have a girlfriend to tow along. Or various prep school friends. Jaina had dragged Anduin along a few times, just to provide a distraction, which was one of his many talents. But he had his own shit to worry about now.

But now. Now, she was actually dating someone. Someone sweet and wonderful and just, so perfect. Someone who didn’t need to be impressed. Someone who she actually had a real connection with, and wasn’t just wanting to come along to be at a Proudmoore Thanksgiving.

And God, mom would never shut up about her dating a woman. But that Jaina could deal with. That was easy. That was a thing of the present, one that she had taken the time to wrap her own mind around, and one that she was already very comfortable with. So comfortable. Fuck.

That would be a lot easier than the usual.

“Are you sure about that?” Jaina asked. “I mean, guests are allowed, but, well, my mom is kind of a trip. She’s going to be horrible to you, but in the most polite and proper way possible. That’s...just what she does.”

“Would it make you more comfortable, though? If I were there?” Sylvanas pressed, ignoring the warnings as she fussed over a piece of Jaina’s hair that was hanging in her eyes.

“I...yeah. Yeah, it would,” Jaina told her.

“Then don’t worry about it,” Sylvanas replied with a smile. The exact smile that Jaina needed to see now. One without reservations. “You just tell me where to be and I’ll show up with flowers and interesting stories to distract her with. Then we’ll leave as soon as it’s appropriate and enjoy the rest of the weekend together.”

“You’re so good. You know that, right? But she’ll expect us to stay overnight,” Jaina cautioned. “And you’ll want to. It’s kind of a drive.”

“Not a big deal,” Sylvanas told her as she finally succeeded in tucking that stray piece of hair behind her ear. “Where is her place?”

“Uh, Long Island,” Jaina answered.
As she panicked. And tried her best not to show it.

Even as she kissed Sylvanas, and even as she rolled out of her bed and rushed to get decent enough to run off to her meeting. Even as she helped feed Nathanos his breakfast and spent a few minutes too long kissing Sylvanas goodbye. Even then, she kept it pushed down. She kept it under control.

Only when she closed the door to the Undercity behind her did she walk away and mutter to herself, “Long Island, really? Really, Jaina?”

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The funny part about lying by omission was that it was so much harder to come up with a way to break the truth, even though all she had to do was say it. Jaina kept herself busy, rather than drive herself insane thinking of how to explain all of this to Sylvanas. The rest of Monday saw her stressing about it as she replied to her mother, and told her she was bringing a guest. Tuesday was filled with last minute preparations that had to be made before the break, papers to be graded, advisors to be consulted, and an emergency proof-reading session that Anduin woke her up at 2am for. Wednesday, she worried about what to wear, what to pack, who Tandred might drag along this time.

Until suddenly, it was Thursday morning, and Sylvanas was grinning at her from the driver’s seat of her rusty pickup truck, waiting outside her apartment building.

Her apartment, which Sylvanas had still never seen. Her building, with a door man. And fuck, the soft little noise that her girlfriend made as Jaina climbed into the truck next to her, dressed in tailored navy slacks and a soft cream-colored cashmere sweater. And actual makeup. And jewelry. Good, and fucking expensive, jewelry. Jewelry that had been gifts. Gifts she didn't want, but had to accept, if only to wear them on days like this.

God.

Sylvanas, to her credit, was similarly done up in a button-down, pants that didn’t have any holes in them, a little bit of makeup, and the earrings that graced her long ears actually all matched, for once.

“You look great,” Sylvanas said as she leaned over and kissed her hello.

Jaina wanted to say so many things. She wanted to tell her to just stay away. Or to take them to fucking Mexico instead or something. What was she doing? She hadn’t even told her what to expect. Sort of, but not really. Fuck. How could she do this to Sylvanas?

“You too,” was what Jaina said instead.

“Well, you were supposed to text me the address last night. I kind of need it now,” Sylvanas told her as she waggled her phone at Jaina.

“Oh,” Jaina gestured to take her phone, and thankfully, Sylvanas handed it to her. “I’ll just type it in. It’s easier.”

Yeah, much easier to type in “1 Proudmoore Way, Westhampton,” than to say it. Way easier.

But they had a good two hours of driving to do. Two hours for her to think of a way to explain this. To talk about the one subject she avoided at all costs in her life. Well, that, and her family.

But Sylvanas didn’t even flinch. She just smiled at her and turned on the classic rock station, then followed the directions that her phone barked out at them occasionally. She talked about cleaning up
the store. She talked about how much she’d missed her. She talked about the stupid things that Nathanos had been doing in the last few days, the things that Jaina had missed. She talked about how Anduin kept texting her lines from Grease, and how delighted he was when she would reply back to him in turn.

She laughed, she smiled, she sang along to the music. She didn’t sink into overwhelming dread, or even warranted nervousness.

And Jaina found herself falling into that wonderful trap, as she always did. She was so happy with her. She could forget. She could just be.

So much so that she didn’t realize how long it had been. At least, not until they passed the first sign for the Westhampton exit, and the voice from Sylvanas’ phone announced that they were supposed to get off there.

She saw it. Just, the tiniest little movement. A little, miniscule quirk of one of Sylvanas’ long brows. It was barely there, but Jaina watched as the question formed in her mind. She could see it.

But Sylvanas didn’t ask it. Instead she chuckled and said, “Finally. I thought you were going to make us drive all the way to Montauk.”

But that wasn’t what she meant. Fuck. Jaina could see it. She could see it as they pulled off the expressway. She could read it in the way the shadows of manicured trees dappled the sunlight through the windshield. She could see it in the way Sylvanas’ eyes darted from one house to the next as they drove, as those houses started to get bigger and bigger.

"Sylvanas, I should probably have said something earlier, but--" Jaina started.

"Jaina," Sylvanas said slowly and evenly. "Did we just pass a yacht club with your last name on the sign, or am I seeing things?"

They had. The yacht club. Their yacht club. Never mind having her last name on the sign. There was a sandwich on the menu with her first name. A turkey club with avocado on artisan multigrain, of course.

"Yes, but just listen for a second, please," Jaina said as she reached across the bench seat to lay her hand on Sylvanas' arm.

The GPS then thought it was a good idea to loudly announce, "Take the next right onto Proudmoore Way."

"I'm listening, Jaina," Sylvanas answered, not taking her eyes off the road. Her ears tucked themselves in low and close to her head.

"My family…" Jaina started. She dug her nails into the fabric of Sylvanas' shirt as she continued. "Is, um, really wealthy. But that doesn't--"

Sylvanas turned the truck at the next right, onto a private drive lined with trees, golden and rust, resplendent in their autumn leaves. They weren't even close enough to the house yet to see it. "I knew you had money. I mean, you bought a five hundred dollar book the first time we went out. I thought you were comfortable rich…not fuck you rich."

She wasn't. Well, no. She was. She absolutely was. "I'm...yeah. Proudmoore Yachts. Kul Tiras Shipping. Boralus Bank. My family owns all of them. I'm so used to people just knowing. But it's not like that. I--"
"Why didn't you tell me?" Sylvanas finally turned to her to ask.

Fuck. Jaina didn't have to be an expert on elven body language to read the droop of her ears now. It was plain. Sylvanas looked hurt and confused.

"Because this," Jaina gestured to the perfectly cut grass of the grounds, to the immaculate gardens, and the six car garage that was coming into view. "All of this is not me. It's not who I am. And everyone who knows about it automatically assumes I'm just some stuck up rich girl. I'm not. I'm just...I never want to be that person. But I'm so used to people treating me that way. I couldn't take it if you...if you looked at me like that."

Sylvanas turned her attention back to the road, even as she slowed the truck down to just above idling. "Nothing could change the way I see you," she muttered, even as she stared at the opulence that stretched out ahead of them. "I just wish you'd told me what I was getting myself into. I'm going to use all the wrong forks."

Jaina's hand found Sylvanas' on the steering wheel. "I should have said something. I know. And don't worry about the forks. It's not really that formal. It's just going to be me, my mom, my brother, and whatever idiot he brought along this year."

Sylvanas let out a sigh before a laugh. A heavy, nervous laugh. She lifted her pinky to wrap around Jaina's as she drove. "Jaina, you've never told me you had a brother either."

"Fuck."

---

Sylvanas had seen plenty of big houses before. There was time when she’d lived in one herself. But this. This was actually a mansion. A proper mansion. Not a large house. Not a McMansion. No. A real fucking mansion.

Still, she tried not to let that show. She tried to keep what she could of her emotions to herself. She was still a little annoyed at Jaina. And having somewhat of a hard time understanding why she had hidden this from her.

But she held onto her hand all the same. Even as she questioned whether or not Jaina might be afraid of this changing how they were, or afraid that Sylvanas would try to go after her money.

But how could she have known? Jaina wasn’t...like that. She was right about what she said in the truck. She never acted superior. She didn’t really even dress all that nice. Sylvanas had known plenty of rich kids, who drowned themselves in designer labels and the latest accessories. The screen of Jaina’s phone had been cracked for longer than she’d known her. She didn’t even bother with a purse most of the time, and instead carried her things in a worn-out backpack.

But that Jaina was not here right now. In fact, Sylvanas was carrying a very well-made leather overnight bag for her. She’d been expecting that backpack.

So yeah, Sylvanas had every right to be surprised. Every right to just not get it.

But Jaina’s hand in hers was cold and noticeably clammy. She’d never tell her that of course. And Sylvanas could feel her tightening her grip, then relaxing it again, only to squeeze once more.

What was going on here?

A Night Elf woman answered the door before they even rang the bell. Right. Cameras. She looked
down at both of them, tall and stern in her starched white button up and black slacks, at least, until recognition lit up her face like a fireworks display. She smiled as she said, “Jaina! You’re early!”

The hand squeezing lessened. Just a little. But Jaina didn’t let go.

“Happy Thanksgiving, Pained. How are things?” Jaina asked as she returned her greeting.

“The same as they always are,” Pained responded frankly, a genuine smile curving her lips to reveal thick fangs. “Who’s your friend?”

“This is, um, my girlfriend. Sylvanas Windrunner,” Jaina said with a quick look in her direction. “Sylvanas, this is Pained. She’s um, she’s an assistant.”

“Housekeeper, the help, driver, sometimes bodyguard, whatever,” Pained corrected with a wink. “So, girlfriend eh? Well she’s definitely cute enough for you, Jaina. Can I take your bags? The chef is still working on dinner, but your mom and Tanny are having hors d’oeuvres in the library. And wine. Of course, wine.”

Jaina looked at Sylvanas for a moment before inclining her head slightly toward Pained. Oh right. She was holding their bags. She handed them over.

Pained winked again as she took the bags and stepped back to allow them inside. “The lady of the house had the guest room prepared for your guest, but I take it you’re not going to want that?” she asked, this time in Jaina’s direction.

“Yeah just my room, please,” Jaina coughed as she confirmed. “And um, if you could not mention that to her…”

“Understood,” Pained said as she shouldered the bags and made her way toward the grand staircase that she’d revealed behind her. “I’ll leave you to sort through that fun conversation. Well, you know how to find me if you need me. Good to see you, Jaina.”

“Good to see you too,” Jaina replied with a nod as she pulled Sylvanas inside.


“A housekeeper? A library? Are you serious?” Sylvanas couldn’t help but whisper as she watched Pained climb the steps.

Jaina didn’t say anything for a while. She just stood there, holding Sylvanas’ hand still, and stared down the hallway leading to the left. “I don’t know why I keep coming back here. I really don’t,” she finally said.

“Hey, I...I didn’t meant it like that. It’s just...this is crazy. A little crazy. Sorry,” Sylvanas stammered out as she tried to capture Jaina’s attention again.

“It’s not that. This place is just full of bad memories,” Jaina told her. “Ones that I should have told you about before.”

“Are they the ones that make you tear apart the bed in the middle of the night?” Sylvanas asked.

Jaina whipped around to face her then, and studied her intently with her stormy blue eyes.
Yes. Sylvanas had slept near her enough to know about those nightmares. Even the last time they’d crashed at her place after karaoke, Jaina had woken from a dead sleep in the middle of the night. Well, woken might not have been the right word. But she did thrash and kick and claw at the covers for a few minutes before she settled back down. She did moan a few things, some of which sounded like names, but most of which were just unintelligible sounds of distress. And she didn't even wake up as Sylvanas held her until she stilled.

Maybe now might not have been the best time to talk about that, now that Sylvanas thought about it. Jaina let go of her gaze with a sigh. “I really, really should have talked to you about this. I’m sorry. It’s not fair. None of this is fair to you.”

But there was still some of that desperation. The same edge to her that Sylvanas had felt under her own hands as Jaina had read those texts. And she’d seen them. Oh she had. She pretended that she hadn’t, but she did. And honestly, if that was the type of tone that her mother was going to have when talking to Jaina here, then Sylvanas was going to have a hard time with it. She really was.

“I volunteered myself,” Sylvanas reminded her as she gently swiped her thumb over Jaina’s tensing knuckles. “And I would do it again in a heartbeat. You’ve been there for me so many times already. This is absolutely fucking crazy, but let me be here for you anyway. I can do it. I want to do it.”

“You really are too good. Well, at least if you change your mind, you drove here,” Jaina said as she tried to summon up a laugh.

“I think they’re going to wonder why the landscaper parked his truck out front,” Sylvanas joked as she tried to crack a smile from her.

A door cracked open instead. From that hallway to the left. Well, slammed open would be a better way to describe it. A red-haired human boy, maybe a little younger than Anduin, not quite college-aged, stepped out into the hallway. He beamed at Jaina. “Jainey! I thought I heard you! Come in! We’ve got spinach puffs!”

“Right, just a sec, Tandred,” Jaina called after him.

She gave Sylvanas one more pained look.

But it couldn’t be that bad, right? Her brother seemed happy to see her, at least. That was her brother, right? And spinach puffs sounded good. Not so bad, right?

---

Sylvanas re-thought that assessment as soon as she met Katherine Proudmoore.

Katherine Proudmoore, who hadn’t bothered to get up from the plush leather armchair she occupied in the library. Katherine Proudmoore, glass of wine in hand, dressed in stunning, but severe gray, who stared at her unflinchingly as she asked, "Girlfriend?"

"Yes, mom," Jaina answered. Her voice was so different all the sudden. So quiet and without any of the fire in it that Sylvanas had come to love and rely on.

So Sylvanas felt the need to step in for that fire. "We've been dating for a few months now," she generalized to make it sound better. "Your daughter is a wonderful person. I'm still amazed by her every day."

"I see," was Katherine's only response to that. "So are you attending NYU as well? In the grad
program?"

"No," Sylvanas answered, gathering a sentence together to try to sum up her circumstances in the most professional way possible. "I own and operate my own business."

"Ah, investments? Day trading? Or are you one of those people doing the Bitcoin thing?" Katherine pressed, her eyes shining with a tiniest bit of interest.

"A retail store, ma'am."

And that interest immediately faded. "Ah," Katherine answered, before turning her attention back to Jaina. "You're always full of surprises anymore, aren't you?"


"She's just trying to make up for me not bringing a girlfriend this year, obviously," Tandred joked from a small buffet table over on the other side of Katherine's chair, where he was pouring himself another glass of wine that he was obviously too young to be drinking. No one seemed to care about that.

Sylvanas wasn't sure what to make of Jaina's brother. He hadn't hugged her. That was strange. He hadn't been unkind either, and had held the door for them as they walked into the library. He mostly seemed intent on eating and drinking and throwing out one-liners when he could.

"I hardly think that's the case," Katherine scoffed back at him. "Your sister just enjoys doing the opposite of what people expect her to, that's all."

Ah, there it was. There was that tone from the texts, but now live and in the flesh and in front of her. Sylvanas cleared her throat.

Just as Jaina's hand finally slipped from hers.

But it was Katherine who spoke again first. "Why don't you go get your girlfriend some wine then? Relax a little. Dinner will be a while yet."

"I'll grab you a glass," Sylvanas offered instead. She stalked over to the buffet, where Tandred offered her a little wave as she moved alongside him to reach for the bottle and one of the empty crystal glasses on a silver tray near it. Fuck. Crystal glasses. Silver trays.

Sylvanas carefully poured out wine that she was sure was worth more than her profits for an average week, maybe two. She then brought it over and handed it to Jaina, who looked at her with a worried, but grateful expression as she took a sip of the dark red liquid.

"None for you then?" Katherine asked.

Sylvanas shook her head. "No, thank you, though. I don't drink."

"How noble of you," Katherine said as she took a sip of her own wine. A smile curved over the rim of her glass.

Sylvanas was most surprised to hear Jaina's voice again. Her real voice, as she asked, "What's that supposed to mean, mom?"

"She's a High Elf, isn't she? Best for them to stay away from anything remotely addictive. They can't
control themselves," Katherine replied coolly.

"Mom," Jaina warned flatly.

"Jaina," Katherine replied, that smile returning as she leaned forward in her chair.

Sylanas could only watch as they stared each other down, as the fire that Jaina had seemed determined to hide behind her fancy clothes and unnecessary makeup flared back into her anyway. For her. To defend her.

"It's just the truth, dear," Katherine said as she finally broke the measured silence. "Nothing more."

"It's called tact, mom," Jaina offered.

"See, Tanny?" Katherine said as she turned to her son, who was watching this like he was taking bets on it. "She's really just full of surprises, isn't she?"

Sylanas wasn't even angry. She wasn't hurt. She had heard much worse things said about her in her life. That was certain. But Jaina was obviously pissed. Enough to have returned to herself, at least. She was just stretching out a hand to reach for her shoulder, to whisper that it was okay. And God, she just wanted to kiss her. To take her away from here and tell her that she didn't deserve this. Whatever this was. Sylanas couldn't put a name on it, but now she understood. Maybe this is why Jaina didn't tell her anything. It was just something she had to see to understand.

But a knock came at the door before Sylanas could even touch her.

"Sorry to interrupt," Pained called from the door as she entered. "But chef tells me dinner is ready!"

"Oh, how delightful." Katherine was somehow capable of both purring out a phrase, and sounding completely sarcastic about it.

And that was finally starting to set Sylanas' nerves on edge. Not the comment itself, but the way it was said.

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"Work from the outside in," Jaina whispered as her mother was distracted by the chef, a large Pandaren man, who had come out to talk to her as he wheeled a cart full of more silver trays into the dining room.

What? Oh right. The forks. But Sylanas had already stopped worrying about those. "Are you okay?" she whispered back to Jaina.

"I will be when we drive away from here tomorrow. I'm sorry," Jaina offered again as she grabbed Sylanas' knee under the table and squeezed it briefly.

"It's fine. Well, it's not, but I get it now. Sort of," Sylanas told her.

Jaina just nodded, and glanced nervously over at the chef as he set down the first of the platters of food. It was all the usual Thanksgiving trimmings, but just, well, richer. A turkey that looked like a picture out of a magazine. Hasselback glazed yams. Carrots with the tops still on, but trimmed down elegantly, like little green crowns. All of it looked and smelled wonderful, so at least there was that.

But then there was the awkwardness of the chef setting down the big, family style platters, but serving everyone from them. And with it, Tandred joking with the man, well not so much with as at
him, while he was too busy doing his job to respond. And Katherine making comments along the way. That the gravy seemed a bit too light. Or that she wished he’d made the kale and cranberry salad from last year, even though the chef pointed out that she hadn’t asked for it.

And he certainly made a quick exit thereafter.

Sylvanas watched and followed along with Jaina, and sipped at a glass of water that Pained had brought for her with another one of her winks. The food was good, but the Proudmoores barely talked. Jaina was back to a forced, stiff silence, and looked all-together robotic as she mostly shoved her food around her plate.

“Did you tell Jaina you’ve made a choice on a school?” Katherine asked Tandred after a particularly long stretch of silence.

“Oh, maybe not? Well, whatever. It’s Yale for me,” Tandred announced as he waggled a forkful of turkey in the air, as if the words meant nothing.

Because they probably did mean nothing. Because that wasn’t something he had to work for, or earn. Try as she might, Sylvanas couldn’t push that thought down. No, she could not. Not when she knew exactly how far she could stretch a dollar. Not when she remembered what it was like to help her mother feed the younger kids on a budget--when she could make hot dogs and mac and cheese seem like a gourmet meal to them.

So yeah, she was just a little bit bitter.

“That’s nice, Tanny,” Jaina replied in that same, quiet, even tone from before.

“See? Not everyone thinks that the Ivy League schools are overrated,” Katherine said, tilting her head Sylvanas’ way as she continued, “Did you know that Jaina could have done her grad program at Harvard? Imagine that. But she chose to stay in the city.”

“I like NYU just fine, mother,” Jaina answered for herself.

“Always the difficult one,” Katherine sighed as she made a show of taking a long time to cut up a bite of sweet potato.

Sylvanas noticed that she held her fork and knife differently even. Elegantly, in a way that she’d never even considered using the utensils before. Fuck. Even her eating was meant to make everyone else feel lesser.

“A shame, your father would have loved to see you go to Harvard,” Katherine said, almost as an afterthought, just before she took a bite.

Jaina’s fist slammed into the table. Hard. Hard enough to shake the wine glass that she’d barely touched, sloshing the red liquid it contained until it was dangerously close to spilling over the sides. Just once. But enough. Enough that Sylvanas could see her fist clench tightly around her fork.

“Dad wouldn’t have cared what I did,” Jaina replied, low, almost growling. “He would have cared that I did what made me happy. And I’m doing that. I’m doing what I want to do, not what anyone else thinks I should, and not what’s ‘prestigious’ or ‘good for our image’.”

“That’s always what you thought, wasn’t it?” Katherine asked, that sickening smile returning to her lips. She leaned over from her position at the head of the table. There was still quite a bit of distance between them, but not enough to separate them from her unblinking gaze. “Sometimes Jaina, just sometimes, you might want to think about what other people think. What they might perceive of
these things that make you happy. When all is said and done, will you really be happy, if everyone around you thinks you’re a fool.”

“She’s not a fool.” Sylvanas surprised herself with how strongly that came out. Exactly as strong as she wanted it to. And exactly as loud.

Enough for Tandred to giggle and mutter, “Oh shit, here we go,” softly enough that only her elven hearing picked it up.

“Oh? Do tell,” Katherine requested as she leaned back with that damn smug smile still plastered on her face.

“What does it really matter, where she’s going to school, or who she’s dating, or anything she’s doing? She’s your daughter. Aren’t you glad that she’s happy?” Sylvanas asked her. It was all she could do to sit down.

How could this woman treat Jaina like this? Why? Jaina, who had been so sweet and kind and understanding. Jaina, who had given her so much and expected nothing in return. Jaina, who certainly didn’t deserve any of this, which was probably exactly why she was being talked to this way. But really, how dare she? Her own mother?

Katherine took up her fork and knife again, her voice going cold and composed as she cut another piece of turkey and said, “She might think she’s happy now, but ten years down the line, maybe, she’ll think to herself that she should have listened, that she should have done what was asked of her, or what I recommended she do. Or do you think that she’ll be happy with you, and your little retail store? Do you think she’ll be happy to count out change, or mop up a mess in the bathroom? Do you really think that, now that you’ve seen where she comes from?”

A part of Sylvanas had been worrying that wasn’t true. She’d been worrying that since they pulled off in Westhampton. Even before that, when Jaina wouldn’t talk about her family. Katherine really knew where to strike, didn’t she?

As she tried to stammer out her own affirmation of that, another voice did it for her, bright, clear, and loud.

“You have no idea what would make me happy, mom,” Jaina nearly spat. “You never bothered to find out. But for the record, yes, I would love that. I would love every second of it.”

Katherine’s knife and fork stilled, clinking against the fine china just once. “And here I was hoping for a nice, civil dinner. Pity.”

“Don’t even start,” Jaina warned her. “Just...don’t.”

“Consider me disappointed on both ends,” Katherine said as she eyed the turkey on the end of her fork. “The bird is as dry as a bone, and my daughter still hasn’t learned her manners. I think I’m ready for more wine, and maybe some pie. What about you, Tandred?”

“Sounds good, mom,” Tandred agreed, as he looked at Jaina with a quirked brow.

But the turkey wasn’t dry. It was amazing, actually. Well, it had been, before this conversation had made Sylvanas lose her appetite. She looked at Jaina, trying to capture her eyes. But Jaina was still staring at her mother, and kept at it as she pushed out of her chair and stood up. “I’ve had enough.”

“Leaving so soon, then?” Katherine asked after her. “You wouldn’t want to miss breakfast tomorrow, at the yacht club. It’s a tradition, after all.”
“Not your tradition,” Jaina told her.

“A Proudmoore one,” Katherine countered.

“Dad’s,” Jaina said simply. She then finally looked at Sylvanas briefly, who was already standing up to join her, then back at Katherine. “And you know that’s actually why I came here. I’m going to bed. I’ll be at the breakfast.”

Jaina turned to go, and Sylvanas followed right along with her.

“You too, Ms. Windrunner? We were just getting to know one another,” Katherine called after her.

“I go where she goes, ma’am,” was Sylvanas’ answer for her as she reached for Jaina’s hand.

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Oof. Your turn, Redisaid :D!

“I go where she goes-”

Those words were, perhaps, part of what gave Jaina the strength to keep walking. Gave her the strength to keep holding tightly onto Sylvanas’s hand. Or...was it the other way around? She heard the doors to the dining room shut behind them and paused at the footsteps approaching.

“Jaina...”

They both turned to look as Pained moved around to look at them - worry on her features where, before, there had been no such thing.

“I...I brought your bags to your room.”

Jaina nodded almost stiffly and Sylvanas glanced at her long enough to catch a glimpse of just how hard she was trying, then turned her attention back to Pained only to find the woman looking right at her. She returned the gaze. Even appreciated the flicker of understanding in the woman’s eyes.

“Thank you, Pained.” Jaina’s voice was back to...whatever it was when it didn’t really belong to her. The Night Elf nodded and quickly dismissed herself from their presence - avoiding the things that
hung between them. Leaving them unspoken.

Gradually, the house became less impressive and more stifling. Sylvanas felt herself pressing closer to Jaina as they walked without really meaning to. Away from the dark, rich wood of the walls and the gilding on the frames of the paintings that were hung along them.

Maybe Katherine was right on some level. Maybe that was a real risk that she shouldn’t push aside so easily. She also knew Jaina needed her, though. She could feel it in the way the younger woman kept bumping into her every time she got closer instead of moving away.

It was too much to figure out right now with the walls trying to swallow her whole and the approach of the massive staircase in the distance. Sylvanas didn’t even touch the elegant curve at the bottom of it. She didn’t want to. As warm it appeared to be, the richness of it all only seemed cold, now, and Jaina was so quiet next to her as they took the steps in time with each other without even trying to.

More wood paneling. More expensive, hand-woven runners along flawless floors. The art had changed, at least. Sailboats. Beautiful ones. Many of them with Proudmoore displayed proudly on their sides. There was warmth, at least, in these paintings. At least it felt that way to Sylvanas. They were something real. Something alive and familiar.

“If it’s going to cause any trouble, Jaina...I can sleep in the guest room.” Sylvanas murmured, though she regretted the words the instant they left her mouth when she felt Jaina go even stiffer. Even more tense. “I don’t want to.” She continued hurriedly. “I don’t want to at all.”

“Then stay with me.” Jaina’s voice was hers again. Softer and less sure than Sylvanas could remember ever having heard it, but still hers.

They passed so many doors. A ridiculous amount of doors on what Sylvanas had come to realize was just one of many wings of the mansion - until, finally, they arrived at the very last one. Then, just as Sylvanas was sure she was going to suffocate, Jaina turned the crystal knob of it and a shuddering breath left Sylvanas as they stepped inside.

She could breathe again. Some of the weight melted away from her heavy chest as Jaina shut the door to the circular, high-ceilinged room. Smaller, Sylvanas would guess, than most of the rooms in this place.

But it was all Jaina. Floors the color of drift-wood and beautiful clapboard walls in a muted, soft white that lead to an octagonal ceiling all the way to its pointed top. And windows. Windows that overlooked the bay and the small balcony outside.

Jaina watched her carefully. Worriedly. Followed the path Sylvanas’s eyes took until she saw the faintest hint of a smile on the other woman’s face as she noticed the too-full bookshelves against the far wall of the room. “I take it this is your room.” Sylvanas murmured idly as Jaina slowly turned towards her side and released her hand to stroke, instead, along her back.

“How could you tell?” Jaina asked - though there was still a faint tremor of anxiety in her voice. “Sylvanas, I’m so sorry.” She continued, trying and failing to stop that tremor from getting worse.

Sylvanas seemed to snap out of the half-daze she’d been existing in since they’d left the dining room and looked at Jaina quickly, turning towards her and reaching up to cradle her face in her hands as though it were made of porcelain. As though everything Jaina was might shatter if she wasn’t careful.

“No. I’m sorry.” Sylvanas responded as she stepped closer until Jaina wrapped her arms around her
tightly. “About earlier. In the truck. I’m sorry I was upset like I was. I didn’t realize it was this...this bad.”

Jaina smiled sadly and shook her head before resting it against Sylvanas’s chest for a moment. “How could you realize something I never told you?” She asked in a whisper, standing there for quite some time before she pulled back and walked past Sylvanas towards her bed, where she sat and turned to look out her bedroom windows at the way the peaks of the little waves in the bay caught the moonlight so far away. “Did you like the ocean? In Cali? Did you go there a lot?”

Sylvanas followed her, then. She moved to stand in front of her for a moment before she took her place on the bed and rested her hands on her own knees. “I did, yeah. For a long time, I went every day. But...don’t make this about me, babe.”

Jaina tore her eyes from the bedroom windows and hazarded a glance in Sylvanas’s direction. “What if I need it to be about you, right now?”

Sylvanas’s brow furrowed at that and she looked like she was about to speak before Jaina cut her off, albeit gently.

“What if I need to know what you’re thinking? What if I need to know if my mother just ruined this? You didn’t deserve this. It wasn’t fair. It wasn’t fair of me. I didn’t know. I...I knew. I did. But I didn’t know she’d be this...this awful to you, Sylvanas. You have to believe me. You have to believe that I’m sorry and that I don’t know what to do.”

All at once, her fears - her utter panic - were all drowned out by the suddenness of Sylvanas kissing her. Gripping her chin firmly so she couldn’t pull away, not that she’d wanted to. “Tell me I’m enough.” Sylvanas murmured. “Tell me in..in however long I get to keep you for, that you won’t regret it. That you won’t regret me.”

“Is that what you think?” Jaina asked as she reached for Sylvanas with both hands, gripping the collar of her shirt and pulling back so their lips were no longer almost touching. So that she could look, really look into Sylvanas’s eyes. “You think she’s right? You can’t possibly believe that this is what matters to me, Sylvanas. You can’t.”

Sylvanas shook her head immediately and touched Jaina’s hands where they were holding her shirt, leaving them there when she thought better of removing them and reaching, instead, to stroke through her hair. “I’m sorry, Jaina. I’m trying.” She whispered, though it was clear by the way her ears pressed back and her tone that she wasn’t exactly confident about it.

“No, no.” Jaina sighed and shut her eyes for a moment as Sylvanas leaned in to kiss her forehead.

“Tell me. Please.”
Sylvanas’s hand went still in Jaina’s hair as she did her best to process those words. As she did her best to figure out whether or not this was what was best for Jaina...for them both, right now. Even as her thoughts raced, Jaina tilted her head closer and brushed the side of her neck with her lips. Any words she’d been about to say escaped, instead, as a soft noise in the back of her throat. “You don’t have to. You don’t have to show me like this.”

“I know. I know I don’t. I just really, really want to.”

Sylvanas nodded. She nodded and it felt like something in her shattered. All the fear. All the worry that everything would fall apart if they did this - if she let herself do this. She wanted this, goddamnit. She needed it.

Jaina swallowed thickly in response to that nod and pulled back, glancing up at Sylvanas and watching ears that had been pressing so low for so long lift in a way that made her smile despite her nerves while she worked at that first button. Then the second. Every time she faltered, she found Sylvanas’s only response was a light, reassuring kiss or a graze of her hands with her fingertips. “I wanna see you.” Jaina admitted quietly as she reached just past where Sylvanas’s now-unbuttoned shirt parted and just barely grazed her chest with the backs of her fingers.

Sylvanas nodded again. She leaned back and slowly pulled her shirt off herself, tugging the sleeves down her own arms and shoving it to the side as her hair fell against her bare chest and shoulders - followed closely by Jaina’s gaze. Now, she didn’t even know if she remembered how to breathe.

Neither did Jaina.

God. God, was it okay to look at her like this? Was it okay that she had to lick her lips when they felt dry, suddenly, at the sight of Sylvanas’s breasts and the tattoo that curved along the underside of them? She didn’t know. She didn’t even remember thinking before she reached out and traced delicate lines that hung down from the pink-tinged foliage of the tattoo like crystals from a chandelier. “Fuck.” She whispered before her eyes shot up and she pulled her hand back. But Sylvanas was smiling. That smile. The one that was only for her.

“It’s okay.” Sylvanas murmured as the smile softened and she reached for Jaina’s hand, pulling it back against her chest - this time, over her breast as she leaned in and kissed the corner of the younger woman’s mouth. “It’s okay.”

Jaina let out a soft breath against Sylvanas’s mouth as the warmth of her hand moved from her own to stroke along her arm, allowing her to move if she wanted to. She didn’t want to, though. Even though her hand trembled faintly as she traced along the softest skin she’d ever felt and even hazarded a brush against her nipple. Sylvanas’s response couldn’t have been more encouraging. She pressed her chest forward faintly into Jaina’s hand, even, as she drew in a sharp breath.

Jaina felt suddenly...powerful. Was it possible to be both terrified and powerful at the same time?

“Would you...could you lay down for me?” Jaina asked - wincing at how awkward that had sounded coming out.

“Oh course I can.” Sylvanas responded gently, pulling away from Jaina carefully and leaning back against the pillows piled against the headboard of her large, plush bed. The comforter felt like heaven against her bare back. Down. That’s what it was. Down feathers.

Jaina moved along with her until she was seated next to her - realizing, suddenly, that that was strange and moving, instead, to lay on her side with one hand resting over Sylvanas’s toned stomach.

“Are you okay?” Sylvanas asked quietly as she lifted a hand to touch beneath Jaina’s chin.
“Yeah.” Jaina cleared her throat when she found that the slight rasp in her own voice sounded almost foreign. “I’m...I’m just nervous.”

Sylvanas regarded her for a moment before leaning up and over to kiss her gently. So gently. Her lips worked against Jaina’s and her tongue just barely brushed them...and then there was a slight pinch of a fang against her lower lip. One that drew a gasp from her and caused her to lean closer. “Don’t be.” Sylvanas murmured as Jaina’s hand trailed lower. “But so am I.” She continued, glancing down along with Jaina as the younger woman found her inner thigh and trailed her nails along the material of her pants.

Jaina looked up in surprise with her brows furrowed as Sylvanas bent her leg at the knee and let it fall over against Jaina while their eyes locked onto one another. “I want to be so good for you.” Sylvanas murmured as Jaina gripped her thigh.

“You are.” Jaina responded quickly, pushing herself back up off the bed and carefully moving on top of her, taking a moment to press her face into the crook of Sylvanas’s neck as she felt the other woman adjust herself beneath her and cradle her hips between her thighs.

“So are you, Jaina.” Sylvanas breathed as she trailed her hands down Jaina’s back to slowly start lifting the hem of her shirt - grazing her fingertips along either side of her spine. Many of the sounds that had escaped her over the past couple of weeks could have been anything, really. Appreciation. Surprise, even. But as Jaina’s hips rocked down into hers - there was no escaping the moan that left her. There was no misinterpreting the hands that moved to the backs of her thighs to pull her closer or the upwards rock that answered her own movement.

There it was again. That feeling that she had some sort of sway over something important accompanied by the realization that that ‘something’ was Sylvanas’s pleasure. The sounds she made and the way her body moved. That’s what it was. That was the fire she’d longed to chase - to catch.

It eased her nerves somewhat. It made the journey her lips took down Sylvanas’s neck towards her chest that much easier. She brushed the bridge of her nose along the soft, sloping curve of one of the other woman’s breasts and kissed towards her nipple before parting her lips against it and running the flat of her tongue across it, pausing at the sharp hiss this elicited from Sylvanas. Shuddering at the way Sylvanas’s body arched underneath her own.

“Don’t stop.” Sylvanas whispered, reaching for Jaina’s hair to gather it in her hand as she looked down at her through half-lidded eyes.

Oh, fuck. *Fuck.* Alright. Alright, she liked this. Sylvanas liked what she was doing. A lot, if the quiet whimper and the subtle toss of her head when Jaina sucked gently against her nipple was any clue.

She didn’t stop. She listened. She listened for the sounds and for the inaudible words in Sylvanas’s body language as she reached further down while her mouth stayed busy. The way Sylvanas’s breath hitched sharply when she fumbled with the button of her pants was as heady as her moans had been. She wanted more. More of all of this. More of Sylvanas. It just seemed so real, suddenly, as she pulled those pants down past her hips to reveal her underwear and the lines of faintly toned muscle that ran down past the waistband of them.

“I don’t think anything could have prepared me for how gorgeous you are. But...is...is that a Guns N’ Roses tattoo?” Jaina asked breathlessly as Sylvanas helped her do away with her pants and settled back down against the bed. She glanced down at what Jaina was looking at - still panting softly as her ears wilted faintly when she looked at the rather large piece that covered most of her thigh and rode up along her hip. “Isn’t that the wrong decade?”
Sylvanas looked up at Jaina slowly and blinked at her. “Really?” She asked quietly as Jaina erupted into a sudden fit of giggles. “You came to my window with the biggest 80s stereotype in existence and you’re making fun of a little phase I went through?”

Giggles turned into laughter. Deep, uncontrollable laughter as she shook her head and stroked along the newly discovered ink. “I’m sorry, baby. You’re right, of course.”

Sylvanas sat up, suddenly, and kissed Jaina hard. Hard enough that it nearly knocked the breath from her lungs. They were all smiles and appreciative murmurs for a while as Jaina shifted to straddle Sylvanas’s lap. Gradually, the mood shifted back into something heavier. Something warmer - as Sylvanas stroked along her thighs and reached up the inside of the back of her shirt, unclasping her bra easily and tracing the faint lines it left in her skin until she was cradling her breasts in her palms.

“Fuck.” Jaina whispered as she broke their kiss and tugged her own shirt up and over her shoulders, followed quickly by her bra. Sylvanas leaned in and scraped the center of her chest with her teeth as Jaina’s hands flew to her hair. “Why are you so goddamned hot?” Jaina demanded breathlessly.

“Am I?” Sylvanas asked as she dragged the tip of her nose up until she was sucking gently against Jaina’s collarbone.

“Mmh...you already know the answer to that.” Jaina breathed, her mouth falling open as Sylvanas’s tongue flicked against one of her nipples and she felt a smile along with the teasing.

Before she knew it, Sylvanas was pressing her onto her back and moving down along her body, dragging her pants and her underwear down her legs at once, looking up at Jaina as she settled down over her - her chest resting against Jaina’s hips and her arms on either side of them.

Jaina saw a hunger in Sylvanas’s eyes she’d never seen before and it drew a certain, strange softness out in her. It caused her to reach out and tuck some of the older woman’s hair behind her ears. “Do you want me?” She asked quietly, tracing Sylvanas’s lips with her thumb before she pulled the bottom one down just slightly then let it go.

Sylvanas kissed that thumb before it had a chance to withdraw completely. “You have no idea how much.” She breathed as she lowered her head and kissed the hollow of Jaina’s hip. Oh, god, she wanted her. She wanted the little freckles that dotted her chest here and there. She wanted the softness in the curves of her body and the fullness of her breasts and gentle dip of her stomach next to where she was resting her chin.

“I’ve never wanted anyone like this.” She continued - her voice a little softer, now, as she ran the fingertips of one hand along Jaina’s side. “And I’ve never seen anyone as stunning as you.” She lowered her head, then, and kissed beneath Jaina’s navel as her fingertips danced along where she’d just been kissing her hip - tracing a little beauty mark there as she turned a soft smile up in Jaina’s direction. “Is this a Guns N’ Roses freckle?”

“Ass.” Jaina breathed in response, though she cradled Sylvanas’s cheek at the same time. That little jab made it so much easier to accept the genuineness of the compliments that had preceded it. The smile didn’t hurt, either. But she swallowed thickly as Sylvanas turned her head towards her palm and bit the heel of it - breathing out slowly against it in a way that made Jaina shiver.

“Please, then.” Jaina whispered, finding the delicate ridge of Sylvanas’s ear and running her fingertips along it just to watch the way it made her eyes flutter shut for a moment. “I want whatever you’re willing to give. Fuck, I want it, Sylvanas.”

“Anything.” Sylvanas murmured in relief as she let out a breath against Jaina’s stomach. “And if I
don’t give you something you want, tell me.” She shifted lower. She pressed a single, slow kiss to
the crook of Jaina’s thigh as the younger woman’s heart hammeried in a way that was almost painful
in her chest. She couldn’t imagine having to ask Sylvanas for something. God, she was too busy
staring at the profile of her face as she parted her lips and ran the tip of her tongue along the place
she’d just kissed. The delicate lines of her features and the softness in the way her eyes shut.

The reality was...more. ‘More’ was the only word Jaina could even think as she felt hot breath
between her legs. Never. She’d never felt this. She’d never felt the molten velvet and scalding
intimacy of someone’s tongue running along too-sensitive skin. She’d never felt silken lips parting
her - seeking something and...oh, god. Finding it immediately.

She nearly pulled away. As it was, she gripped desperately at her comforter as her chest heaved and
a shuddering moan broke the quiet, wet sounds Sylvanas was making between her legs. Glowing
blue eyes lifted to her own and she watched Sylvanas for a moment through blurred vision. She got
to see Sylvanas lift a hand over her thigh and find one of her own - twining their fingers together
tightly and stroking along Jaina’s thumb with her own as her eyes fell shut again and she exhaled
sharply. Another new sensation that made Jaina’s thighs tense against Sylvanas’s ears.

Sylvanas was so patient. So steady. When Jaina moved, she moved with her. Never, not once did
she stop. She did, however, start moaning quietly as Jaina’s hips began flexing, pushing her harder
against Sylvanas’s mouth. Still, the gentle lapping and steady suction never ceased. Not when she
found a pace that was neither too little nor too much for Jaina. Not when she found a pace that
brought small, shuddering moans and breathless gasps from her.

The only thing that changed was the slow, subtle stroking of Sylvanas’s hand along her thigh. It
shifted, now and then. Higher along her leg and then, finally, between them and beneath her own
chin. Sylvanas stroked around her entrance for a moment before slowly pressing her fingertip into
her. And her fucking mouth. God, it never stopped. Her slick, hot tongue never fucking stopped
even as her finger began curling rhythmically inside her.

Jaina had lost any semblance of awareness. She was holding Sylvanas’s hand too tight. It was just
that...neither of them cared. Least of all, Sylvanas. Not now that she’d opened her eyes just enough
to watch the way Jaina’s stomach jumped and tensed - just enough to see that the flush in her cheeks
had spread to her chest as moans turned into gasps and then nothing. She was just tense. Arched
away from the bed as her entire body shook and Sylvanas pressed her tongue against her clit more
firmly, sucked against it just a little harder.

Never in her life had Jaina made such a sound. A raspy, almost violent moan as her back hit the bed
and then left it again just as quickly before she collapsed and each exhale became a whimper.
Sylvanas knew better than to continue. She knew better than to push her. If she didn’t, the way
Jaina’s legs tried to close around her head and her shoulders would have let her know quiet easily.

No, she didn’t keep going, now. Instead, she slipped her finger free with so much care that even
Jaina, in her haze, noticed and appreciated it. She lifted herself and knelt above her for a moment
before moving from between her legs and lowering herself against her side. “You’re okay.” Sylvanas
whispered against her cheek before kissing it as another shudder wracked her. She reached for
Jaina’s knee to close her legs slowly - easing the slight ache that had been there from keeping them
spread for her. Another kiss. This one against her temple. “Shh. You’re okay. You’re okay, Jaina.”

The frantic panting slowed, eventually, into something more controlled yet Jaina’s eyes stayed shut
ightly for a while. The only thing keeping her grounded, really, was Sylvanas’s hand stroking her
hair away from her face and cradling her cheek.

She was endlessly glad it was fairly dark in the room when her eyes finally opened into little slits and
she searched for the familiar glow of Sylvanas’s - finding so much warmth and adoration in those eyes and that smile that she almost lost herself in the other woman all over again just like that.

“Hey, you.” Sylvanas whispered, propping herself up on an elbow as Jaina let out a short breath that might have been a laugh.

“Hey.” Jaina breathed in response, lifting a hand and, with some difficulty, stroking at a spot of skin beside Sylvanas’s mouth that was still glistening. “Mess. You’re...a mess.”

Sylvanas wrinkled her nose and leaned in to kiss her in response. “I don’t doubt it.” She murmured. “But if you don’t mind, I sure don’t, either.”


Was that lift of Sylvanas’s ears pride? Lust? Something else, maybe? Jaina just didn’t have the brain power to figure it out, right now. But it was cute as hell. She reached out suddenly and stroked along the length of one of Sylvanas’s ears, murmuring her appreciation as it shifted closer to her hand instead of flicking away.

“Are you turned on, baby?” She asked quietly, the corner of her mouth quirking so slightly that anyone other than Sylvanas might not recognize it as the barest hint of a smirk. “Come here.” Jaina continued, turning onto her side and pulling Sylvanas’s leg over her own hip. She’d never wanted so badly to make someone feel good. It felt like life or death, suddenly. All of it. Especially the flush suddenly coloring Sylvanas’s cheeks to the tips of her ears and the subtle darkening of her eyes.

Jaina pressed her palm between them, splaying her fingers against Sylvanas’s stomach and trailing her nails along it before slipping it back down. She nudged the older woman’s chin up with her own and kissed her bottom lip before murmuring against it. “Are you?”

Oh. Right. Jaina had asked her an actual question. The fingers slipping through the wetness between her legs beneath her underwear and stealing the breath from her lungs must have distracted her. “Yes. Fuck, Jaina...” She hadn’t been expecting this. Not at all. Not in the slightest...but it sure was happening.

“I can. If you want.” Her gaze lowered for a moment. Was that too much? Fuck. Was it?

Sylvanas nodded as her slightly swollen lips parted and she gripped the comforter between them. Okay. Okay, so maybe it wasn’t too much.

“Can I take these off?” Jaina asked - her voice suddenly losing some of its edge of confidence as she removed her hand and toyed with the waistband.

Sylvanas couldn’t help the raspy, weak laugh that left her as she reached down to help Jaina remove them only to find her leg hitched even further over Jaina’s hip this time. A move that left no more room for any more amusement.

“Will you tell me if it’s too...will you just tell me?” Jaina asked, searching for Sylvanas’s eyes until they were looking back at her. Until Sylvanas was kissing her. How a kiss could feel safe, Jaina might never know. But it did. It felt safe and warm and reassuring and it was everything they both needed. Especially when she found that wetness again and sank two of her fingers into it and Sylvanas gasped sharply against her mouth then exhaled in a sound that Jaina could have sworn was both a whimper and a moan all at once. And she was tight. God, she was so tight and warm and soft and...oh, fuck. Sylvanas tensed around her as she pulled her fingers out and slid them back in slowly
and Jaina could’ve sworn she’d fallen through her bed and landed in some divine afterlife.

She hadn’t, though. Or had she? As she began moving her fingers more steadily and Sylvanas grasped her breast before reaching for her shoulder, she started to wonder. Jaina couldn’t take her eyes off of her expressions - the furrow between her brows and the glinting of her fangs in the moonlight. The sounds. The quiet, almost-keening that started in the back of her throat and ended past her lips in sharp, short huffs.

“Harder? More?” Jaina asked breathlessly as Sylvanas dug her fingertips into her shoulder.

“Deeper.” Sylvanas responded, gasping as Jaina lifted her own leg beneath her thigh to spread her wider. It was then that Sylvanas buried her face in the pillow she turned her head towards. It was then that ‘deeper’ became ‘roughe’ and each thrust of Jaina’s hand between her legs dragged a carnal noise from Sylvanas to be buried in the contrasting softness of the pillow.

Jaina made it a point to press her hand fully against Sylvanas each time she buried her fingers hard and fast into her - pressing firmly against her clit each time. After a while, as her confidence grew, she leaned her upper body over Sylvanas’s smaller one, turning with her as she fell onto her back and reached quickly beneath Jaina’s arms to better grip her.

Sylvanas seemed almost frantic. Like she couldn’t decide between looking between their bodies, at Jaina’s face, or shutting her eyes tightly when both options were just too fucking much. Then Jaina was panting against her neck. Biting along her shoulder and baring her teeth against it in response to the strange ache in her arm. It was an ache that she found easy to ignore when Sylvanas began digging her heels into the bed to lift her hips for that same ‘more’ Jaina had been chasing after earlier.

Jaina was fairly certain the sound Sylvanas made when she came was something she would never forget. The repeated whisper of the first syllable of her name - then the first letter - then nothing that could ever be considered words. It was Jaina’s turn, now, despite her exhaustion - to press kisses across Sylvanas’s face and chest even as her arms threatened to give out on her. Then, when they inevitably did - when her weight settled against Sylvanas and her arms slid up beside her - she turned her head to listen to her heart race, unhinged and loud against her ear. “Am I too heavy?” She asked quietly as her eyes fell shut and she found some of Sylvanas’s hair to toy with idly.

Sylvanas tried to laugh. She really did. It just came out as more of a croak. “Baby, I’m not that small. Please.” Sylvanas murmured as her arms finally relaxed around Jaina’s back so she could stroke over the slender expanse of it with her palms.

“Pretty small.” Jaina responded - smiling as she glanced up at Sylvanas to catch her staring right back at her. “And I love that. So much.”

“Alright. I guess I’ll stay small, then.” Sylvanas mumbled as Jaina shut her eyes again and smiled.

It was a long while before Jaina even dared to move. Finally, though, she did. She carefully untwined herself from between Sylvanas’s legs and covered the older woman’s hand as it came to rest on her arm. “Do you want me to bring you a washcloth?” Jaina asked as she ran her thumb over Sylvanas’s knuckles.

“Mm-mm. I'll come with you if my legs still work.”

They did. But barely. In fact, they both leaned on each other just a bit as they made their way to the bathroom. Was this even a bathroom? It was the size of an average hotel room…

Sylvanas didn’t even mind. It was still Jaina. Light colors and soft wooden tones and windows that
overlooked the bay. She waited near one of the vanities as Jaina pulled a couple of cloths down from a nearby cabinet while the water she’d already turned on began to heat up.

Once the cloths were both damp Jaina looked suddenly shy as she glanced up at Sylvanas. “Sorry...I haven’t ever really. Like. Washed up with someone.”

Sylvanas smiled sympathetically and walked over to her, taking the cloth from her giving her a quick kiss. “I’ll be in the bedroom. It’s fine.” Another kiss - this one lingered a little. “I promise.”

Jaina was finished by the time Sylvanas walked back into the bathroom and placed her rag in the hamper near the door. She seemed to have been waiting for that - because as soon as Sylvanas looked back up, she was walking towards her. “I’ll, uh...I’ll get dressed real quick and we can cuddle?” Sylvanas asked as Jaina turned off the bathroom light and somehow found the courage for her response.

“You don’t have to. Get dressed, I mean.” Jaina noticed the hopeful lilt to Sylvanas’s responding smile before she continued. “I like how this feels. I just...I just like this. I like you.”

“I sure hope so.” Sylvanas murmured - her voice both gentle and teasing before they helped each other back into bed - on top of the sinfully soft comforter that Sylvanas honestly found herself already growing attached to. They couldn’t be that expensive, right?

As they settled down on their sides facing each other their legs seemed to twine together naturally without them even trying - as did their fingers as Jaina reached for Sylvanas’s hand between their chests. “I like it, too, by the way.” Sylvanas continued at long last - sighing appreciatively as Jaina began combing through her hair with the fingers of her free hand. “And I like you, too. Very much.”

“That’s good to know. Definitely a relief.”

“I’m rubbing off on you.” Sylvanas was grinning, now. Fuck, she was so beautiful.

“I’m down any time.” Jaina responded with a grin of her own.

Sylvanas was a little fatigued to catch it on the first pass, but as the words sank in she gasped. “Jaina Proudmoore.” Her tone was somehow both accusatory and adoring.

“That’s my name.” Jaina responded, though her voice seemed to be getting softer and softer despite the seemingly permanent smile plastered on her face.

“It’s such a good name, baby.” Sylvanas leaned in to kiss her. Even the kiss felt different, now, somehow. “Goodnight. You’re falling asleep.”

“Am not.” Jaina mumbled as Sylvanas shifted closer to her.

“I’ll see you in the morning.” Sylvanas whispered in response. She was glad she managed to hold on long enough to hear the jumble of words she had no chance of making out that she got in response.

Sylvanas didn’t budge until a sudden chill caused goosebumps to rise along her skin and pulled a quiet whine from her - a whine that cut off when she reached for Jaina and found nothing but an empty bed.

“Jaina?” She sat up groggily and looked around the room until her eyes landed on the open door that led to the balcony she’d noticed earlier. Fuck, had she had a nightmare? How had she slept through it? Well...she probably knew how, actually.
As quickly as she could get her bearings, she stopped by the bathroom and pulled on a robe she’d seen hanging in it before making her way outside - wincing at the harshness of the winter air against her far too exposed body.

“Babe...baby, it’s freezing out here.” She called out as a sudden breeze whipped her hair from her face and caused her to sputter in protest.

Jaina looked over her shoulder at her and worry registered on her face. “I’ll be back in in a minute. Go back inside, silly.”

Sylvanas pulled her hair back out of her eyes as she padded across the distance between them and moved to press against Jaina’s back, relishing her warmth as she wrapped her arms around her middle. “Why would I do that? You’re out here.”

“Mmm. You’re so sweet.” Jaina responded as she lifted a hand behind herself to stroke the back of Sylvanas’s head when the other woman’s chin came to rest against her shoulder. Even as cold as it was, Sylvanas appreciated the smell of salt in the air and the sight of far-off waves crashing gently back down after they rose almost lazily.

“I never wanted a TV in there. Mother always tried to have them put in and I just...I never wanted to drown out this sound, you know?”

Sylvanas nodded as she tightened her hold on Jaina, as much for heat as to just...be closer to her. “We don’t ever have to have a TV, Jaina.” She murmured in response.

“You’ll get bored with me eventually, Sylvanas.” Jaina laughed - and Sylvanas couldn’t really tell if her heart was in it or not.

“Bored?” She asked quietly as that laughter faded. “You haven’t heard the way you breathe while you sleep if you think that’s possible.”

Sylvanas lifted one of her hands, pressing it over Jaina’s chest to feel the slow, steady rise and fall of it as her eyes stayed trained on the darkness of the water. “It’s kinda like this.” She murmured against Jaina’s jaw - falling silent for a while. Just allowing the sound of the waves and the wind to surround them. “You know when each wave is coming...but it doesn’t change how soothing it is when it happens. It’s like that with you.” Sylvanas kissed the side of Jaina’s neck then as Jaina inclined her head towards her slightly.

“That’s how I know I could never be bored. Because in the space between your breaths - whether we’re just sitting together or if you fall asleep before me...or when you’re still again after your dreams, I always know the next one is coming. No matter how rough things are for me or what I’m going through, I always know.”

Jaina turned so slowly in her arms that it made Sylvanas wonder what she was thinking. It almost made her worry, before Jaina’s expression finally registered. It was almost like...wonderment. She didn’t know how else to describe it. She only knew nobody had ever looked at her that way before.

Sylvanas noticed it, too, then. The difference in the way Jaina kissed her. She let herself melt into it. Melt into Jaina’s arms and into the softness of her mouth as the sounds of the water threatened to take her over entirely. Home. It felt like home, here. On this cold balcony wrapped in the warmth of Jaina’s arms. With her eyes shut - she could almost see the palm trees and the sun. Only...this was more like home than home was. This was the ‘home’ that people wrote songs about. The ‘home’ she never, ever thought she’d have again.
When she opened her eyes again, she felt no different. No, it was still there. In the stormy blue looking back at her and the freckles and the smile. Fuck, it was still there.

“You’re freezing.” Jaina whispered, taking her hands in her own for a moment before she led her back inside and shut the door behind them.

This time, Jaina lifted the comforter for them once their robes were discarded on the floor. This time, she pulled Sylvanas back against her chest as she turned onto her side. “Thank you.” Jaina’s voice was barely audible as she kissed the nape of Sylvanas’s neck. “Thank you for being.”

Sylvanas found Jaina’s hand as the chill finally began to subside. “For being what?” She asked quietly as she lifted Jaina’s hand to kiss it before tucking it back against herself beneath the haven of the blanket.

“Just for being.”
Sometime during the night, Sylvanas had turned in her sleep. She was still pressed against Jaina, her skin warmed by both her body heat and the thick comforter that covered them. But now her back was pressed against Jaina’s chest. Their legs were tangled in each other. And as the early morning sun greeted them, shining over the ocean and through the wall of windows that overlooked the bay, this was what Jaina woke up to. An overwhelming thought of warmth, safety, and one other idea.

They fit. They just fit together. Physically, Sylvanas’ narrow hips formed perfectly against her fuller ones. Sylvanas’ strong thighs captured one of her knees expertly. Jaina found that she could brush a kiss against her neck from this angle, just right, without disturbing her long ears, even as they drooped listlessly with sleep. And more so than that. Not just the parts of them that formed together like puzzle pieces, but the place in her heart that Sylvanas was carving out. It was a perfect fit for her. For everything she had given Jaina already, and the promise of so much more to come.

A second kiss caused Sylvanas to stir into wakefulness. She was a light sleeper. That much Jaina had learned already. But they needed to be up soon, and Jaina didn’t want to lose this opportunity. No, she was awake now, and clear-headed. As much as last night had been amazing, the whole thing had felt like a dream at the time, fogged in afterglow even hours later when she’d woken up and went out onto the balcony. But now, she could truly appreciate the smaller woman in her arms.
Jaina rested a hand on Sylvanas’ stomach to draw her closer. She brushed another along her spine, tracing the intricate arrow tattoo that ran along it, from its beautiful fletching, that started just above her hips, to the pointed tip that ended just between her shoulder blades. She moved her head down a bit to place a single kiss on the tip of that arrow.

“Mmm good morning to you to,” Sylvanas finally mumbled at that. Her hips canted slightly into Jaina’s, bringing with them more memories of the night before. Wonderful memories, still bright and vivid and full of sensation.

“Good morning,” Jaina said as she began to pull Sylvanas’ long hair up the pillow and out of the way so that she could see the rest of her back.

They laid that way for a while, not talking, so much as communicating through touch and appreciative murmurs. Jaina couldn’t keep her hands off Sylvanas, but not in the same way as the night before. No, now it was just a furious need to be as close to her as possible, as wrapped in her as she could be. For just one more minute, then maybe another, then another. Because she knew what would happen, when they finally untangled themselves. She knew they would get up, and face a day she didn’t want to face. She knew that she owed Sylvanas about ten thousand explanations that were long past due.

But God, this was much easier, and much nicer than the prospect of what was to come, wasn’t it?

But eventually, Jaina's alarm blared it's usual siren song. Both of them groaned simultaneously, then laughed, then groaned again as Jaina finally rolled away to silence her phone.

"But it's so warm in here," Sylvanas protested, the grain of sleep still gritting her voice as she reached after Jaina.

"I know, but we have to get ready," Jaina complained, as much to herself as she did to Sylvanas. She looked at the time on her phone again to remind herself of that fact.

Then at the text she'd gotten earlier that morning, whose chime she had ignored as she wrapped herself tighter around Sylvanas. It was from Anduin. A picture of an ugly little black dog in a banana costume, with a caption:

Nathanos and I are Black Friday shopping and he found this stunning outfit. We are going to be fashion icons! Hope you and my Danny survived Mama P <3.

Jaina's laugh immediately drew Sylvanas toward her. She snaked her way through the comforter to rest her head on Jaina's shoulder to ask, "Let me guess, Anduin?"

Jaina showed her the picture.

Sylvanas burst into a quick little laugh. “How did I know?” she asked as she snuck in a kiss to Jaina’s cheek. Then another. Then one more for good measure. “As much as I’m loving this, we should probably get up so we can save my dog from him.”

And God, Jaina was loving it. She was loving the way that Sylvanas’ skin was warm against hers. The way she could feel the gentle curves of her, and her hard angles, pressed against her back. And how the morning light filtered in through her hair. How when she chanced a look back at her, she could still see a faint smear of eyeliner, and smell her shampoo. Just...all of this. All of it she wanted so much, but really, anywhere but here. Anywhere but this place.

That stark reminder was what finally pulled Jaina out of bed. She thought about trying to steal a blanket to cover herself with at first, but realized that was pointless. Even in the relative dark of the
night, Sylvanas had already seen everything there was to see on her and about her, and she had all but worshipped it. Jaina had nothing to hide, and no reason to hide it. That felt...really nice.

She smiled to herself as she walked to the bathroom door, naked and not caring about it.

“I’m going to shower real quick. There’s a really nice ensuite for the room across the hall that you can use, if you want,” Jaina offered as she ducked into the bathroom.

“If I want?” Sylvanas asked. Jaina didn’t need to turn around to hear the smirk in her voice.

When she did turn around and peek back through the doorway, she confirmed she was right about the smirk, but didn’t know what exactly it meant.

“What if I don’t want?” Sylvanas continued, leaning on her elbows in the bed, her chest just barely covered by the comforter.

Then it dawned on Jaina. A thought she’d had, to herself, a while ago. Well, a few times. Pretty much every time she’d been in Sylvanas’ bathroom. That she wanted to shower with her for some reason. That this would be an amazing thing. A thought that she was sure was contained entirely in her skull, and existed nowhere else in the world, certainly not in Sylvanas’ mind at all.

How nice it was to be proven wrong.

“Sylvanas Windrunner,” she said in mock shock. “Are you suggesting we shower together?”

That fanged grin was an answer enough. “I mean, it would save time, if you’re okay with it, of course,” Sylvanas replied.

“Please get in here now, before I lose my nerve,” Jaina demanded.

It turned out that showering together was intimate in a way that the night before didn’t even compare to. Though there were a few lingering kisses under the hot water, a few touches along places on each other’s bodies that were still new, still just becoming something to be touched. But it wasn’t about that. It was about Jaina’s hands in Sylvanas’ hair, admiring the smoothness of it’s wet, silky texture as she rubbed shampoo into it. It was about Sylvanas lathering up some body wash and then laughing as she dabbed a bit of the suds on the tip of Jaina’s nose. It was about all of this being comfortable and normal. About how looking at each other was still exciting, but also just...another thing they could do now.

Just like drying their hair and writing dumb things in the condensation on the mirrors. Just like getting dressed together. Just like doing their makeup together in the same mirror, though there were two of them. Well, until it was time for Jaina to put on her jewelry again. Until the heavy weight of gold settled on her neck and fingers and wrists. It reminded her again of where she was, and that it didn’t matter who she was with. This place...these things...it all felt like manacles and chains still. Even after all this time.

Jaina wondered if she would ever just slip the lock on those chains one day and throw away the key. If she could.

“So this breakfast thing,” Sylvanas started as she finished pulling her hair up into a messy sort of bun. “Am I dressed okay for it?”

She was. She was actually very cute and rather feminine today, in her off the shoulder sweater and tight, dark jeans. The hair up was a very nice touch. Jaina couldn’t recall ever seeing her in anything other than a ponytail, and she liked it, but still longed to run her fingers through it some more all the
“Yeah, you look great,” Jaina told her, trying to push the distance from her voice.

It didn’t work. “Would you rather we just go home?” Sylvanas asked. “We can do that, right?”

“We can’t,” Jaina replied with a firm shake of her head, which caused her overly intricate earrings to tinkle way too loudly against her ears. “The breakfast won’t be bad. We can stay away from my mom there. It’s why I’m here, after all. All of my dad’s old friends will be there, from the yacht club. It’s really the only time I see them anymore. I grew up with them, there. On the boats. Running around with their kids while they sat at the bar and told the same stories over and over. To me, that’s more home than this place. It always will be.”

Suddenly Sylvanas’ hand was on hers, wrapping it in a warm, steady grip. “Then we’ll go. I can’t wait to see your real home, Jaina.”

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But they would have to wait. Pained was at the foot of the stairs as they came down, standing stiffly even as she smiled up at them. “I’ll take your bags, ladies. The lady of the house wants you for coffee in the breakfast room before you go.”

Sylvanas didn’t know that such a thing as a breakfast room existed until that moment in her life, until she kept hold of Jaina’s hand while she led them into a slightly less-oppressive room, filled with large windows that had had their curtains partially drawn back to reveal the cold November morning outside. They looked over the gardens, where frost still clung to the evergreen hedges.

But apparently a breakfast room was just a smaller dining room, only no one was sitting at the table. Tandred was leaning by a buffet again, this time filled with two silver carafes and a tray of china mugs and sugar bowls and cream pitchers. Oh, and another tray of little pastries, all of which would have been at home in the window of any specialty shop, for all of their finesse and intricacies. Yet Tandred didn’t even look at the one he unceremoniously shoved into his mouth as he waved at them.

Katherine, meanwhile, was a silhouette against those garden windows, as stiff as the frosted leaves of the foliage outside, and as severe as the coming winter itself.

“There’s coffee and tea,” she said without turning around.

Sylvanas had half-expected a jab about caffeine to come with with that statement, but it didn’t. Maybe Katherine had decided to behave today.

“Thanks,” Jaina offered coolly as she went over to the buffet.

Tandred took another pastry and nearly ran off to an uncomfortable looking loveseat at the other end of the room as they approached, smiling oddly at them through the crumbs on his mouth all the while.

They hadn’t...heard anything, right? No. Not in this giant house. Not while they were still probably downstairs, several bottles of wine deep for the day. Sylvanas settled that moment of panic within herself. No. It wasn’t possible.

Jaina poured a tea for herself and quietly asked Sylvanas if she wanted coffee. She seemed, more herself this morning. Not entirely herself, but a little stronger, a little bolder. Sylvanas was proud of her as she watched her mix a splash of milk into her tea. Proud enough to give her hand a little squeeze as she reached for sugar for the small cup of coffee she had poured for herself. Less than she
usually would, for fear of spilling any on the ornate rug beneath her feet.

Katherine waited for them to turn around, for both women to take a sip from their cups, to give them a sense of normalcy, before she started. She didn't turn herself, but kept looking out at the frozen morning as she said, "I'm not going to the yacht club. Too much to do here, you understand."

Sylvanas' eyes immediately shot to Jaina's face, trying to read her expression.

It was definitely anger. "We go every year, mom," Jaina protested flatly, tightly gripping her tea. "Ever since dad started this. Before I was born, even."

"I'm not cancelling the event. Let the sailors have their fun. I just don't need to be there. You don't either. You can go back to the city and do whatever it is that makes you happy there," Katherine waved off as she finally turned to face them.

"Mom, this is literally the one tradition we even have. One of the few pieces of what dad left behind that we still get the enjoy. And you want to let that go now?" Jaina demanded.

"Some of us are more adept at letting things go than others, Jaina. In time, maybe you will understand why that is," Katherine said as she turned back to the window again in what felt like a dismissal.

"Is it because of what I said before? Because I didn't just stand there and let you belittle me this time?" Jaina asked her. This time, it was actually Jaina. The real Jaina. The one that dived headlong into things, even when she probably shouldn't. The one for whom fear was an afterthought.

"You always think everything is about you, don't you?" Katherine sighed.

Jaina set her tea aside on the buffet and gave Sylvanas a look she'd never seen before. A warning. A message. A storm brewing behind her eyes, laden with a hundred things she could not summon the words for yet. Not quite yet.

"Can you go find Pained, please?" she asked quietly, the words straining against her teeth. "Find out what she did with our bags. We're leaving."

Sylvanas nodded, understanding that she was being given an excuse not to hear what was about to happen. That Jaina wasn't ready for that yet. That maybe, this was a side of her that wasn't soft and kind. Maybe there was a nice girl who was tired of being kicked around instead.

The problem was, well, it was a big house. They were on the opposite end from the dining room, so Sylvanas had no idea where the kitchen would be. She checked the foyer again to find it empty, then wandered back to the hall outside the breakfast room. Close enough to hear shouting. Too close.

But Pained was probably nearby, waiting in case someone needed something. Right?

Sylvanas chose a door next to the breakfast room, and slipped into the dim light of an empty room. She almost closed the door again to move onto another room, but a sheen of morning light on pure, glossy black caught her attention.

A piano. A baby grand.

That was enough to get her to find the switch and turn on the lights. It was a music room. Fuck. A fucking music room.

The piano took center stage on a little raised platform, just under the windows. Guitars lined the
walls, all of which would have been right at home on the walls of her shop, except they'd already been restored, or were just in beautiful original condition. While still lined with dark wood, this room had a different feel to it. Calmer. Not so heavy. And pictures, the first actual pictures Sylvanas had seen in the house. Not paintings, but photographs, lined one whole wall.

The largest of these was at the center. A family on a sailboat, squinting into the summer sun and smiling. A tall, broad-shouldered man with thick brown hair and mischief in his eyes. Katherine, her steel gray hair blonde in her youth, and looking strange with her genuine smile. A teenage boy, blonde and all limbs. A blonde little girl, laughing as her older brother picked her up. Sylvanas recognized the light in those stormy blue eyes and smiled. And of course, a little red-headed toddler, clinging to his mother's leg.

So she had two brothers? Where was the older one?

Sylvanas tried not to dwell on it. She knew Jaina would tell her, when she was ready. She could feel that that would be soon, and honestly, there was no rush. She could see family wasn't a good subject for Jaina. She didn't want to force her to talk about something that hurt her.

But it hadn't always been that way, had it? Most of the photos were from a long time ago, when the kids were young. They were always with their father, sharing his wide smile. Then after that, no photos for a while. Then just a teenage Jaina, holding an array of acceptance letters and smiling, then riding a horse in a...polo uniform? Holy shit. That was...wow.

They were all off to one side. All on their own. All pictures of accomplishments and…

Things she wanted to share with her father.

It dawned on Sylvanas very quickly. This room felt better because it wasn't Katherine's. It was his. Whoever he was, this smiling man who loved the sea and his children.

Did he play? Sylvanas could only wonder as she wandered over to the piano. Fuck. A Steinway. Of course it was a Steinway. That thing had to have cost more than most luxury cars. It was clean, sure, but was it in tune? Did anyone even do it justice here, in this forgotten room?

Well, there was only one way to find out. She really...she really should have been looking for Pained. They needed to leave before that shouting match got any louder. But...a Steinway.

Sylvanas debated with herself for only a few seconds more. But it became clear which side won out when she gently laid a finger on middle C, just enough to hear it ring out, perfectly in tune, as softly as it could be played. God. What a sound.

What a contrast to the sounds that were leaking in from next door.

"You have no right!" Jaina shouted.

"Tell that to me when she bleeds you dry, Jaina. Your father thought you wise enough to manage what he left you, but don't think for a second that your money isn't the first thing that anyone will care about," Katherine shouted back.

"I never even told her about any of this! She didn't know! And she cares about me anyway! Not everyone is you, mother. There are some decent people in this world that don't go looking for gold and diamonds out of a relationship."

"And what is it you think she wants from you, hmm?"
"Did love ever cross your mind?"

Sylvanas found herself smiling at the silence that followed that comment. Smiling and playing a quiet scale. Fuck did those keys feel nice. Perfectly responsive.

"Is that what you think you want, Jaina? Love? Love doesn’t put a roof over your head. Love doesn’t pay for your damn education, or your apartment,” Katherine went on.

"Neither do you, mom. And honestly, love sounds much better than all of that. I almost forgot what it felt like, you know,” Jaina retorted, her voice further muffled by the walls as it got quieter.

"Is this how it is, then? You’re going to tell me you love her--you love this no name lesbian that suddenly swept you up and showed you everything you feel like you didn’t have? You already have everything, Jaina. All I ask is that you show some gratitude.”

"Would it really be so bad if I did tell you that?"

Sylvanas had barely heard her, but it was enough to make her smile and play another soft note. She sat down at the bench. Just to see how it felt. Just for a moment.

How long had it been? How long had it been since she’d sat at their old used Yamaha in the living room and played her heart out? Ten years? No, longer now.

Sylvanas looked around the room, at the instruments that dotted room like just another piece of decor. “You would have loved this, dad,” she whispered to no one. “In fact, I’m pretty sure you and Mr. Proudmoore here would have gotten along great.”

Maybe just...one more chord. Just a little louder this time, so she could hear how it really sounded. With the way things were going in the other room, it didn’t seem like she’d ever get to play this thing again. So...she might as well, right?

A D minor 7. God, it was wonderful. She couldn’t stop her right hand at that point. It went off on it’s own, playing a jazzy little twirl from muscle memory--from the memory of her father’s smile the first time she got it just right. Then more chords, more twirls, the keys smooth as velvet under her touch, expert, but rusty. She didn’t let that stop her, though. She kept playing, right until the part where dad normally started singing.

But no, she couldn’t stop there. She...she had to finish the song. So Sylvanas played louder, and sang softly along, “It’s nine o’clock on a Saturday…”

It became easier as she went along. Her hands remembered what her mind thought she’d forgotten. Every bar was better, looser, lighter, more like the original. And though the Steinway sounded wonderful, it wasn’t enough like her old piano. It didn’t face a window full of palm trees and sunny skies. It didn’t have her dad singing along, or her siblings dancing around it, or her mother clapping at the end.

In fact, it had a very different mother bursting through the door and staring daggers into her, with Jaina behind her, eyes wide with shock.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Katherine asked Sylvanas through clenched teeth.

The notes died off in a sudden clatter, even as her fingers burned to keep playing. “I, uh, sorry. I couldn’t find Pained.”

“Get up,” Katherine growled.
“Mom,” Jaina offered as she shouldered her way past her and headed for Sylvanas. “She didn’t mean anything. Relax, please.”

“Get her away from that piano,” Katherine demanded, not moving from the door.

Then she looked away. At the floor. At anywhere that wasn’t the room, that wasn’t the dying echoes of the music that had filled it only moments before.

Jaina moved to meet Sylvanas even as she stood and moved away from the bench as fast as she could. “I didn’t know you could play,” Jaina whispered as she took hold of her arm.

“I uh, yeah, I kind of used to play a lot. Was that bad? Did I just make this worse? Fuck, I’m sorry,” Sylvanas whispered back.

“I don’t...I don’t know. That’s my...my dad played that piano. Not near as good as you. Damn, Sylvanas, what can’t you do?” Jaina asked as a ghost of a smile returned to her.

“The right thing, apparently,” Sylvanas answered as she looked over at Katherine again, who was giving the floor a pained thousand year stare.

“I think you might be wrong about that, actually,” Jaina hummed as she squeezed her arm and then let go to walk over to her mother. “It’s been a while since I’ve heard that piano. I didn’t even know you kept it in tune.”

“It deteriorates if you don’t tune it,” Katherine answered her quietly.

“Can’t have that,” Jaina stated matter-of-factly.

“No, we can’t,” Katherine responded, her voice quiet and much more pleasant this way. Much more normal, even. Like this was how she actually spoke, when she wasn’t trying to portray some sort of image.

“So I don’t think you really have any ground to stand on, about what you said earlier--about letting things go. And that’s okay, mom. It’s all okay. You are allowed to miss dad. We all miss him,” Jaina told her, and even hazarded a brush against Katherine’s hand with her own.

Katherine still snatched her hand back, but didn’t look up as she said, “You know I don’t need any reminders of that. I have enough. I still don’t want to go to the breakfast.”

“Well, I’m going,” Jaina told her plainly. “Because it’s tradition. Because a Proudmoore should be at the Proudmoore Yacht Club sometimes. Because dad would be happy, to know that I still talk to his friends and keep up with the things he loved in life.”

“Then go, Jaina. I’m not going to try to stop you,” Katherine offered as she swung the door wider to let them out.

“You couldn’t if you tried, you know,” Jaina told her as she motioned for Sylvanas to follow her out.

“I know.”

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It turns out that Pained had been in the kitchen trying to find the chef. Jaina was able to find her easily through an intercom system that Sylvanas had thought were just thermostats or something. She even beat them to the front door, and had their bags in hand as she dove in to hug Jaina goodbye.
“I know you hate it here, but I miss your face,” Pained told her as she wrapped her up in her too-strong arms. “Text me sometimes to let me know you’re okay?”

“I will,” Jaina promised. “And I miss your face too. Please take care of them for me.”

“You know it,” Pained offered in return.

As soon as they were in the safety and silence of the truck, both Jaina and Sylvanas both blurted out at once.

“That was--”

“You were--”

And they laughed. Laughter like balm for the soul. Laughter that lightened the burden of this place, even as they drove away from it. Even as they headed toward another bastion of heaviness for Jaina.

“I’m…really glad I brought you here. I know it’s a lot. But, I really needed you,” Jaina told Sylvanas as the giggles died down. “And fuck. Watching you play was...amazing. I didn’t know.”

“We’re still learning a lot about each other, huh?” Sylvanas wondered aloud with a grin. “I um, wanted to be a concert pianist. It’s what I went to school for, before all the shit hit the fan in my life, and even a little bit after, honestly.”

“Holy shit, Sylvanas. That’s amazing,” Jaina said as she grabbed for one of her hands with a new appreciation for the fingers that she’d always thought were so graceful and delicate.

“Not as amazing as you were, standing up to her like that,” Sylvanas told her.

“I’ve...never really done that before. Usually any argument with her is so pointless that I just give up. I don’t think I won there either, but it felt really good to just...say my piece for once,” Jaina admitted as she gripped the hand she’d stolen from the steering wheel.

“You’re amazing,” Sylvanas told her. “And honestly, fuck her. I don’t know what her problem is, and you don’t need to tell me now if you’re not ready to, but you’re perfect. You’re wonderful. And fuck your mom for not agreeing with that.”

Jaina didn’t have the words to answer that. She didn’t still as they finished the short trip and pulled into the parking lot for the yacht club. She didn’t even as Sylvanas struggled to find a spot, as it was full of people going to the breakfast. She just...felt light. So light. Like she could float away. Like she could...actually do this. All of this. Everything. Life itself. She could do it, as long as Sylvanas would do it with her.

So Jaina just answered with a smile. One that Sylvanas probably recognized from those photos in the music room.

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“You don’t have anything to be nervous about.” Jaina recognized how hypocritical that might have come across if Sylvanas were aware of just how nervous she was, herself. Thankfully, Sylvanas didn’t seem to notice or, if she did, she didn’t say anything.

They stood there beside the truck for a moment as Sylvanas fussed over her shirt before Jaina reached for her hands and pulled them both close, pressing a kiss over each of them before she pulled the older woman into a hug. “It’s not gonna be that bad, babe.” Jaina murmured as she slowly released her from her arms and stroked over her shoulders quickly.

Sylvanas turned her attention from Jaina to the entrance of the club and nodded. “At least there isn’t a valet.” She murmured distractedly, glancing down as she felt Jaina twine their fingers together and give her hand a gentle tug in the direction they really should be heading in.

“No valets for this. You’ll see. It isn’t like that.” Jaina reassured quietly as Sylvanas offered her a smile, even if she found herself having a difficult time believing that.

Much to her surprise, though, Jaina had been right. Sure, it was ostentatious. Sure, there were rich women smiling at each other over the mimosas. Sure, their husbands with their nice sweaters were lined up chatting along floor to ceiling windows that overlooked Proudmoore Marina. But there were
normal people, too. People who greeted Jaina with so much warmth that Sylvanas couldn’t help but start to relax.

One such person, in particular, caused Jaina to light up in a way Sylvanas hadn’t been expecting - but that she would never forget.

“Jaina!”

Sylvanas took a slight step back as a rather burly, greying man wrapped Jaina in his arms and nearly lifted her from her feet in his excitement. He was easily twice her size, especially in width. He looked like he had once had dark hair, though most of it was greying, along with his well-kept mustache that Sylvanas only noticed when he finally released Jaina from the hug. “It’s nice to see you, too, Thornby.” Jaina responded with a quiet laugh as he turned both his attention and his bushy eyebrows in Sylvanas’s directions.

“And who is this fine young woman you’ve brought with you today?”

Strapping. Strapping was a good word for this man. Perhaps jovial. Such were the thoughts Sylvanas suddenly found herself jarred from as Jaina looked over her with what she could only interpret as pride. It made her heart flutter in her chest and the corners of her lips turn up slightly.

“Sylvanas, this is Captain Thornby. Thornby, this is my girlfriend, Sylvanas.”

Rather than reproach or judgement - as Sylvanas had come to expect from Jaina’s mother, and, thusly, those connected to her - she found herself the subject of a disarmingly charming smile. A twinkling of brown eyes - one that spoke of happiness. Genuine happiness. He held out a large, rough hand and she took it without reservation.

“It’s nice to meet you, Sylvanas. Lovely to see Jaina’s finally found someone as pretty as herself.”

“Thornby, please.” Jaina murmured as he released Sylvanas’s hand and she laughed quietly. The laugh that Jaina loved more than almost anything in the world. One that made her glad they’d stuck it out and made it here this morning.

“Please, what? I’m allowed to point out the obvious. You might say I’m...Captain-”

“Do not.” Jaina leveled a very serious gaze at him, but an announcement that breakfast was going to be served saved him from any further trouble.

The comfortable mingling of two very different kinds of people continued into breakfast. In fact, Sylvanas was genuinely enjoying herself. The eggs benedict certainly didn’t hurt matters. Nor did the fact that they were seated at a table next to the windows so close to the water Sylvanas could hear it lapping against the side of the building outside.

“You’re quiet.” Jaina finally observed as one of the waitstaff brought them more of the juice they’d both chosen to drink.

“I’m sorry.” Sylvanas responded quickly as she placed her silverware down on her mostly clean plate. “I’ve just...been having a nice time watching you, I guess.”

Jaina couldn’t do much about the blush that resulted from Sylvanas’s admission aside from avert her eyes for a moment.

“Don’t be sorry. I’ve just been...I don’t know. It’s nice. It’s nice to see them.” Jaina finally responded amidst the din of conversation that filled the room.
Sylvanas nodded and reached for Jaina’s hand across the tabletop, though she stopped herself and glanced around halfway. Jaina only gave her a reassuring smile and bridged the rest of the distance, herself - covering Sylvanas’s hand with her own as they finally managed to really look at each other for what felt like the first time since they’d walked through the doors.

“I’m glad. I’m so glad this is good for you. And I’d be lying if I said I didn’t enjoy the fact that almost no one has asked where your mother is.”

Jaina nearly snorted in response to that. “Most of these just…aren’t her people, honestly. It’s a lot to explain. Was your breakfast good?”

Sylvanas looked down at her plate with an almost sheepish smile. “Just a little bit. Maybe. I might have also worked up an appetite last night.”

The resulting stare-down from Jaina bordered on intense. Until Sylvanas grinned softly at her from across the table - allowing one of her fangs to show for a brief moment just for good measure.

“You’re adorable.” Jaina said - her tone as dry as her face was expressionless until she couldn’t contain her own smile anymore even as she felt her face flush slightly as memories of just what had worked up that appetite flooded her mind momentarily. “And I can’t wait to get you back home where we’re both comfortable.”

“What’s...what’s that supposed to mean?” Sylvanas asked, though the way she quirked a brow coupled with the slight rise of her ears told Jaina she absolutely knew what it meant.

“Nothing at all.” Came her actual response followed by a faint scrunch of her nose that was...utterly disarming. There was little Sylvanas could do about it, though. Especially in a room full of people in a yacht club. In...Jaina’s family’s yacht club.

Soon enough, breakfast was over and Sylvanas was once again walking around the room with Jaina. Mostly saying goodbyes - doing a little more talking, herself, this time. Then, a pleasantly familiar voice drew their attention from behind.

“Hey, Jaina?”

Jaina turned to look at Thornby questioningly - leaning closer to Sylvanas as she felt the other woman’s hand brush her lower back.

“I was just wondering if you wanted to take The Lady out.” He sounded almost hopeful.

Yet, for some reason, Sylvanas could almost physically feel Jaina tense beside her.

“You haven’t wintered her yet?” There was something almost accusatory in Jaina’s tone. Yet...it didn’t sound harsh. It sounded almost sad. Sad with an edge of anxiety.

Thornby simply shook his head, his brow furrowing slightly. “No. I was waiting for you.”

It was the aging man’s turn, now, to sound almost trepidatious. Yet there was something hopeful about him - and though Sylvanas couldn’t begin to understand what was going on, or the emotion behind it - she found herself hoping Jaina would agree. If only for Thornby’s sake.

“When can you have her ready to sail?” Jaina finally asked as Sylvanas looked at her almost worryingly, though her full attention was on the man in front of them who was now smiling that warm, gigantic, open smile again.
“She’s already ready, Jaina.”

Jaina nodded softly. “Alright. Just around the bay. A couple hours or so. And then you’ll take care of her for the season?”

“Always, Jaina. I always do.” He responded immediately - sounding like the alternative was something he’d never even considered. It wasn’t. It absolutely wasn’t.

Sylvanas stood with Jaina for a while after Thornby left. She couldn’t even find the right words when Jaina began leading her towards the back of the club to the doors that led out to the docks and slips outside. So she just asked the foremost question on her mind, instead. “What’s The Lady?”

Jaina cleared her throat and cast a quick, nervous glance in Sylvanas’s direction as they rounded the corner and Thornby hailed them both from the boarding ramp of an absolutely stunning yacht. A breathtaking mixture of old and new. Beautiful wood and elegant, stark white curves. It even had a back deck that hung just above the surface of the water. That much Sylvanas could see with the way the craft was positioned. And on the side, in beautiful script - ‘The Lady Jaina’.

“Oh.” Sylvanas murmured softly.

“She...my father…” Jaina pursed her lips and shook her head as she stumbled over the words. She was ready to tell her. She really was. But not on a dock people were strolling along. Not here.

“It’s okay.” Sylvanas pushed the shock of the fact that they were about to board a yacht with Jaina’s name on it into the farthest reaches of her mind and took the other woman’s hand, instead. “She’s...I’ve never seen anything like this.” And she hadn’t. She’d seen plenty of boats and ships in California. More than she could count. But this one...they all paled in comparison to it.

Jaina nodded and looked at Sylvanas’s carefully. Appreciatively. “She was built for me.”

That was the only explanation she gave right then, before leading Sylvanas towards the ramp and up - onto the flawless deck as Thorny began finishing the work he needed to do to get them moving. Sylvanas couldn’t ignore the way Jaina held her hand. So tightly that it almost hurt. In fact, she wouldn’t have ignored that if her life depended upon it. She thought of a million things to say. She thought to offer that they didn’t have to do this - but that was no good. Jaina hadn’t done this for herself or for Sylvanas, that much had been clear. Jaina had done this for someone else. Thornby? Maybe...but Sylvanas didn’t think so. Not entirely, at least. She figured for right now, as Jaina led her towards the top cabin and the heated comfort of it - that it was best to just rest a hand on her back as they looked out over the grey of the water until it seemed like Jaina was slightly more comfortable. Until she was leaning against her as the yacht began to move.

“Will you be okay once we’re out there?” Sylvanas asked softly, tilting her head slightly so that Jaina would hear her over the sound of the propellors kicking off far beneath them and the powerful engines that drove them.

“Better. I’ll be better once we are, yes. Don’t worry so much about me, babe. Enjoy the ride, alright?” Jaina tried her best to offer Sylvanas what she hoped was an uplifting smile. It wasn’t. At all. But Sylvanas’s heart ached in response to the effort.

“Would you mind if we went inside for a while?” Sylvanas asked softly, tilting her head slightly so that Jaina would hear her over the sound of the propellors kicking off far beneath them and the powerful engines that drove them.

“Better. I’ll be better once we are, yes. Don’t worry so much about me, babe. Enjoy the ride, alright?” Jaina tried her best to offer Sylvanas what she hoped was an uplifting smile. It wasn’t. At all. But Sylvanas’s heart ached in response to the effort.

“Would you mind if we went inside for a while?” Jaina asked as she pressed a bit closer, trying to keep the faint tremor out of her voice as she spoke.

“Babe, I’m fine if you are. It’s not that cold...plus it’s beautiful out here.” Sylvanas wrapped an arm around her, though, and looked at her carefully. She watched as Jaina seemed to struggle with
something that was, as yet, unspoken before very obviously forcing a faint smile.

“We can stay out here if you want.”

Sylvanas frowned and glanced out at the water quickly as they turned towards the openness of the bay. It was calm. The ride was smooth. Incredibly so, thanks to the size and the quality of the craft. Yet still, Jaina seemed strangely unsteady considering all the evidence Sylvanas had seen suggesting she should be perfectly at home on the water.

“What if I don’t want?” Sylvanas asked as she stroked Jaina’s side with the thumb of the hand that was holding it.

Jaina turned slowly to face Sylvanas, then, and lifted a hand to her cheek as she placed a kiss against the other one. “Let’s go inside. Let’s talk.” She murmured near enough to her ear that she would be able to hear her.

Sylvanas slipped her arms around Jaina’s waist until the younger woman pulled away and opened the door they’d been standing near.

The warmth was more than welcome...but nowhere near as welcome as the fact that, as soon as the door shut, Jaina seemed at least a little okay. Nowhere near her usual self...but at least okay. They kept moving across the cabin until Jaina tucked them neatly into a corner of it - until they were sinking into plush leather seats and Sylvanas had an arm around her. She didn’t rush her. She wanted to know, though. Of course, she wanted to know. But she’d have waited forever. She’d have held her like that forever - to the gentle sounds of water against the hull and engines pulling them deeper into the water. In fact, Sylvanas was almost surprised when Jaina spoke.

“My Dad had her built for me when I was born. She’s the only one. That’s why you’ve never seen anything like it before. For my brothers, it was cars. Things like that. But my dad always told me ships are ladies because…” Jaina trailed off with a sigh as her brow furrowed and a pained expression crossed her face.

“Jaina. You don’t have to.” Sylvanas whispered as she lifted a hand to stroke through her hair.

“No, I...I need to. For you. For us. It’s just silly, that’s all.” She continued with a ghost of a smile.

“It’s not, though, Jaina. It’s not silly. Why? Why are ships ladies?”

Jaina shrugged and Sylvanas swore she saw her lower lip quiver faintly before she let out a breathy, almost choked laugh that was really more of a whisper than anything. “Because boys aren’t pretty and strong at the same time like ships. That sounds ridiculous now...but when I was little it didn’t. When I was little it made me feel so fucking special, you know?”

Sylvanas nodded. “You were. You are.”

There was something calming about Sylvanas’s tone. The words were so genuine and sweet...but the way she said them? The way she said them somehow allowed Jaina to take the deep, steadying breath she so desperately needed to take.

“You said brothers, again.” Sylvanas murmured against Jaina’s temple before leaning her forehead against it. “What was his name?”

“Derek.” Jaina responded - feeling the ache that always seemed to dwell somewhere deep within her push its way to the surface almost angrily at the mere sound of his name. “And he was nothing like Tanny. He was...he was so good, Sylvanas. Like Dad. I wish more than anything you could have
met them. You have no idea. You would have loved them so much and...I...I’m so sorry for what I have left. I’m so sorry that you don’t get to see that it was good once.”

“I don’t have to meet them to know that, Jaina.” Sylvanas leaned back into the seat they were sharing as Jaina turned towards her and rested her head against her shoulder. “Look at you. How good you are...how beautiful you are. Inside. Not just outside. That had to come from somewhere. I wish I could have met them, too, but...I get you.” Sylvanas trailed off, then, and tucked some of Jaina’s hair behind her ear so she could see her better. “What happened, Jaina?”

Sylvanas worried she’d pushed too hard when the younger woman’s eyes slipped shut and a little line appeared between her brows. She’d already begun fumbling for what to say when Jaina began to speak.

“I didn’t love to sail when I was young.” She began, carefully pulling her head away from Sylvanas’s shoulder, though she remained sitting against her. “That’s kind of an understatement. I just...that’s all I wanted to do. I wanted to be on the water with Dad more than anything. Derek, too. When Dad was busy, he would almost always take me out. He was a good sailor. He really was. But…”

Jaina paused, then. She could almost see her father’s hands effortlessly working the rigging. She could almost hear his confident laughter as they would overtake Derek together.

“They used to race. I remember we went out one day and Derek was already on the water. Dad waved over at him and Derek shouted that he bet he wouldn’t race him. Dad looked at me and I just...I got so excited. He could see it in my face. So every now and then they’d do that. They’d arrange race days and I would always be with Dad. We would almost always win. Derek would’ve been as good as him, though. Maybe better by now.”

“That sounds so wonderful, babe.” Sylvanas murmured when it seemed she needed a moment to collect herself. During that pause, Sylvanas turned her hand and offered it to her - smiling faintly when Jaina took it almost immediately.

Jaina was glad for that hand. She was glad Sylvanas was here to ground her in the present. Especially when she began to speak again.

“Anyway, it was my tenth birthday. The day it happened. Dad canceled everything and...fuck. Mom had stopped going out with us. It was like the more time Dad spent with me the angrier she got about it and Tanny was always glued to her hip. So it was just the three of us. I never felt safer than I did when I was with them. It wasn’t their fault. The water was perfect. It was...it was just so beautiful out. The wave hit the boat just right. Dad couldn’t turn into it in time because there wasn’t enough wind for it.” Jaina was staring at the wood floors beneath their feet now and her palm was sweating against Sylvanas’s. Her fingers were trembling uncontrollably. Even her body was tensing now and then. Jaina didn’t notice any of it.

“You know the most fucked up part?” There was a break in her voice, then. Sylvanas had no idea how she’d made it this long, but there it was. She shook her head. She didn’t know. God, she didn’t know.

“I could hear her while I was out. I could hear my mom. I could hear every shitty fucking thing she said.” Jaina pulled her hand away then and wiped angrily at her eyes when she felt them begin to sting. “She didn’t even tell me. My doctor did. She couldn’t. She wasn’t fucking there when I woke up. She was never there. Not at any of the hospitals or the rehabs or fucking any of it.”

Sylvanas reached for her. She couldn’t help it. She didn’t even think, first. She just pulled her into her chest tightly. If Jaina didn’t want this...well, she’d apologize later. But the fists clutching her shirt
at her sides told Sylvanas she did.

“Then she acts the way she does. Like it’s my fault. And, like, fuck - it might be. I mean. Might. Might is pretty generous, right? That trip was for me, not them. I get that. But then she wants to treat everyone else like they’re beneath her, too. Even you. Like she’s old money or some shit. She was a bartender. She was just some pretty bartender that caught my dad’s eye. I’m not saying she didn’t love him...I’m just saying I don’t know if she’d have tried so hard if it hadn’t been for his money.”

Jaina dragged a deep, shuddering breath into her lungs, then, but even as way too far as she knew she’d gone, she couldn’t pull away. The warmth of Sylvanas’s arms around her and her chest against her face were too much to let go of right now. “It’s fucked. It’s all so, so fucked. It’s all wrong...and there is absolutely nothing I can do to change it.”

Sylvanas swallowed thickly, then, and tightened her arms around Jaina’s shoulders. Her lips were parted just so she could breathe evenly enough for it to seem normal. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d felt so gutted...or angry. “Jaina...baby, I…”

“I’m sorry.” The apology came out as a near-whimper. “I’m sorry I dropped all that on you.” Instead of pulling away, though - instead of withdrawing - Jaina released the sides of Sylvanas’s shirt and wrapped her arms around the other woman as she lifted her head to bury her face into the crook of her neck.

“You didn’t drop anything on me.” Sylvanas murmured almost urgently into her hair as she stroked along her back. “God, Jaina, please don’t think that. You’ve accepted all the shitty things about my life. You’ve never even blinked an eye. You deserve so much more and so much better than what you’ve gotten and if I could snap my fingers and have it fall into your lap right now - you have no idea how fast I’d do it.”

Jaina listened closely - memorizing the way Sylvanas’s throat moved against the bridge of her nose as she spoke and the level of softness in her voice that was new. New and wonderful and absolutely everything she needed right now. “You’re right here.” Jaina whispered - finding those words both terrifying and...right. They felt so fucking right.

“Then I’m not going anywhere. Nothing could make me. Not your mom, not your past. Nothing. I don’t have a lot to offer...but god, if it’s enough - it’s yours, okay?”

“You’re enough.” Jaina murmured adamantly as she lifted her head and kissed Sylvanas almost roughly, suddenly - though it was quick, and then her hands were resting along either side of the older woman’s face. Sylvanas had only barely managed to kiss her back before it was over, and even then - it wasn’t her best.

“I’ve never told anyone all that. I’ve never wanted to.” The tinge of worry had returned to her voice. That tone, coupled with the slight redness of her eyes - only seemed to thicken the lump that had long ago formed in her throat.

“I’m never gonna hurt you like that. You don’t have to be alone, Jaina. You don’t. You don’t have to wonder. You can just know. You can just know that you have your friends. That Anduin and Kinndy love you so much. I can see it plain as day. And you have me. You have...so fucking much of me. More every single day. You...you have more of me than I even knew I had left to give.”

“I wish you knew what that was worth to me.” Jaina responded now that she managed to reign herself in enough to feel coherent again. “I wish I had the words to tell you how...how I’d sweep your shop and count that till every day and be the happiest I’ve ever been. How I’d sort records with you and dig through barns with you and eat at hole in the wall diners and just...be so fucking
thankful for every second of it. I told you. This isn’t me.”

Sylvanas was quiet, suddenly. It was all she could do, really, to even process the words Jaina was saying. Her eyes fell to Jaina’s hand as it took one of her own. “This is.” Jaina whispered, stroking over Sylvanas’s knuckles and pulling it towards her face until she was kissing her palm. “This right here. Sometimes we have to go through some really awful things to get where we’re supposed to be...but I’m here. And it doesn’t matter to me where ‘here’ is. It doesn’t matter that we’re on a yacht. It doesn’t matter if we’re in a park or in your loft or any fucking thing else as long as you’re there.”

Jaina’s head was swimming. Her heart was pounding so hard it hurt. Too much. She was laying out too much. She knew she was. She just couldn’t stop. And she damn sure couldn’t take any of it back.

Sylvanas made a noise, then. A quiet, indiscernible noise that Jaina couldn’t place because she’d never heard it before. Then she was being pulled into the older woman’s lap - pressed against the front of her so tightly she had no hope of pulling away. Fuck, she didn’t want to.

“I wanna make you happy, Jaina.” There had been a near-whimper in there. Jaina was almost sure of it.

Then, Sylvanas continued. “I want that more than anything. I...I want you to go to sleep every night knowing you’re the last thing on my mind before I close my eyes and the first thing on it when I wake up in the morning. I want you to know that I can’t fucking stand the thought of you hurting. I wish I knew now that I’d never upset you. That I’d never hurt you even a little bit. But I promise with all my heart I wouldn’t do it on purpose and that that night - you’d still be the last thing on my mind before I slept and I’d wake up needing and wanting you just as much as I did the day before. Probably more. It’s been that way with you. More, I mean. All the time. I’m rambling…”

“You aren’t.” Jaina whispered as she rested her forehead against Sylvanas’s. “You’re perfect. Thank you so much for being here. For listening. For staying.” She was settled in Sylvanas’s lap, now. They were no longer clinging to each other. It was softer. More comfortable...but no less needed. No less meaningful.

“Thank you for all those same things.” Sylvanas responded as she ran her fingertips down the sides of Jaina’s neck. “Babe...let’s go home. Back to the city, I mean.”

Jaina nodded and reached to touch along Sylvanas’s wrists where her sweater had fallen down them around her forearms. “As long as I get more time with you over the break that doesn’t consist of...this. I’ll go tell Thornby to head in. Will...will you come with me?”

“I think we’ve established that I would absolutely prefer to come with you whenever I’m invited, babe.” Sylvanas tried to smile. She tried one of her cute little grins. So much had happened, though - and the emotion between them was so thick - that Jaina watched her fail for perhaps the first time. And that, in and of itself, was almost too precious for words.

Something felt different, now. The air...the salt in it, perhaps. No, that was wrong - because even her feet felt steadier against the deck. It didn’t hurt that Sylvanas was standing behind her holding her in her arms as they watched the wake fanning out from beneath the deck they’d ventured down to. The pain wasn’t gone. Not by any means. It was just different. It was...manageable. Like the fear. The fear that couldn’t seem to get past the strongest, most delicate arms she’d ever felt - and the soft, warm breathing against her shoulder where Sylvanas had rested her chin to watch the water with her.

They’d been quiet for so long, Sylvanas’s voice sounded almost out of place against her neck as the other woman turned her head and spoke against it. “Thank you.” The soft, gentle words were
followed by an even softer, gentler kiss. “Thank you for inviting me to your Thanksgiving.”

Jaina couldn’t help but laugh at that, albeit quietly - as she reached for Sylvanas’s arms where they were wrapped around her and held onto them. “Don’t thank me for dragging you through this.” Her eyes fluttered shut as Sylvanas kissed her neck again - when she lingered a little too long, yet not long enough at all.

“I wouldn’t trade it. I learned more about you. I got to know you better. I couldn’t ask for more. Even if your mom sucks. A lot.”

Jaina squeezed Sylvanas’s arms and leaned back into her. “She does suck a lot.” Jaina agreed quietly. “I’m glad you came…and I don’t regret falling apart on you. Much.”

“Good. Please don’t.” Sylvanas responded, giving her a faint squeeze in the process. “I don’t mind taping you back together until the pieces fit a little better. Until the edges hurt a little less.”

A gust of wind blew across the deck, then - and threatened to carry those words away as quickly as they had come.

But it didn’t. Those words belonged to Jaina, now - and she stored them away carefully. She tucked them in next to the way Sylvanas followed her across the bed to kiss her. Next to the way it felt to lather shampoo into her hair.

Because all of that was hers...and no one could take any of it from her.

Something was finally hers.

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