Birdsong

by Meimo

Summary

Kalina Sunwing has known Sylvanas since they were just kids, the pair of them growing up playing hide and seek in the forest together, going from friends to best friends to downright inseparable as time went on. Now that they're all grown up, watch as they pursue their dreams together and learn more about themselves and the world around them than they could have ever dreamed existed.

Starting long before the Second War and going from there

Updated weekly, sometimes sooner!
Act I

Chapter Summary

Forgot to mention! Sorry if some parts of this fic are a bit fast paced, I'm mostly trying to get through the first few centuries quickly enough to make it to the second war.

A strong wind ruffled the trees of Eversong Forest as a young Quel’dorei girl of seven years sprinted through the woods, her snow colored hair whipping in the breeze against her porcelain face. Kalina Sunwing, daughter of Velaris and Nilanya Sunwing - magisters responsible for overseeing the town of Tranquillien - found herself quickly running out of breath as she forced her legs to keep moving. She couldn’t keep running, she realized. She had to hide, somewhere she wouldn’t be found. Her sapphire eyes scanned her surroundings, before an idea came into her head. Turning towards the nearest tree, she grabbed onto the rough bark and began to ascend it as fast as someone of her size could. It wasn’t the most innovative idea, but it was the safest available, and staying hidden was all that mattered at the moment.

“Ready or not, here I come!” Came the voice of Sylvanas Windrunner, age 10, from the edge of the forest.

From where Kalina was perched high up in the tree, she could see the girl’s sunlight colored hair slowly getting closer as her friend came strolling in the direction she’d taken off in.

“Kaaaaaliiiiiiii!” The girl called out casually in a sing song tone as she looked around, taking notice of a rather large tree off to the side of the path.

Kalina watched, trying to keep herself from laughing, as Sylvanas made a dramatic show of quietly approaching the tree.

“Are you over… here?!” she exclaimed as she leapt around the trunk, ready to tag what she was sure was hiding behind it, only to find nothing.

This time Kalina had to quietly place a hand in her mouth to suppress a giggle.

Slowly, Sylvanas drew closer, now watching the forest far more carefully while making a clear attempt to keep her steps as quiet as possible.

Kalina carefully lowered herself from her perch as her friend passed under her, until she was perched on the second lowest branch as Sylvanas was looking around the very tree she sat on, making it even harder for the girl it held to suppress laughter.

As the sun haired elf began to move on, Kalina waited until she was sure she’d be well behind her friend, before quietly dropping from the tree, making sure to land on a root so as to minimize noise.

Carefully watching for any leaves or twigs, she crept up behind her pursuer. Danced might be a better word for it, with the way she left between roots and rocks to minimize sound.

Soon she was only a few feet behind Sylvanas. Unable to contain herself any longer, she joyfully shouted “Behind you!”, causing the blonde to whip around in shock to see Kalina standing there with a triumphant grin on her face, before their nonverbal exchange was broken as the both of them
took off sprinting, Sylvanas after Kalina.

“Girls! Come inside! I made cookies!”

The pair’s chase was broken short as the recognizable sound of Lireesa Windrunner’s voice called out to them through the woods.

Kalina turned back around to Sylvanas with a smile. “I win!” She cheered.

Sylvanas seemed to consider her for a moment, before smirking and replying “Race you there READYSETGO!” as she took off without another word.

Hide and seek was always one of their favorite games to play when they were together. Years later, at age 13, Kalina Sunwing found herself climbing another tree in Eversong Forest, her long white hair hanging down to her mid back, while Sylvanas stood off in the distance, counting with her eyes covered. Despite having played this same game for years, it never quite got old. They always ended up coming up with new ways to find and evade each other, to the point where it had become less a game of hide and seek and more a game of assassin.

“Ready or not, here I come!” Came the cry of a 16 year old Sylvanas as Kalina reached a branch midway up the tree. Sylvanas had become rather skilled at tracking her, and whenever Kalina would ask how she was doing it, she’d always get a response of ‘Windrunner family secret’. That never stopped her from figuring out some of the blonde’s tricks on her own.

And so it was that Kalina kept carefully perched amidst the leaves as Sylvanas followed the trail she’d been careful to make discernible, but not obvious, so as not to let on that she wanted Sylvanas to follow it. The tiniest flicker of movement from the lower foliage was all the warning Kalina needed that Sylvanas was nearing her tree, and so before her pursuer could find which tree it was and begin to search it for a glimpse of her, Kalina silently leapt from her branch to the next tree over, careful not to move too fast lest the flicker of movement risk catching her friend’s attention.

It wasn’t long before Sylvanas, finding the end of Kalina’s tracks, abandoned all pretense of stealth under the assumption that she had the girl cornered.

“Oh Kaaaliiiii~” she called out gently as she began to ascend the tree. Even from where Kalina was hiding, she could make out the triumphant smirk on her best friend’s face. Not wanting to be seen from the other tree, Kalina silently took cover behind a large section of the trunk, before quickly lowering herself to the ground. Once there, she circled around the tree, stepping only on the roots, before coming to face the path of faint footprints she’d left earlier for Sylvanas to find.

Looking up, she could see the blonde’s silhouette through the leaves, still searching but clearly running out of places to look judging by her movements. Kalina had to be fast if she wanted this plan to pull through.

Making sure not to step anywhere but in her own footprints, Kalina swiftly moved towards the tree Sylvanas was in before flattening herself against the trunk, her feet now resting again on the roots as she placed herself horizontally opposite Sylvanas so that if her best friend looked down, she wouldn’t be able to see her.

‘Come on please work.’ she thought as she bit her lip and waited for the sound of Sylvanas descending the tree, careful to keep circling the trunk so as not to be seen. She had to stop herself from letting out a sigh of relief as she heard the sound of Sylvanas’ boots hitting the ground on the other side of the tree. Now was her chance.
Before the blonde could get more than a few steps from said tree, Kalina had circled around again and now stood just a couple feet behind Sylvanas. Before her friend could turn around for another look, Kalina had closed the gap.

“Behind you.” Came the whisper in the taller girl’s ear, causing her to jump several feet in surprise before whipping around to see Kalina standing there with a big grin.

“How…” She began.

“How.”

The only time it ever snowed in Quel’thalas was leading up to and during Winter’s Veil. During that time, the Windrunner family held their annual Winter’s Veil ball. Being that they were one of the most powerful families in Quel’thalas due to their family having passed down the hereditary post of Ranger General since its inception, everyone who was anyone in southern Quel’thalas attended.

It was to that end that Kalina Sunwing sat in the back of a carriage on its way to Windrunner Village, along with her parents. Where once had sat a young and excitable girl, now sat a stunningly beautiful, even by elf standards, young woman. This, of course, had just made her parents that much more eager to wed her off to someone powerful and influential. Marriages in Quel’thalas were in general a very family involved affair, in that they were usually arranged and done solely for the purposes of elevating one’s house in wealth and status. Among that same line of familial duty was then baring children so as to further the bloodline and cement the bond between houses. It was for that reason that homosexual marriages were all but unheard of, considered at best an act of selfish hedonism and at worst an act of flat out betrayal, along with any other acts one might take that would go against one’s familial duty.

Kalina had never really found herself being attracted to any men, something that her parents assured her would change ‘once she found the right guy’, meaning once they found the right guy.

Despite all this, Kalina wasn’t too worried. Most matches took anywhere from decades to centuries to arrange, during which time both parties usually went out and lived their lives, and so she sat in the back of the magically warmed carriage wearing an ice blue two piece dress that managed to be appear sexy without coming off as trashy for such a formal occasion, along with makeup that made her cheeks, lips, and eyelids all match the color in one way or another. On top of all this was a hooded white cloak lined with fur.

They’d been traveling for almost half a day now, meaning they were getting close. The whole ride had been incredibly uncomfortable for Kalina, with her mother staring daggers at her the whole way. It’d been like that ever since she’d started attracting the attention of men. Her mother had slowly grown more cold and resentful of her. Her father, meanwhile, looked at her with eyes one might look at a very, very, very large bag of money with; something that had also arisen once she’d started becoming attractive.

Still, her destination was more than worth any momentary awkwardness from her family. The sound of activity outside the carriage told them that they’d arrived in Windrunner Village. Kalina pushed open the carriage flap to catch a glimpse.

The scene outside was one of wonder. Snowflakes drifted down enough to accumulate but not so much as to become an impediment. The entire village was decorated for the holiday, with snowball fights, snowmen, and general merriment being in abundance.

For the first time since their journey began, Kalina found herself smiling. She loved Winter’s Veil.
It wasn’t long before the carriage came to a stop again, signaling their arrival at Windrunner Spire. At this point, Kalina all but lunged for the flaps and ended up completely disembarking before the rest of her family had even left their seats.

Windrunner Spire was nothing short of massive. Three great towers dominated the view, connected around back, Kalina knew, by several equally large buildings built in the the cliff face, which in turn were connected to more rooms underground along with a network of external bridges and gardens reaching down to the beach below.

As the last member of the Sunwing family stepped out the carriage, it quickly pulled away to make room for others as all around them partygoers disembarked and strolled up the steps.

Kalina took a few hasty steps forward, before turning around with an annoyed expression as she waited for her family to catch up. Etiquette unfortunately demanded they enter as a group, and so Kalina stood and waited as ever so slowly her parents strolled toward her.

After what felt like hours, the group finally reached the entrance to the central spire. The inside foyer was massive, easily large enough to accommodate a few hundred partygoers comfortably, which it tended to do this day of the year. The ceiling had been enchanted to reflect the night sky, with snow gently coming down gently but always vanishing before it ever touched anything. Off to one side were an array of circular white tables with a straight table on an elevated platform at the very edge of the room, with its back to the wall. At the complete opposite edge of the room was a hemispherical bar where a man in an elegant white robe was serving cocktails to partygoers. Off to one side, a set of enchanted string instruments added music to the affair. Through the opposite exit out into the courtyard overlooking the beach, Kalina could see more guests socializing.

“Nilanya!” Came a cheerful voice, calling the name of Kalina’s mother. Kalina turned to see Lireesa Windrunner, Ranger General of Quel'thalas, strolling over towards them in a carmine red dress, a glass of champagne in each hand.

“Lireesa!” Kalina’s mother replied in kind with a smile as the pair exchanged a greeting hug.

“So glad you could make it. I hope the journey wasn’t any problem.” The ranger spoke, handing the woman across from her one of the glasses.

“Not a problem at all, we wouldn’t have missed it for the world.” Nilanya replied with a well practiced smile.

Lireesa’s gaze turned to Kalina. “Kalina, dear, so good to see you again.” She said as she gave the girl a warm hug.

“It’s good to see you too, ma’am.” Kalina replied with an equally warm smile. Despite the spider web of sociopolitical games played by Quel’thalas’ upper class, Sylvanas’ mom had always seemed like a genuinely warm person. Perhaps it came from the fact that her position was firmly hereditary to begin with, but Kalina liked to take a more optimistic view: Lireesa was simply a lovely person.

“Sylvanas is still getting ready, so why don’t you go mingle in the meantime while I take your coats?” She asked, setting down her glass on a nearby table containing the guest registry.

Kalina let out a small chuckle. Sylvanas always had made a point of pouring a staggering amount of time into looking her best. Even so, the results certainly showed. More than once Kalina had found herself staring at her friend’s face, before snapping herself back to reality.

Removing her cloak, she gently placed it in Lireesa’s arms, before quickly signing the guest registry
and going off to mingle. In one corner of the room she could see Sylvanas’ older sister, Alleria, conversing with a number of men. If there was one thing Kalina had come to love about attending this party every year in the last few years, it was that for once she wasn’t the center of attention for the room’s male population. Most of the time when she attended a formal event or social gathering nowadays, all eyes in the room locked on her the moment she entered, something that always made her incredibly uncomfortable. Here though, Alleria Windrunner stood not only beautiful and capable, but also next in line to be Ranger General of Silvermoon, making her a far more valuable prize for any potential suitors, and thereby giving Kalina a little room to breathe.

So it was to both Kalina’s surprise and annoyance that not long after getting a glass of rose wine was she approached by a red haired elf wearing an ornate navy and silver robe.

“Good evening.” He greeted her in a tone which betrayed a degree of overconfidence, with a smile to match.

“Good evening to you.” Kalina replied with a pretty smile and sparkling eyes that her mother had drilled her on for weeks on end until she got it just right.

“So how do you know the Windrunners?” He asked. Kalina had never been sure what to think of small talk. On the one hand it seemed trivial and pointless. On the other it was a very, very easy way to gain social points, something that, Kalina supposed, if she was to be sold off like a prized cattle someday, she might as well accumulate to get a better buyer than a worse one.

In all truth she didn’t want to marry at all. Her dream since she’d been a little girl had been to become a ranger alongside Sylvanas, an idea her parents had never been particularly keen on.

“Family friends.” She replied. It was a pretty standard answer, all things considered, what with the amount of networking that went on. She extended a hand. “Kalina Sunwing.”

He took her hand gently. “Rhalyf Dawnblade.”

All at once Kalina’s blood froze. The Dawnblades were one of the most powerful families of magisters in Quel’thalas, so much so that they actually held a seat in the Convocation of Silvermoon.

‘Alleria is right there go talk to her quickly before my parents see us together.’

Kalina glanced over to see her parents talking to a pair of wealthy merchants. Okay so they hadn’t seen yet.

“She’s beautiful, isn’t she?” Kalina mused, turning her gaze to Alleria and hoping Rhalyf would take the hint.

“I like the view from here more.” He replied with a small grin, moving a step close to her.

Kalina gave a bashful smile in reply with a polite chuckle, her head tilting just slightly downwards before returning to its normal position. It was all an act.

Placing her glass gently in his hand, she looked up at him. “Could you be a gentleman and get me another drink?” She asked.

“Of course.” He replied with a short bow before leaving to refill her glass.

Kalina wasted no time. The second his gaze turned away from her, she casually slipped out of the room and into the courtyard out back. If her parents knew a Dawnblade had shown interest in her, she’d never hear the end of it.
She strolled over to the edge of the courtyard, where a small stone bench sat with an excellent view of the beach below. If there was one negative about Winter’s Veil, it was that the cold and cloudy sky took away from the beach. Still, sitting there looking pensive was certainly preferable to flirting with Rhalyf Dawnblade.

“Behind you.” The gleeful whisper came in her ear, and all at once the momentary unpleasantness of a minute ago was lifted away in favor of a feeling of pure excitement.

Standing up from her seat, Kalina quickly whirled around to see Sylvanas standing there wearing a white dress with a smile that she could only describe as perfect. She looked beautiful, even by Sylvanas standards, giving Kalina the impression that she was staring at less an elf and more a goddess.

“Howdy.” She stammered out, earning a mischievous grin from her friend. She cleared her throat before trying again. “Hey.”

Sylvanas laughed. It sounded like music to Kalina’s ears. “You look amazing. Happy Winter’s Veil.” She said as she leaned in and gave the younger elf a hug.

“You too.” Kalina managed to reply. Sylvanas leaned back out.

“Come on, let’s go get drinks.” She took Kalina’s hand, before leading her back inside.

Soon the earlier awkwardness with the Dawnblade boy had all but been forgotten as the pair of them drank and mingled together before going to eat dinner with their respective families. Once that was over, it was finally time to dance.

As people began to get out of their seats to move to the dance floor, Kalina and Sylvanas exchanges grins from across the room. Dancing together was something they both enjoyed.

Before Kalina could make her way over to her friend, however, she was intercepted by none other than Rhalyf Dawnblade.

“May I have this dance?” He asked as he cut in front of her, extending a hand. Unable to really decline, Kalina internally kicked herself.

“You may.” She replied as she placed her own hand gently in his with her other hand on his shoulder.

As the music began to increase in volume, the pair began to move in unison.

“You and Sylvanas seem close.” He asked as they twirled.

“We’ve been best friends since childhood.” Kalina replied simply. Inside she was running damage projections. There was no way her parents wouldn’t notice her dancing with a Dawnblade.

“Such a beautiful girl as yourself really shouldn’t be hidden away this far south.” He said, quickly changing topics. “You should be in Silvermoon where the height of society can admire you.”

‘No thank you.’

“And what’s a man of such high status as yourself doing this far from Silvermoon?” Kalina asked, feigning interest. In truth she knew the answer. It wasn’t uncommon for magisters or their families to use teleportation as a means to shorten journeys across Quel’thalas, especially for high profile events.
“Enjoying the festivities.” He replied with what he probably thought was a winning smile.

“I see.” She spoke. Silence fell between them as Rhalyf now maintained eye contact with her. Internally, Kalina was beginning to get stir crazy. The longer they danced, the more her parents would think he fancied her, and the harder they’d work to set him up as a marriage prospect.

She looked over across the room to see Sylvanas dancing with an older magister in a green robe. She looked far more confident than Kalina felt. She always was good at maintaining her composure like that.

Soon the song came to an end. Rhalyf, however, showed no sign of wanting to stop. Deciding this was a good place to stop without breaking the rules of etiquette, Kalina stopped the dance instead.

“All this dancing has given me a thirst. Would you mind getting me a drink?” She asked the crimson haired elf politely. Either he knew she was about to ditch him after last time, or he was an idiot; or perhaps just incredibly oblivious. Either way it’d be seen as rude if he were to refuse.

Sure enough, Rhalyf’s expression dropped considerably. “...Of course.” He replied stiffly before turning around on his heel and stepping briskly toward the bar at the end of the room.

“May I have this dance?” Came Sylvanas’ voice the second Rhalyf turned away. Kalina turned her head with a smile to see her friend standing there with a winning smirk and a hand extended.

“You may.” Kalina answered with a grin as she placed her hand in Sylvanas’.

“A friend of yours?” asked the blonde as they took hold of each other and began to dance.

“Annoyance might be the better word. Even worse is that my parents have probably seen us together at this point.” replied Kalina with a groan.

“Who is he, anyway?” Sylvanas asked, her expression now a mix of amusement and curiosity.

“His name’s Rhalyf Dawnblade.” At the mention of the name, all amusement dropped from Sylvanas’ face at once.

“Oh.” She spoke softly. Of all the people Kalina had met over the years, Sylvanas was one of the few she knew that really seemed to understand her lack of excitement over the idea of being married off to some theoretical prince charming.

“Exactly.” Kalina replied with a sigh. “So I could be seeing a lot more of him sometime in the future.”

Sylvanas seemed to look through Kalina rather than at her for several moments as they danced in silence, until, as they nearied the door out into the gardens, she suddenly let go of Kalina’s hip and gripped the girl’s other hand a touch more tightly.

“Come on.” Sylvanas whispered suddenly as she darted out into the courtyard, Kalina in tow. It was dark out now, with a full moon casting a beautiful silver light over the ocean below.

“Where are we going?” Kalina asked as she followed quickly. Sylvanas led her off to the side, down one of the bridges to a platform lower along the cliff, where no one else could see. “Sylvanas wha-” Before she could say another word, her best friend suddenly whipped around and in one fluid motion kissed her on the lips, her hands now gently taking a hold of Kalina’s face as she buried her tongue in the younger woman’s mouth.
Kalina’s first reaction was one of shock. Followed by that was panic. She didn’t know how Lireesa felt about this sort of thing, but she knew that if her own parents found out, her life would become a living hell in every sense of the word.

She realized she didn’t care. Sylvanas’ lips were warm and soft against her own, and for the first time since she’d begun to mature, all the stories of romance she’d read growing up suddenly made sense.

Slowly, Sylvanas let go of Kalina’s face and pulled away, now breathing heavily. If Kalina thought she looked like a goddess before, it was nothing compared to how she looked in the moonlight.

“I love you.” Kalina spoke without thinking as her entire world clicked into place all at once.

Sylvanas smiled.

“I love you too, Kali.
Chapter 2

Three years later, Kalina Sunwing sat on the terrace in a cafe in Silvermoon, sipping a cup of tea with honey and snacking on a pastry. She’d told Sylvanas she was going to Silvermoon for the week and that they should meet there so they could spend it together. She hadn’t actually given a meeting place. She didn’t need to. Her girlfriend had become a master at tracking her.

Sure enough, only a few minutes after she sat down appeared Sylvanas, taking a seat across from her with a triumphant grin.

“You’ve got to tell me how you do that someday.” Kalina laughed.

“I told you already, it’s a Windrunner family secret.” Sylvanas replied, signaling a server as she did so.

“So you’re saying I’d need to marry a Windrunner to find out?” Kalina asked with a twinkle in her eyes.

“That,” Sylvanas started as she leaned in while taking Kalina’s chin gently in her hand, “is exactly what I’m saying.” She finished before pressing her lips gently to Kalina’s. The kiss only lasted for a moment, before Sylvanas leaned back in her seat.

“So, um, I had an idea.” Kalina began as the server returned with Sylvanas’ order. Just thinking about what she was about to say had made her nervous for months, let alone actually saying it.

“So… you know how we both wanna be rangers… and, well…”

Sylvanas watched Kalina try to articulate with a look of amusement. “I do.” She said, deciding to throw the poor girl a bone.

“Uh, so, I was thinking we could maybe… um… join up together.” Kalina finished, before taking a large sip of tea. Sylvanas had been training for the last couple of years so that when she did join, she could sail through training and get selected for the Farstriders. Kalina’s parents, meanwhile, had forbidden her from going anywhere near a bow or anything sharper than a kitchen knife, instead emphasizing “wifely duties”. What if Sylvanas saw her as possible deadweight?

“That sounds doable.” Sylvanas replied, earning a sigh of relief from Kalina. “But,” Kalina’s heart missed a beat “you have to train with me every day from now on.”

Training alongside Sylvanas had secretly been a fantasy of Kalina’s since she was a girl. The only problem was, besides her parents, the fact that Tranquillien was easily half a day away on horseback.

“But, what about the dist-?” Kalina started.

“We’ll live together. That way your parents can’t interfere either.” Sylvanas replied in a commanding tone.

Kalina could only nod. “Yes ma’am.” Sylvanas had always had a gift for authority.

The woman burst into laughter. “I’m not your drill instructor, Kali. Not yet, anyway.”

And so it was that once their week in Silvermoon was up, the pair sent Kalina’s parents a quick letter notifying them that she was not dead, merely staying with a friend, and then set off for Windrunner Spire. Kalina was fairly sure her parents didn’t actually know what was going on between her and
Sylvanas, though in fairness they were certainly known for buying info from those willing to sell.

Kalina had been in Sylvanas’ room enough times even before they’d started dating to where it was as familiar to her as her own. Being that they were both rangers, Alleria and Lireesa were often gone for extended periods, meaning Kalina and Sylvanas had the spire largely to themselves.

The pair of them thus got into a daily routine together. They’d wake up at dawn five days a week, throw on some underwear, then run up and down the beach until the sun was high enough for it to be mid-morning, at which point they’d climb back up the spire, make breakfast, and study until after lunch, before returning to the sands below to practice their swordsmanship with wooden training swords. The rule was the loser each time had to do 50 pushups. Naturally, Kalina always had to do them. The first week was harder for her in general. Whereas Sylvanas’ body was nothing short of chiseled, her own was dainty and soft. Even so, it was without question the happiest she’d ever been in her life, and so she took the pain and exhaustion with a grin.

After that, though, she more or less got used to it. After sword, they’d usually move onto bow work until it got dark out, at which point they’d head inside and eat dinner before exercising themselves a different kind of way.

It was a warm morning, about three months after they’d first started training, as the pair came inside from the beach wearing nothing but their bras and panties and drenched in sweat, having been running across the sand for easily the past three hours.

Where once Kalina’s body had been soft and weak, that had since been replaced by a full set of well defined muscles that definitively reflected the training she’d been under.

“I’ll get started on pancakes and coffee, you do eggs and bacon?” Sylvanas asked as she and Kalina stripped off what little coverage they had on, letting it fall to the ground where they stood with the intent to pick it up after they got something in their stomachs.

“Sounds good.” Kalina replied with a nod. She’d never had much in the way of chest development, but what she lacked in upper body assets, she more than made up for in lower body ones.

While Sylvanas retrieved the necessary ingredients, Kalina reached for pots and pans with one hand while lighting a fire under the stove with the other. It was one of the few spells her parents had given their approval for her to learn, the reason why being obvious.

While the thought of domestic life married off to some nobleman somewhere was easily one of her worst fears, being here making breakfast with Sylvanas felt nice. Maybe it was because their relationship involved her actually being seen as a person instead of a political bargaining chip or a means of producing children, or maybe it was because they were doing everything together, but something about their current state of living, side by side, made Kalina happy.

As the food was cooking, a voice rang out from a few floors above them.

“I’m home!” Lireesa Windrunner called out from above.

The pair froze, before exchanging terrified glances. They were together, in the kitchen, naked and covered in sweat.

“Hide!” Whispered Sylvanas quickly before springing into motion, lunging for the underwear on the ground while Kalina looked around frantically for somewhere to hide. The kitchen offered very little in the way of concealment. “Catch!” Sylvanas whisper-yelled out as a second later her underwear flew in Kalina’s face.
Kalina caught it in her hands before looking down at it. “This is yours!” she shot back quietly as Sylvanas now struggled to get Kalina’s bra to fit.

“It doesn’t matter she won’t notice just hide!”

“Sylvanas! Are you in here?” came Lireesa’s voice again, now much closer than before.

Finding no viable hiding spot, Kalina’s thoughts turned to the glass door they’d come in from, leading back out onto the cliff face. In one swift motion, lunged for the door, opening it as quickly and quietly as possible before slipping through and letting it close on its own. From where she was standing on the walkway, she could see a ledged that she could just barely grab onto on the exterior of the building.

‘Okay, just breathe and hold on tight and whatever you do, do not look down.’

Desperation mounting and time being of the essence, it didn’t take long for Kalina to convince herself.

Reaching out cautiously with one hand, the snow haired elf heard Lireesa’s voice coming from inside again, causing her take the necessary leap all at once just as she heard the woman entering the room.

Panic gripped her as she held onto the wall for dear life, everything behind the balls of her feet finding nothing but emptiness. It wasn’t that she was a bad or inexperienced climber, she was actually quite a good one from all her years of evading and outmaneuvering Sylvanas. The difference was that now there was easily a 200 foot drop below her.

‘Just breathe, you’ve held onto much worse ledges before, you can do this.’ She thought, steeling her resolve.

Meanwhile, Sylvanas just barely managed to finish hooking Kalina’s bra into place as her mother entered the room.

“There you are.” Lireesa spoke as as she strolled into the kitchen. “Did you not hear me calling?”

“Welcome home, mother.” Sylvanas replied with a polite smile as she straightened out her posture, feeling Kalina’s bra digging into her from all sides as she did so, while trying to keep Kalina’s stretched out panties from dropping to the floor. “Sorry, I was probably too focused on cooking.”

“Mm.” Lireesa nodded. “How were things while I was away? How’s your training going?”

“Good!” Sylvanas replied a bit too quickly. She cleared her throat to give herself an extra second. “It’s going well, thanks for asking.”

Her mother gave her a curious look, before looking her up and down once. “What happened to your underwear?”

Sylvanas realized the food was still on the stove. Carefully strolling over to attend to it with her free hand, she replied. “I’m not sure what you mean.”

Lireesa watched her. “Your bra looks like it shrunk in the wash while your panties… did not.”

Sylvanas nodded. “They got worn out during training, I think.”

Lireesa strolled over to where she was cooking. “That’s a lot of food for just yourself, don’t you
Sylvanas was prepared for this one. “I figured you’d be home this morning and wanted to surprise you with breakfast.”

The older woman chuckled. “Thank you, that’s very sweet of you.” she replied with a smile as something caught her eye.

“Something the matter?” Sylvanas asked, worry creeping into her voice as she turned to look at her mother.

“Is that your underwear out there?” the older blonde asked, causing Sylvanas to turn around to see. There, lying in plain view just outside the door, were Sylvanas’ undergarments.

‘Damn it, Kali.’

“Uh… Sorry, I must’ve left it outside when I went swimming last night and forgot about it.” she replied with a nervous smile.

“Uh huh.” her mother said again. “Sylvanas, could you be a dear and do me a favor?” She asked as her gaze returned to her younger daughter.

“Of course, mother.” Sylvanas replied at once, relief washing over her at the change of topic.

“Write your sister a letter, and tell her I owe her 20 gold.” spoke Lireesa with a sudden smirk, causing Sylvanas’ face to turn bright red. “I’m gonna go get changed.”

Without another word, she turned and left the room. Sylvanas stood there in shock for a few moments, unsure whether to feel anxious or relieved, before deciding she should probably go find Kalina first.

Stepping outside to where her underwear lay on the ground, the blonde elf looked around for some clue as to where the girl had gotten off to, and finding nothing. Odd. She wasn’t usually this good at evading her, not anymore at least.

“Um…” Came the faintest squeak from off to the side, causing Sylvanas’ head to turn and her jaw to subsequently fall open as she took in the sight of the girl hanging off the ledge with a slightly terrified look on her face. “Could you maybe help me get down please and thank you.”
Their first Winter's Veil together was a nerve wracking experience for Kalina, less so for Sylvanas. Kalina couldn’t understand how her girlfriend was so confident about everything. What if people found out? What if people saw them together and rumors spread? What if she had to spend the night pretending to be single and interested in Rhalyf Dawnblade? Even worse, what if her parents saw her? She’d been trying to stay as off their radar as physically possible since she’d moved in with Sylvanas.

Realistically, Kalina had been working under the assumption that her own mother had found out where she was the moment Sylvanas’ did. It was bound to come up in friendly conversation, and if there was one thing her mother was good at, it was hiding her true nature. That didn’t make the idea of actually being seen by her any less daunting. Who knew what her parents would do if they found out what was going on between her and Sylvanas?

“How do I look?” She asked nervously as Sylvanas finished zipping her up, before turning around. She was wearing an elegant maroon piece that went well with her alabaster hair, and which made her quietly thank the light her eyes weren’t green.

Sylvanas gave a small chuckle. “You look beautiful. Relax, okay? Everything will be fine.” She reassured the shorter woman as she placed her hands on the girl’s shoulders.

Kalina nodded. Sylvanas was always good at inspiring confidence. “Yeah, you’re right.”

Sylvanas kissed her on the forehead. “I love you.” She said with a soft smile.

“I love you too.” the white haired elf replied.

“You should get downstairs before people show up.” continued Sylvanas as she let go of Kalina’s shoulders and strolled over to the vanity sitting next to her bed.

After climbing onto the ledge to hide from Lireesa months ago, Kalina had begun to experiment with climbing the sides of buildings some more, a skill she was sure would make her stand out in the rangers. As such, the original plan for this evening had been for Kalina to take off her shoes as guests were showing up, climb down the exterior of the central tower to the courtyard below, put her shoes back on, then slip into the crowd and pretend she’d just arrived the same as everyone else. Of course, it was one thing to climb up small ledges or maybe a floor or two. It was an entirely different matter to completely scale Windrunner Spire with her bare hands during Winter’s Veil when everything was covered in ice and snow, all without getting her dress wet.

So instead she’d decided to just go downstairs the normal way before anyone else arrived and pretend she’d gotten there early. She tended to put a lot less time into preparation than Sylvanas did anyway, so it worked out.

“See you soon.” Kalina said as she turned to leave, grinning despite herself.

The downstairs foyer of Windrunner Spire had been revamped similarly to the previous year’s and the year before that and so on. Already guests were beginning to show up and be greeted by Lireesa. Trying to look as unnoticeable as possible, Kalina made her way over to the bar.

“Eversong wine, please.” She spoke quietly to the bartender.

“We meet again.” came a voice from behind her that she’d learned to dread the sound of at any high
profile social event over the last few years. Faking a smile, she turned on her heel to face the
nuisance.

“Rhalyf! It’s good to see you again.” She exclaimed to the red haired elf. “How’ve you been?”

“Things have been going very well for me. And you, you’re looking as lovely as ever.” He smiled,
tipping her chin up as he did so.

‘Kill me now.’

“That’s very kind of you to say.” she replied to the magister, faking a sheepish expression. As she
glanced around the room, she realized to her horror that she couldn’t ask him to get her a drink,
because she was standing at the bar.

“You really should visit Silvermoon more often. I could show you around; I’m sure you’d enjoy it.”
He continued. “You haven’t truly seen the city until you’ve seen what being in the company of a
magister like myself can get you access to.”

He turned to order a drink at the bar. In the background, meanwhile, Kalina could see Alleria coming
down the stairs. She’d only gotten home last night. Kalina shot a ‘help me’ glance the older
Windrunner’s way.

“That sounds lovely, but unfortunately I rarely get the chance to visit Silvermoon, being from
Tranquillien and all.” she replied as Rhalyf turned back to face her.

“Then I guess we’ll just have to do something about that.” He replied with a grin.

“Oh! Kalina! So good to see you again!” Came Alleria’s voice, interrupting the pair.

‘Thank the light the cavalry has arrived.’

“Alleria!” Kalina greeted the woman with a far more genuine smile, hugging her as she did so and
whispering a “Thank you so much.” in the woman’s ear before pulling back out.

“How have things been while I’ve been away? You simply must tell me everything, come!” the
blonde exclaimed, ushering her away from Rhalyf.

Kalina let out a sigh of relief. “I do not like him.”

“I should hope not. Speaking of, I heard you and Sylvanas were…” She smiled.

Kalina grinned and nodded. “Four years now. Can’t believe we were able to keep it quiet for so
long.” Homosexual relationships in Quel’thalas weren’t considered a bad thing in and of themselves.
It was only when they crossed over into marriage or otherwise interfered with the wishes of one’s
family that they were considered a problem. It was for that reason that Kalina and Sylvanas had
worked hard to keep it away from the ears of Kalina’s family. Sylvanas was one of the few people
who understood the kind of person Kalina’s mother was. “We were planning to join up together.”

“So I heard!” Alleria beamed. “If you need any help or advice, don’t hesitate to ask.”

“I hope I’m not interrupting anything.” Came the voice of Velaris Sunwing. Kalina turned to see her
father standing there, wearing an ugly green robe that Kalina hoped her mother had tried to dissuade
him from. “Can I borrow her for a minute?” He asked, not waiting for a response as he took a hold
of my arm and led her off.
‘Here we go.’

“What have you been doing? Do you have any idea how hard it is to arrange a match for you when you’re not actually there?” He hissed.

“I’m 22, Dad, let me actually have a life first.” She’d been going over that line in her head for months on end, preparing for this exact conversation. 22 was young for a human, but for an elf, it was practically still in the cradle.

“You can have whatever life you want after you find a husband. Until then, that is your only priority.” Kalina realized her family didn’t have the slightest idea what or who she’d been doing at Windrunner Spire.

‘Thank you Lireesa.’

“I’m working on it.” She lied. “Considering I’m being courted by a Dawnblade, I’d say I’m doing a pretty fantastic job, especially considering that - again - I’m only 22.”

He stopped. “Work faster. It’ll only be so long before he gets tired of chasing.”

‘Wouldn’t that be a shame?’

With that, he let go, leaving her to resume mingling and enjoying the party. She watched him go.

It’d been seven years since they’d started dating when they decided, with Alleria and Lireesa’s input, that they both were ready to head to Silvermoon to join up together. Sylvanas’ mom had been kind enough to pull a couple of strings to make sure that they’d be in the same unit together, wherever they ended up.

It was another warm morning, as it was made to be every day in Quel’thalas, as the pair sat on one of the platforms outside, Kalina holding Sylvanas’ legs while the woman did sit-ups.

Silvermoon was at least a week away by horse, and as a result they’d decided it was best to spend this week working out and then make up the study time next week while they’re horseback.

Kalina was reading through a manual on improvised alchemy when the sound of magical chimes echoed gently through the house, meaning that someone was standing at the door.

It took a second of stillness for the pair to realize that neither Alleria nor Lireesa were home, meaning one of them would have to answer the door. They both scrambled into motion at once to find something to put on, Kalina reaching for a basic maroon robe while Sylvanas reached for a stretched out shirt.

Sylvanas was faster, sprinting out of the room, down the hall, and down several flights of stairs as Kalina trailed behind, having abandoned any attempt at getting dressed in favor of the thrilling prospect of taking cover along the wall near the door while her girlfriend did the talking.

“Lady Nilanya.” The blonde spoke as she opened the door, causing Kalina’s blood to freeze.

“Hi Sylvanas!” Her mother chirped back in a friendly tone. “I’m here to take my daughter home, could you call her?”

‘You’re what?’
“She’s asleep right now, she’ll probably be awake in a few hours if you wanna come back then.” Sylvanas replied.

“I would,” Nilanya started “but we really have a full day ahead of us and it’d be better to get started now.”

Sylvanas was silent for a moment.

“One moment.” She said finally before closing the door slowly.

Kalina knew she couldn’t refuse. To do so would be to ask the Windrunners to place themselves in a feud between houses, one which - given the emphasis placed on filial tradition in Quel’thalas - a great many if not all of the families could unite against them in.

She was silent, her face a mask of horror as she stared as much through the ground as at it.

“I’ll… I’ll go get my stuff.” She mumbled, before turning around and starting up the stairs.

15 minutes later, Kalina stood in front of the front door dressed and with all her clothes that she knew were definitely hers folded neatly in a large pack. Sylvanas was there with her, the pair taking each other in for what could be the last time in a very, very long time.

“I love you.” Kalina finally spoke, trying very hard not to cry.

“I… I love you too, Kali.” Sylvanas replied softly. She was maintaining her composure much better than Kalina was, all in all.

They stood there for a moment, before Kalina stood up on her toes and pressed her lips softly to Sylvanas’. The kiss lasted only a moment, before the younger woman pulled away and in one swift motion opened the door to find her mother still standing there.

“There you are! Good, let’s get going.” Nilanya exclaimed, taking Kalina’s hand and pulling her forward and out the door. “Sylvanas, this is for you, sweetie.” She added, passing the aspiring ranger a white envelope, before turning around and starting off, Kalina in tow.

“Hi mom…” the white haired elf barely managed to speak as she was dragged away down the path, to where her father was waiting with a pair of horses.

Her mother didn’t respond, instead jerking her toward Velaris.

“Up. You’ll ride with your father.”

“Mom-”

“Now, Kalina.” Velaris interjected..

Unsure of what else she could say or do, Kalina got on the horse, followed by her father who proceeded to put an arm around her in a vicelike hold. As the pair trio departed, Kalina gave up trying to speak, instead putting all her energy into just keeping it together.

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The room suddenly felt empty as Sylvanas returned to it, the envelope still clutched in her hand. Four years of doing everything together, so much of it in this room, suddenly taken away just a week from the finish line.

She looked down at the envelope. It wasn’t sealed. Gently, she reached one hand up and unfolded it,
revealing a white card gilded with a blue and gold border. Sylvanas’ blood froze at the first line.

“You are cordially invited to attend the wedding of Rhalyf Dawnblade and Kalina Sunwing.”

She stopped reading. The card fell from her hand as she stood still as a statue, a maelstrom of despair and fury in equal parts now clashing inside her.

Taking a deep, calming breath, Sylvanas worked to maintain her composure as always, before said composure shattered, giving way to rage as she turned and buried her fist in the wall next to her.

The entire journey home, Kalina’s parents hadn’t said a word to her. The town of Tranquillien would’ve felt serene like its namesake under any other circumstances as they entered it, but all Kalina could feel at the moment was a mounting sense of hopelessness.

As they reached the massive tower Kalina called home, the group dismounted. Kalina’s father placed a hand on her arm as she got off, his grip tightening to the point of being painful the instant her feet touched the ground, as if he believed she’d try to run otherwise.

Kalina tried to speak. “Can someone please just-”

“Inside. Now.” he said as he roughly yanked her forward, until the door closed behind them.

Kalina felt him let go.

“What’s going o-”

“You’re getting married.” Velaris cut her off, causing Kalina’s stomach to drop out from under her.

“N…” Kalina looked at parents in horror. “N-no…” She trailed off, trembling as her eyes watered. “To who?”

“By the Sunwell, Kalina, I swear if you start cr-” Velaris stopped as Nilanya placed a hand on his arm.

Her mother spoke now with a cruel smirk. “To Rhalyf Dawnblade. Since you and he were spending so much time together, we figured he’d be perfect for you.”

“I’m 25!” She shouted at her parents as tears began to flow freely.

“Oh grow up.” Her mother snapped, her expression curling into a sneer. “You didn’t really think we’d let you fool around with her forever, did you?”

Any hope she might’ve held of being able to marry Sylvanas someday died inside her at that moment.

“You knew…” she trailed off as her face fell.

“Half of Quel’thala knows!” Her mother shouted as she leaned toward her. “A Windrunner having a secret relationship with a girl expected to be married to a Dawnblade! You didn’t think anyone would figure out what the two of you were doing? Do you have any idea how much scandal you’ve put on our family for your little experiment?! Half my friends-”

“I love her!” Kalina screamed back, cutting her mother off.

“Well then let’s hope you can learn to love your husband as much, then maybe you can actually be
useful to your family for once.” Nilanya shot back with the self satisfied demeanor of someone who knew they had all the leverage.

Velaris put a hand on Nilanya’s shoulder and stepped forward, a quiet signal to let him take things from here.

“We leave for Silvermoon in a week’s time. You’re to remain in your room until then, except for at mealtimes. Whatever your feelings toward us or your new husband, you will be nothing but polite and appreciative toward him and his family for being willing to let you two be together.”

Kalina stared daggers at him, while taking deep breaths. She knew better than to argue so furiously with her father. Any sign of what he could interpret as disrespect toward him or his authority, and he would be merciless.

“Go.” He finally ordered. She didn’t need to be told twice, sprinting furiously up the stairs to where her room sat on the highest floor of the tower, opposite that of her parents, and slamming the door.

Her room was exactly as she’d left it the day she’d set off for Silvermoon four years ago. A circular canopy bed dominated the room, with a small table and set of chairs off to one side, a large closet space on the opposite side, and a balcony looking out over the town at the far end.

As the adrenaline left her system and she realized how truly alone she suddenly was, Kalina dropped her bag, slumped down against the door, and waited to wake up from the horrible nightmare she was in.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

TW: DV and implied non-con

She’d gone numb long before they’d reached Silvermoon, and certainly before the day of. No expense had been spared for the event. With such a powerful family involved, why would there be?

The snow haired elf stood in her dressing room, looking at herself in the mirror. The hair and makeup team certainly hadn’t spared any expense either. She looked like a goddess. The dress was perfect for her too, accentuating every curve and facet of her body to its absolute fullest. She would’ve loved to have worn it for Sylvanas someday.

She’d looked over the menu for the reception. The food selection had sounded to die for, and it was made by some of the best chefs in Silvermoon, names even she recognized, being from as far south as Tranquillien.

The venue was amazing too - The Court of the Sun. A wedding taking place there would be downright historic. Thousands of years from now, people reading about the history of Silvermoon would read that their wedding took place there. They’d even gotten Rhalyf’s grandfather, a member of the Convocation of Silvermoon, to officiate the ceremony.

Everything was perfect, and Kalina would’ve happily thrown it all away to have just one more day together with the woman she loved.

The guest list was long and, according to the makeup artist, full of the most illustrious and influential names in Quel'thalas. Even so, she didn’t dare look it over. She was too afraid of seeing any friendly names, because if there were any there, it would mean they’d betrayed her and shown approval for the union.

A knock on her door signaled her father’s arrival. It was time. Allowing herself a single sigh, Kalina turned around and went to answer it.

The ceremony was far too long to be comfortable. The bridesmaids had all been her mother’s friends rather than her own, something she was at least quietly thankful for. If history did remember this wedding, she wanted there to be nothing to suggest she’d been happy about it.

Even worse though was the kiss at the end. She never wanted to feel Rhalyf’s tongue in her mouth again if at all possible.

Cocktails were served soon after. Like the wedding, the reception was being held in the Court of The Sun, with the ceremony itself taking place in the upper half, and the reception taking place in the lower half, where all of Silvermoon could look out and watch the happy couple on the happiest day of their lives. Kalina took the opportunity to respectfully request the most hard hitting drink available. She was going to need it to make it through the rest of the night.

People she didn’t recognize and didn’t care to came up to the pair of them one after the other to
congratulate them and wish them happiness. Kalina mostly just smiled and shook their hands, wishing she could be anywhere else.

Before long, like at so many parties before, it was time to dance. First dance, of course, belonged to the groom. As the music began and the floor cleared, Kalina felt Rhalyf’s hand grab her hip with a resounding clapping sound as he gave her a hungry smile, reminding her painfully of the fact that she’d have to spend easily a solid year doing nothing but having sex with the man in front of her. Quel’dorei honeymoons were much, much longer than human ones, due to their longer lifespans and tendency to not age; especially the further up on the social ladder one went.

She quietly thanked the light that they at least couldn’t talk to each other at the moment, with everyone watching. While she put on a smile and laughed like she was enjoying herself, anyone who paid attention to her eyes for more than a few seconds could see the truth. That was the most rebellion she could give under the circumstances.

The entire wedding felt more like a bloodsport to her than anything joyous or even civilized. The way people surrounded her and watched her suffer while laughing and drinking and networking; It felt like a ritual sacrifice, like they were about to pick up rocks and start stoning her to death.

She hated them all, she realized. Every single one of them, at that moment as she twirled and danced and laughed with her new husband, every single one of them she wanted to see burn.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity of his hand digging into her ass, the song ended and it was her dad’s turn to dance. He at least held her with more respect for her body than Rhalyf had; and unlike Rhalyf or anyone else at the event, he actually saw her eyes and the fury with which they were staring at him despite her smile. There were no illusions between them. For Kalina, at that moment, it was downright liberating. She supposed she could at least take solace in that.

Before long, their dance was over, and people flooded the dance floor, eyes now on each other rather than on her as they paired off and began to dance. Kalina took the opportunity to step off the floor and let out a breath she didn’t know she’d been holding in. She wondered whether anyone would notice if she disappeared now.

“Behind you.”

The whisper that came in her ear inspired a mix of horror and excitement in the white haired elf as she turned around to see Sylvanas standing there, wearing a slim black dress.

“Sylvanas… you’re here…” Kalina spoke, silently terrified at the implications of her making an appearance.

Sylvanas smiled. “Couldn’t miss the opportunity to dance with you one last time.”

For the first time since she’d gotten to Silvermoon, Kalina genuinely laughed.

“I’d love that.” She replied as she took the taller woman’s hand and led her back out onto the dance floor. She hadn’t realized how much she’d missed Sylvanas’ touch.

As they began to dance, Kalina found herself at a loss for words. There’d been so much she’d wanted to say up until this point, but now she couldn’t think of a thing. She realized she was okay with that. Just getting to have one more dance with Sylvanas was more than she could’ve ever hoped for.

“I shouldn’t have let you go.” Sylvanas finally spoke.
Kalina smiled sadly. “What’s done is done. No point beating yourself up over it now.”

She could see the pair of them were getting looks, some people pointing and whispering. Good. Let them know how much she hated her new husband.

“Promise me you’ll tell me if he mistreats you.” It wasn’t a request.

Kalina knew he was going to mistreat her the moment they were alone and near a bed. He’d already grabbed a handful earlier this evening. Still, she didn’t say anything. She knew she wouldn’t be able to.

“I promise.” She lied.

Silence fell between the pair of them. Kalina could hear the song starting to wind down, and felt her eyes water.

“I love you.” She spoke softly with a hiccup in her voice.

Suddenly Kalina felt herself being pulled in tightly for a hug followed by a whisper in her ear.

“I love you too, Kali.”

The song ended. Kalina’s grip on Sylvanas tightened. She didn’t want to let her go. This time it was Sylvanas’ turn to smiled sadly.

“It’ll be okay. We’ll be together again someday. I promise.” She reassured her, before leaning in and kissing Kalina on the forehead.

It took everything Kalina had not to let a tear fall down her cheek. She couldn’t afford to. Not here. Quiet rebellion was one thing, bursting into tears in the middle of the event was quite another. She squeezed her eyes shut to keep the tears in.

“G... Goodbye…” she said as she felt Sylvanas let go of her.

When she opened her eyes again, the woman she loved was gone. She looked around to see if anyone had noticed her lose her composure. If anyone had, they weren’t being obvious about it.

Kalina had been dreading this moment with every fiber of her being since Rhalyf first approached her all those years ago. They were newlyweds, and as the bride from any influential family is expected to do, it was time for her to consummate the marriage.

The door clicker shut behind them. She couldn’t do this, she realized. The very idea made her skin crawl. She had to tell him.

“Hey, um, could we maybe wai-“

The words died in her mouth as she suddenly felt herself being slammed up against the wall, the sound of heavy, furious breathing now right in her ear as his hands tore her dress to pieces.

She could feel his breath on her ear as he spoke the next few words with a cold rage, sending a chill down her spine.

“Don’t worry. It’ll be okay.” She could hear the grin on his face as he spoke “By the time I’m done, you’ll forget all about the Windrunner bitch.”
“I-“

“Shut up.” Rhalyf hissed angrily in her ear. Before Kalina could even think of a reply, she felt all ability to speak leave her. A muting spell. They were usually reserved for subduing mages.

She found to her horror that she couldn’t so much as make a sound. Part of her wanted to turn around and crush the skull of the man holding her. She’d certainly gotten strong enough to fight back.

But she couldn’t. Best case scenario, she defends herself, the marriage is annulled, and she’s cast down into poverty. Worst case scenario, it’s Rhalyf’s word against hers, and she’s found guilty of making an attempt on a magister’s life.

Realizing there was no way out, all Kalina could do was close her eyes and wait for it to be over.
Chapter 5

It didn’t take long for Kalina to discover the reason exactly why Rhalyf had always chosen her to talk to at parties rather than someone like Alleria. Alleria Windrunner was strong, capable, resilient, and fearless.

Rhalyf wanted none of those things. He wanted someone easily moldable, someone submissive and weak whom he could keep locked away at home as he pleased or could show off as a trophy. But never someone who could compete with him or outshine him at anything.

It’d been three weeks since she’d been married off to him; three torturous, absolutely horrific weeks since the last time she saw Sylvanas. The memory of that dance was the only thing that was keeping her sane at this point, keeping her will intact - the image of Sylvanas one day swooping in, killing Rhalyf, and taking her away from this awful place to spend the rest of their lives together.

Despite it having been three weeks, Kalina had only just learned that the looming tower on the Silvermoon waterfront that was Rhalyf’s home had a library. If there was a silver lining to this mess, she supposed, it was that she could finally learn some substantial form of magic like she’d always thought about.

She stepped into the library. It wasn’t the largest library one could imagine, but it was definitely not small by any means. A labyrinth of shelves reaching to the ceiling spanned the entire floor of the spire. Under different circumstances, perhaps, Kalina would’ve smiled. As it stood, she was just trying to keep her will to press on.

She started down the aisles, the heels she was wearing clacking against the floor with every step. Rhalyf had been very clear that she was to look her best at all times, which meant - in his opinion - stilettos. She wasn’t even sure where to begin.

After a few minutes of searching, she came across a tome that at least looked like a good starting point - ‘Introduction to Basic Pyromancy’. The moment she reached for it, however, every muscle in her body seized up as a sudden shock rushed through her system. The next thing she knew, she was on the ground, with Rhalyf standing over her, holding the book in question.

“Awake, are we?” He asked calmly in a tone that suggested he was anything but. “Tell me, what does this book have to do with your duties?”

Kalina slowly got to her feet. “I wanted to learn some magic.” She answered, feeling like she was admitting to some sort of crime.

Rhalyf looked back down at the book. “And what does pyromancy have to do with your duties as my wife? Do you need it to bare children? I can’t imagine you’d need this much knowledge to cook.” Even if she did, Rhalyf’s house was rich enough and lazy enough to hire a cooking staff, and being a family of magisters, cleaning became a trivial task, meaning that Kalina’s so called ‘wifely duties’ really just amounted to pleasuring her husband.

“I’m sorry...” She spoke quietly. In her mind, she loved to imagine herself shouting at him while driving a knife into his stomach over and over, but she knew it could never be. At the end of the day, Rhalyf’s good will was all that stood between her and what would be considered a betrayal of her family, something that’d make her a pariah, cast to the very bottom of society.
“See to it that such a slip up does not happen again.” He snapped back, before replacing the book and leaving.

Once he was gone, Kalina sat back down and hugged her knees. Three weeks had gone by, and she was expected to keep doing this for at least a few thousand years. She wondered what Sylvanas was doing right now; probably off becoming a farstrider, with an eternity of adventure and excitement ahead of her. She would’ve given anything to join her.

Her thoughts turned to the idea of suicide. It’d certainly be preferable to a life of being raped by Rhalyf Dawnblade every day in a gilded cage for all eternity, let alone having to have children with the man. She imagined herself taking a poison. Something painless, where she’d just go to sleep and fade away. She’d have to learn alchemy to make something like that, which would mean that Rhalyf would need to give his approval for her to learn alchemy.

She realized with a flicker of hope that she could actually make the case that her learning alchemy would be beneficial to his sex life, which would mean that she could learn alchemy. She could actually be something beyond just a doll for her husband to fuck.

Joy welled up in her as she got to her feet, practically skipping now as she went to find her husband. An hour later, she happily strolled out of the library again, this time with a mountain of alchemy textbooks in her arms.

The next few months were as hellish as the first few weeks were, but it was easier for Kalina to hold on now. On top of that, she soon found, she didn’t have to worry about lacking the necessary funds to supply her new hobby. She hadn’t forgotten her stated reason for learning alchemy, and she knew it’d be better for her funding if she showed results, and so it was that one evening Kalina sat out on the balcony, a tube of lipstick in one hand and a small mirror in the other, wearing a set of lingerie she’d bought recently. She wanted everything to be perfect for tonight’s performance.

She’d given Rhalyf the aphrodisiac potion earlier that day, with instructions to take it 30 minutes before they were to begin. She’d certainly wanted to make something faster acting, but that required a level of skill she didn’t yet possess.

She looked down at her tube of lipstick. If tonight went well, her life here would become exponentially easier. She looked out over the water. In the very distance, she could see Quel’Danas. The light of the Sunwell was so beautiful at night, she thought. If she ever did decide to kill herself, it would certainly make for a nice last thing to see.

The sound of the bedroom door came from inside. She allowed herself one more look out over the ocean, before she faked a smile and turned around to go attend to her husband.

The next day Kalina was nothing short of gleeful. The potion she’d blended with her lipstick had work exactly as hoped. One minute he was on her like a jungle troll, the next he was pushing rope. What she wouldn’t have given for someone to make a portrait of the look of shock and humiliation on his face. It was a small victory, for sure, but it meant that she never had to be violated by him again. She could keep putting it in her lipstick, she could slip it into his wine, she could get it into him a hundred different ways and things were going to be okay. Well, not okay, but better, and that was a start.

“Kalina!” Came a furious shout from upstairs. The elf smiled. She’d expected as much.

“Coming!” She called back which a smile as she nearly pranced upstairs to the northern half of the top floor that made up their bedroom.
Inside, Rhalyf sat in bed, looking absolutely furious.

“You called, dear?” Kalina asked in the most innocuous tone of voice she could as she stepped into the room. She’d made sure to put extra work into her appearance today specifically for this conversation.

To her unpleasant surprise however, the moment she entered Rhalyf’s field of view, she was slammed backwards against the far wall by a magical force, knocking the wind out of her.

“Did you think I wouldn’t figure it out?” He spoke as he stood up, unrestrained fury on his face. Kalina couldn’t move a muscle. As it was, she was struggling to breathe.

“You have me drink some strange potion before sex and suddenly it doesn’t go up?!”

Kalina wondered whether any of the cooking staff could hear him shouting.

“Answer me!” He shouted, now standing in front of her as she weakly gasped for air.

“I… I…” She barely breathed before the spell holding her was released, causing her to fall to the floor, gasping for breath.

“I could have you executed for this, you know! Poisoning a magister!” He shouted at her.

“I didn’t…” She finally managed to speak, remembering the failsafe she’d prepared. “I brewed a whole-” she was cut off by a sudden coughing fit as air flowed into her lungs. “-a whole cauldron. You can see for yourself.”

“Where.” He growled, before grabbing her by the neck and lifting her to her feet.

Kalina took a deep breath, before shooting him a glare. “Follow me.” She said before leading Rhalyf out of the room and downstairs to where she’d set up a small alchemy lab. Inside was a cauldron in the center, a large table with several pieces of glassware and tools off to one side, a table full of textbooks on the opposite side of the room, and several cupboards at the back.

She could feel Rhalyf’s eyes boring into her as she passed by the equipment to the cupboard at the back, kneeling down to open one of the drawers where, to her word, the drawer was found to be filled to the brim with several corked bottles of the glowing pink substance. She’d filled them by hand a few nights ago, something that had proven to be a rather distracting process considering that the compound could be absorbed through the skin.

“Here.” She spoke briskly, standing up and stepping back. “Take it, test it, safeguard it, do whatever. You’ll find it’s clean.” She gave him a look of near contempt. It didn’t come close to the ocean of absolute loathing she felt for him, but it was more than she’d ever had an excuse to give him up to this point, and as such she appreciated the opportunity.

He looked at her stiffly. “Fine. I will. Then we’ll see.” He snapped back, before kneeling down and pulling out the entire drawer.

Kalina watched him go. The moment the door closed, she found herself fighting the sudden urge to smash things. It hadn’t even been a year and already she’d reached a level of both terror and rage she didn’t know existed, several times over.

She thought about what Sylvanas would do if she saw what Kalina’s home life had become, before pushing the thought away. It wouldn’t help to keep thinking about her, down that road lay only more pain and heartbreak now. Winter’s Veil was coming up. Rhalyf had made it clear that they wouldn’t be visiting Windrunner Spire anytime soon, something that Kalina was now quietly relieved at. She
didn’t think she could bear another brief glimpse followed by a brutal goodbye; not after the past few months, anyway.

If Rhalyf had run any tests of the drawer of potions, he didn’t say, but Kalina heard no more on the matter. It’d taken him about a week to work up the courage to tell her they were gonna have sex again; and the night of, it became clear he had hung on to the bottles of the potion. It made no difference. The poison in Kalina’s lipstick was still more than enough to make him drop like a rock, earning her, to her quiet satisfaction, the sight of Rhalyf slamming his fist into the headboard in frustration.

With the end of their honeymoon, Rhalyf went back to his work as a magister, which mostly involved playing politics and exerting influence over a number of facets of Quel’thallas. Kalina found it positively boring, but of course that didn’t stop her husband from venting to her about it at every opportunity.

The months quickly turned into years for Kalina, as now that her husband/rapist was effectively castrated, she didn’t have to worry about staying sane one day at a time. Rhalyf’s frustration, meanwhile, slowly gave way to dejection and finally acceptance, to where he’d still make the attempt every night both with and without the potion Kalina provided, but to where each attempt came to be expected to fail in its entirety - which it did, only adding to Kalina’s smug satisfaction. The best part was at social functions when people would ask whether they’d thought about having kids yet, only for Rhalyf to come up with some flustered excuse about waiting a while.

Despite the newfound comfort and ease of her position, however, one thing she’d not been able to get out of her head was Sylvanas. It had been years since they’d seen each other, with the closest Kalina had come since then being catching a glimpse of recognizable pale blonde hair under a blue ranger hood as she watched a precession of the soldiers go by one afternoon in the Royal Exchange, Silvermoon’s trade district. She’d cried for hours that night.

On the other hand, her alchemical skill flourished wonderfully, going from simple marital aids or lack thereof to all sorts of healing potions, poisons, and other interesting delights. The part of the day Kalina spent studying and brewing was probably the easiest for her, because it was where she could channel her rage and sorrow into making all sorts of horrific substances which would kill or maim the consumer in a variety of nightmarish ways; all, of course, to her husband’s ignorance.

It was a warm and sunny one afternoon, like almost every other in Quel’thallas, as Kalina was out shopping for alchemical reagents. She was wearing a long, flowing burgundy dress which complemented her ivory hair nicely, and a set of matching gloves. She always looked good in burgundy, and so it along with a number of other darker reds had become a commonality in her wardrobe.

While there were a number of places to get reagents in Silvermoon, there was only one shop that managed to get everything she needed in large enough quantities for her to use on a daily basis. That shop was Royal Reagents.

“Lady Kalina! Good to see you again!” Came the pleasant chirp of the girl at the counter as Kalina entered the shop. A shorter elf with cobalt hair by the name of Lira.

“Hey Lira.” Kalina replied with a pleasant smile as she stepped up to the counter. “I’m just here to replenish a few things.”

“Sure thing! Watcha need?” she asked, placing her arms on the counter and leaning forward with a carefree smile. Kalina liked to think it reminded her of herself once upon a time.
“Uh, let’s see…” She started, recalling the items she required. She never dared to keep a written list, just in case Rhalyf or someone else found it and figured out some of the things she was making. “Half a pound of strangleroot, a liter of kingsblood, half a liter of blackmouth oil, and 5 grams of thorium dust.” She said.

“No problem!” Came the immediate reply. “I should note, though, that we are actually out of blackmouth oil for the time being.”

Kalina’s stomach dropped out from under her. Blackmouth oil was one of the main ingredients needed for the draught that she used to keep Rhalyf more or less impotent. If she ran out, it’d mean his dick would start working again, which would not only mean she’d have to be raped by him again, but that this time he’d likely want to seize the opportunity to have kids. On top of that, the risk of her being discovered would skyrocket if suddenly everything started working again, and if she was discovered, any number of unspeakable things could happen to her.

She blinked. “Why so?” She calmly inquired, though no longer smiling.

Lira seemed to notice the sudden change in temperament, because her mannerisms became a bit more nervous.

“Well, um, one of our shipments from Sunsail Anchorage has been indefinitely delayed, so we’re not gonna be able to get any more for a whi-”

“Why is it delayed?” Kalina cut her off, her terror growing.

“You’ll… have to talk to my boss about it…” the navy haired elf spoke, her nervousness growing.

“Done. Where are they?” she shot back without missing a beat.

Lira stared at Kalina for a moment, as if she was crazy, before taking a nearby quill and scribbling down an address on a piece of paper.

“Just, don’t tell her I sent you…” she finished as she handed the piece of paper to Kalina.

“Got it. Thanks.” The white haired elf replied as she read over the address once before folding up the piece of paper and putting it in her purse, immediately turning around and hastening out of the shop.

“Come back soon!” She heard Lira nervously call after her.
Chapter 6

Augur’s Row was definitely not the part of Silvermoon Kalina had expected to find herself in anytime soon. Crime of all sorts flourished there, to the point where the guards wouldn’t even patrol there, even during the day. Whereas most of Silvermoon was dominated by wide, sunlit streets, the buildings in Augur’s Row were clustered together to where it was so dark at the street level that one couldn’t tell whether it was night or day if they didn’t look up to see check for a tiny speck of blue far above them.

Her eyes were on a swivel. All around she could see silhouettes in dark alleys, groups of hooded figures huddled together, and people staring at her. She really wouldn’t have come to this sort of neighborhood looking as appetizing of a target, for one crime or another, as she did if it wasn’t an urgent matter, which it very much was.

Her only security as she cautiously walked the dark streets was the pair of daggers strapped to her thighs. Rhalyf had been more than willing to let her carry a blade once she’d proposed the prospect of another man touching her in ways that only he was ‘allowed’; and Sylvanas had taught her to dual wield, so she figured why not two?

She tried not to think of the ranger as she neared her destination. She certainly tried not to think of those days spent almost naked on the hot sand together, laughing and sparring with a perfect future together ahead of them.

Soon she came to the address in question. It was a fairly inconspicuous building, with a pair of balconies, a large one halfway up the building and a smaller one near the top. Her eyes darted around again, looking to make sure she wasn’t being followed. Things seemed as clear as they were gonna get. Kalina hesitated for a moment, before knocking on the door.

A moment later, an elf that could only be described as built answered it. He didn’t say anything, only staring at her.

Kalina hesitated.

“Uh, hi, I need to talk to Lira’s Boss?” The moment the words left her lips, she was all but yanked inside, the door closing behind her. The interior of the building was actually rather nice. Beanbags, cushions, and hookah pipes were scattered about, while ornate tapestries hung from the walls.

She didn’t have much time to take in the interior decorating, however, as a sudden shove told her less than politely to start walking, and so she did, until a massive hand on her shoulder steered her in another direction. She passed by several people, some of them armed, others just relaxing it seemed.

It wasn’t long before she came to a room with a single door at the other end and a desk off to the side. A woman with warm blonde hair sat there, looking wonderfully bored.

“You here to see the boss?” She called out casually as Kalina entered.

Kalina only nodded.

“Right, arms up. Boat, search her.”

‘Boat?’

The large man behind her didn’t wait to be told twice, lifting Kalina’s arms up himself before patting
her down, something that might have once made her uncomfortable, but nowadays was nothing to her.

She could feel both her daggers being removed from their sheaths simultaneously, before being placed on the desk. A few seconds later ‘Boat’ gave a thumbs up.

“Go on in, sweetheart.” The blonde spoke again, causing Boat to give her another shove forward.

‘Yes thank you, I understand.’

Stepping forward, Kalina made her way through the door, noticing that Boat didn’t follow her. On the other side, she found a set of stairs leading up to another door.

As she stepped through the second door, she came into a rather luxurious looking office space, with an opening leading out onto a balcony at the far back. A woman with dirty blonde hair, tanned skin, and leather armor stood leaned against one wall with her arms crossed, while towards the back of the office, a woman with raven colored hair, a dress to match, and an eyepatch sat reclined in a comfortable looking chair behind a large redwood desk.

The eyepatched woman, whom Kalina assumed was the boss of the operation, raised an eyebrow at her with an overconfident smile. “To what do I owe such a beautiful view?” She asked, looking Kalina up and down.

Already Kalina liked her more than her husband, though that was really saying very little all things considered.

“Hi! Yes, I was told that a shipment of blackmouth oil has been delayed infinitely. I’d like to know the reason.” she replied, ignoring the comment.

The boss lady shrugged casually. “Shipments get delayed, shit happens. Nothing anyone can do.”

Kalina sighed. “If I don’t get a large quantity of blackmouth oil by the day after tomorrow, my life is going to get very bad very quickly. What can I do to un-delay the shipment?” She asked. It didn’t seem like an extortion attempt, at least not against her.

The woman smirked. “If you really wanna help so bad, go for it. The shipment’s being held by the guards. They seem to be under the impression that there’s something less than legal being shipped.” She shrugged. “If you wanna try talking to em, be my guest.”

“Where is it being held, specifically?” Kalina asked.

“Far as we know, they’ve legally detained the carts at the third inner barracks.” She spoke.

Kalina nodded. “If I can get you a big enough distraction, can you get your people in there long enough to get the merchandise out?”

The smile disappeared from her eyes, despite staying on her mouth. “Even if I were to be able to arrange such an endeavor, which I’m not, how would I know you’re not just working with the guards and this isn’t a trap? Seems pretty obvious to me, someone who’s clearly not from Augur’s Row waltzes in here knowing full well who I am already and just expecting me to-“

“One of them will die.” Kalina cut her off. She could see movement in the corner of her eye. The blonde stood up straighter, as if to move towards her. The dark haired elf held up a hand, causing the tan woman to stay where she was.
“Go on.” The boss spoke slowly.

“One of them will die as part of the distraction. More if necessary.” The second part of that statement she said with less certainty than the first part. She’d long since told herself she’d be willing to wipe out Silvermoon if it meant never having to be violated again. All the same, she’d never actually killed anyone. It was one thing to theorize about it, it was another to actually plan it. “Have your people in position tomorrow night for when the time comes. I’ll make sure you can’t miss it.” She looked down at herself, causing her to notice that she was shaking. This was actually happening.

The boss lady sighed. “Fine. If this works, and that is a very big if, I’ll let you have as much of the blackmouth oil as you want. Betray me, and we’ll be speaking again very soon. Was there anything else?” She asked, waving a hand expectantly.

Kalina shook her head. “No ma’am.”

“Good, then fuck off.” She replied briskly.

Kalina didn’t need to be told twice as she turned around and left without another word.

‘Total annihilation of one’s enemies is the only honorable form of stealth.’ The words echoed in Kalina’s head from a lifetime ago. She’d first heard them when studying a book of military strategies with Sylvanas. While she certainly knew her way around a blade, she wasn’t nearly experienced enough to simply walk in and slaughter the entire guard detachment on her own.

Stealth in Quel’thalas as an acceptable military tactic was fairly unheard of. It was considered beneath the Quel’dorei, instead being among the acts of the trolls, the humans, and other less honorable races. No glory would be given to one who ended a war using it.

Which meant, of course, that no one expected it.

The Silvermoon City Guardians, skilled as they were, were armed with massive shields that reached from their heads to their feet, and double-sides swords, a weapon that if wrestled from them somehow, would be impossible to use without special training. Their entire loadout was very much designed for an open confrontation in the streets or during an arrest. It was incredibly effective for area denial, crowd control, and use in head on confrontations.

What it was not, was agile. The guards didn’t need to be. Agility was a trait saved for the rangers, who needed mobility above all else in order to deal with the dishonorable tactics used by the trolls. Against other elves, however, honor was assumed.

Her plan began the following afternoon, with a friendly visit between the wife of a powerful magister and a decorated member of the military nobility. She’d even brought a plate of homemade cookies.

“Kalina!” Came the cheerful voice of Major Renarus Springweaver as she stepped into his office, holding an envelope in one hand and the plate of cookies in the other. “So good to see you again! To what do I owe this visit?”

“Good to see you too, Major.” Kalina replied with a smile. “How are the kids?”

“Oh they’re doing fantastic! Elarin’s been accepted for an apprenticeship as a blacksmith, and Nyana just graduated from the Ranger Academy!”

Kalina’s’ grip on the plate of cookies tightened imperceptibly, largely due to the gloves she was wearing.
That’s wonderful! I’m so glad they’re doing well. Here, I hope you don’t mind, but I made cookies for you and your men.” She said, setting the plate down as she did so. “And this is for you.” She held out the envelope. “A donation from House Dawnblade to your detachment for new weapons, gear, or whatever you wanna spend it on. There’s more than enough for whatever you plan to do with it.” Rhalyf had given her some leeway in terms of spending for political networking - definitely enough to warrant a personal visit to the Major.

“That’s very generous of you.” He said, standing up to accept it. “I’ll make sure it’s put to good use.”

“That’s wonderful to hear. My husband and I are very-” she let out a cry as she suddenly fell forward, dropping the envelope and catching onto the major’s arm for support, hard enough were he’d never notice the prick of the pin hidden in her glove.

“Are you okay?” He asked, helping her regain her balance.

“Oh, yes, I’m sorry. I’m so clumsy sometimes.” She spoke as she stood up. “Thank you for catching me.” She smiled up at him.

“Anytime.” He replied with his own smile. “Would you like to stay for tea?”

She shook her head. “Thank you, but I should get home before it gets dark so Rhalyf doesn’t worry about me. I’m not a magister like him, so he tends to get nervous for my safety.”

He nodded. “Of course. Give your husband my thanks for me.” He picked up the envelope before going to sit back down at his desk, putting it in his top drawer.

“Will do!” Kalina gave him one more smile, before turning around and leaving.

The poison in the cookies would just slow the guards down while they were awake and make them stop breathing once they went to sleep. The poison she’d just given the major, on the other hand was much faster acting and much, much more dramatic - enough to traumatize anyone who saw even a glimpse of his fate.

Kalina checked her timepiece as she was escorted out. She had about two hours before all hell would break loose. Once she was clear of the base, she strolled further down the street, before turning into an alleyway when no one was watching, where she’d prepared her dead drop containing her daggers and a set of loose black clothing that covered her face, among other things. It wasn’t her first choice of attire, but then, she hadn’t had long to prepare.

A part of her wondered what Sylvanas would think if she could see her now, preparing to kill an entire detachment of Silvermoon guards. She sighed. Sylvanas hadn’t seen the last ten years of her life. She hadn’t seen her getting assaulted and raped on a regular basis all while locked away in that cage she was forced to call home, while everyone around her laughed and drank and told her how lucky she was to have a husband like Rhalyf. If Sylvanas could see her now, she wouldn’t understand.

Pushing such disheartening thoughts from her mind, Kalina grabbed onto a low lying ledge and quickly began to scale the wall. Compared to Windrunner Spire, this was nothing. Reaching the roof, she checked her timepiece. 90 minutes to go. The sun was setting now. Once it got dark out, she could cross over to the building adjacent the outpost.

Sylvanas found her way back into Kalina’s thoughts again. She hadn’t spoke to the ranger in a decade, yet somehow she couldn’t find herself able to get past those years they spent training together. Maybe, she thought, it was because that was the last time she was truly happy.
She hadn’t realized how long she’d spent thinking about Sylvanas until she looked down at her
timepiece again, startling herself. Five minutes. Quickly stowing it away, she got up, before taking a
running start and leaping across the gaps between buildings until she was looking over the enclosed
plaza that served as the guards’ training yard. Across the way she could see the buildings that served
as the guards’ offices, barracks, and detention centers, while off to the side of the yard, the stables sat
along with a small storage building. That was where the cart would be.

She looked down into the yard. A lot of the guards were moving more sluggishly and less elegantly
now, as though they were seriously drunk. Some of them were fine however. Any of They’d have to
die first. It was imperative that the alarm not be raised.

The sound of violent coughing told her it was showtime. The major wouldn’t die quickly, not in the
slightest, because if he did, that was a reason to sound the alarm. No, he’d suffer dramatically for at
least an hour. Plenty of time for her to work and for Lira’s friends to get what they needed.

Kalina watched, waiting, before a female scream suddenly sounded from inside the Major’s office.
His secretary, no doubt. The sound of shouting followed, and soon the majority of the still attentive
guard members were rushing to their commander’s office. The only ones that weren’t were the ones
watching the perimeter.

The black clad elf looked down from her perch. She’d gone through this at least a thousand times in
her head in theory, but that didn’t make it any less terrifying. Ah well, either she lived and she never
had to be raped again, or she died and she never had to be raped again. The only way she could lose
was by hesitating.

She took one last deep breath, before leaping from the roof and trying not to scream. A moment later,
her feet found their target as she landed on one of the guards below, forcing him to the ground face
first and taking his breath away as his ribcage was shattered by the impact. Kalina didn’t hesitate,
driving one of her daggers into his neck with all the force she could muster, before yanking it out just
as quickly.

A part of her was in shock not only at the deed she’d just committed, but at the act of acrobatics
she’d just performed. That part of her was drowned out at the moment, however, by an ocean of
adrenaline.

Not waiting for someone to find her there, she got up and dissolved into the shadows.

‘Ready or not, here I come.’

The body was far too heavy for her to move, which only put her on more of a timer. Luckily for her,
one of the guards manning the entrance appeared to have ingested the poison as well, allowing her to
sprint quietly enough up behind him to where his sober partner at the other side of the gate hadn’t
heard her. By the time the poisoned one had, her arm was already wrapping its way around his throat
while she drove her dagger up under his armor and into his spine.

His companion noticed the movement, turning to see his partner being butchered. Before he could
call out, however, Kalina had already let go of the first dagger, still in the guard, and drawn the
second, before throwing it with enough force that it buried itself in his face, causing his very brief cry
to turn into a tortured series of gargles.

Kneeling down, Kalina ripped her first blade out of the one nearer to her before sprinting over and
grabbing the other one. She held up an OK sign to whoever was watching, letting them know that
the way was clear and now was the time to move in.
Quickly, Kalina worked her way through the rest of the outpost, slaughtering any and all inhabitants discreetly, until she found herself on the ledge outside the major’s window. She could hear his sputtering turning into wheezing. He was almost dead, which meant she was almost out of time. Grabbing the frame of the window, she launched herself through in one swift motion to where his secretary waited, along with a medic and two other soldiers guarding the door.

‘Shit.’

She didn’t have time to ponder how bad of a situation this was as, drawing both her daggers at once, she chucked each one into the faces of the two guards near the door, before lunging forward to grab them. The secretary wasn’t armed, but she was trained, and two sets of weapons just dropped to the ground near her.

Kalina made it at the same time the secretary did, the assassin barely grabbing her daggers in time to deflect the blade suddenly being stabbed downwards at her. The other blade of the weapon came down in response, its goal to cut, before being parried briefly by the Kalina’s knives, giving Kalina just enough time to kick upwards, knocking the secretary back as the door behind Kalina opened for another guard to come in. Kalina looked backwards, her blade lashing out and catching the first one in the leg, bringing him down as she rolled out of the way and stood up. It was just the two of them now plus the medic, which were much better odds than Kalina had started with.

They stared at each other, the secretary breathing heavily. Stowing one of her daggers, Kalina with drew a small bottle from her pocket, before stepping slowly towards the other corner of the room and placing it down.

“The antidote.” She lied. “Medic stays where he is.”

The secretary nodded as Kalina backed away from the bottle, before carefully stepping towards it, keeping her guard up the whole time. The moment the woman’s hand found the bottle, her guard slipped, allowing Kalina’s dagger to find her skull, leaving only the medic, who only a second later found Kalina’s other blade in his head.

The room went quiet, save for the sound of the major slowly dying. Only now did Kalina have time to actually take in what had happened to him. Blood poured from every possible orifice while the man himself spasmed, twitched, and jerked erratically as red foam came forth from his mouth. His expression was one of unthinkable agony, such that there was no way he was still completely sane.

Kalina sighed, before slowly stepping past him and opening the top drawer of his desk, retrieving the donation envelope she’d given him earlier. Strolling back around, she stood close enough so that he could clearly see her, before holding up the envelope.

“For what it’s worth, know that your men died for a good cause.” She said simply, before removing the dagger from the medic’s skull with one swift yank and burying it in the major’s neck, putting an end to his torment. Pulling the dagger out again, she took the time to wipe it off once with her clothes, before resheathing it and doing the same with the one in the secretary.

Only as the adrenaline began to wear off did she realize what she’d done. Her hands clapped over her mouth as she fell to her knees, fighting the urge to throw up. She’d just committed an unthinkable crime. One or two guards dying was one thing, but an entire outpost being wiped out wasn’t a guard matter, at that point it was a military matter. The rangers would be involved, the magisters would be involved, everyone would be involved.

Sylvanas could even be involved. Kalina had to get out of there.
Slowly, she got to her feet. If Sylvanas did somehow get involved… Kalina couldn’t bear the thought of her finding out, of her hating her. Without thinking, she strolled over to the major’s desk, before sweeping everything aside with one arm, leaving the surface bare. Her heart pounded in her chest. With a shaky hand, she withdrew one of her daggers, and quickly carved into the wood the words ‘I love you. I’m sorry.’ before resheathing it and all but bolting for the window. Only a few moments later, she was gone, and the guard outpost was left eerily silent.

The reaction was unprecedented. The event itself was unprecedented. An entire guard outpost was wiped out silently in the dark, with not a clue as to who was responsible. A curfew was ordered for anyone not a guard, ranger, magister, or member of one of the seven major families. Arcane guardians, massive magical constructs that were once only seen used by magisters, now watched over the city as guards patrolled alongside rangers.

Luckily for Kalina, her last name was “Dawnblade”, so whereas most were kept inside at night under penalty of extreme force, she was free to move as she pleased, in this case that being the hideout in Augur’s Row. Before she’d even had a chance to knock on the door, it opened up and she found herself being pulled inside like her life depended on it, which she supposed it would’ve had she not been a Dawnblade.

Inside, Boat all but picked her up this time before carrying her all the way to his boss’ office. They didn’t even stop to disarm her.

“There you are.” The raven haired woman spoke in a much less relaxed and much more business tone than the last time they’d seen each other, now pacing back and forth in front of the young ivory haired elf. “Do you have any fucking idea what kind of inferno you’ve summoned? You fucking should, seeing as you live in the same fucking city as everyone else in this fucking room, but I’m wondering whether the fuck you actually do because I’m trying to figure out whether or not you’re a fucking psychopath!”

Kalina got to her feet. “So I take it I’m not under suspicion of being a guard anymore?”

The boss slapped her so hard she hit the ground again. “This is not a fucking joke, do you have any idea how much fucking harder it’s gonna be to get shit done now that every fucking street corner has fucking Farstriders on it?” The woman pinched the bridge of her nose and closed her eyes. “By the sun, this situation is fucked.”

Kalina slowly got up again. “Um, so, about the blackmouth oil…” The chaos caused by the events of the previous night had bought her a few days as Rhalyf, along with all but the highest ranking magisters, had to stay at work long into the night producing as many arcane guardians as possible as quickly as possible.

The boss looked up at her. “You really are insane…”

Kalina ignored the comment. “What was in that shipment that was worth so much effort, anyway.”

The woman stared at her, mouth agape, before closing said mouth and sighing. “You know what? I don’t even fucking care anymore. Bloodthistle, there you happy?” She sat back on her desk, before turning to where a bottle of whiskey sat and - rather than pouring herself a glass - taking a drink directly from the source.

Bloodthistle. The mention of the narcotic gave Kalina an idea. “… You said there’d be more work for me?” She asked nervously.
The boss set the down the bottle. “With your skill set, fuck yeah there’s work for you.” She sounded exhausted.

Kalina nodded. “I’ll do whatever you need me to, but I want my pay to be half bloodthistle.”

A look of understanding came over the boss’ face. “So that’s it. You’re a thistlehead.”

“No.” Kalina shook her head. “But I know someone who is.”

‘Or someone who will be, at least.’

“... Fine. In the meantime, go get your blackmouth oil and I’ll find you when I have a job for you. Fuck.” She took another swig.

“Wait.” Kalina spoke again, before Boat could pick her up.

“What now?” The boss groaned.

“I don’t know your name.” She gave a nervous smile.

The woman let out a long breath. “Lysenna. Happy?”

Kalina nodded. “I’m... Canary.” She finished after a moment’s hesitation, having long since decided that a caged bird would make for a fitting image.

“Great. Now please, I’m begging you: get the fuck out.”

Silently, Kalina turned and left to collect her blackmouth oil.
Chapter 7

After about a month, the rangers broke off from the city guard to resume their normal activities, and the curfew was lifted. A week later, Kalina found a note in her bag of reagents she’d bought from Lira that day: ‘Have work. Come after dark.’

That night, Kalina slipped Rhalyf something to help him sleep while she went out shortly after sunset. The presence of the arcane guardians set her on edge. While she could hide from the guards no problem, the constructs saw everything. Luckily, even they stayed out of Augur’s Row.

And so it was that she soon found herself in Lysenna’s office again, carrying a bag full of everything she expected she’d need for the mission ahead. She’d brought more knives this time, along with a set of soft leather armor with a hood that covered her face.

“You wanted to see me, ma’am?” Kalina asked. She hadn’t needed Boat to show her the way this time, and no one had hassled her about disarming or being patted down. It was nice.

Lysenna gestured to a chair across from her. Kalina took a seat.

“I’ve got work for you.” She spoke, looking far more composed than the last time they’d seen each other.

“Sure thing.” Kalina replied. “I can start as early as tonight.”

“Good. There’s a magister who’s employed us in the past for political… fuck it you’re not a guard, he’s had us commit crimes to further his political career and fuck over his enemies. Except now he’s refusing to fucking honor the fucking favors we called in.” Lysenna took a sip of her drink. “At this point, he’s useless at best and a loose end at worst. 2000 gold for his head plus 500 worth of bloodthistle. You in?”

Kalina smiled. “Yes ma’am. Any details you can give?”

“Kyara will give you the address.” At Kalina’s look of confusion, she added “Girl downstairs behind the desk. He knows we’re coming, and has managed to get a fuckton of guards and guardians watching over him, so go slow. Here, take this shit.” Lysenna tossed a bag into Kalina’s arms.

“What is it?” She asked, unsure whether she should open it.

“Bloodthistle. Not for you. For him. Plant some after you wreck him. The guards will put a lot less fucking effort into investigating his death if they think he’s a fucking addict.”

Kalina nodded. “Understood. Was there anything else I should know?”

“The guards figured out your fucking stunt. They know to watch the rooftops now.” Kalina expected as much. She hadn’t exactly made it hard to figure out with the way she killed the first guard, nor with the scene in the major’s office. “Since he’s under special protection, there are rumors they’ll be bringing in Farstriders.”

Kalina froze. “Farstriders, ma’am?”

Lysenna nodded. “Just rumors though. Our sources have had a lot more fucking trouble getting us info.”
She swallowed. Even if there were farstriders, which was very much an if, the chances of Sylvanas being there were fairly low; or so she told herself. “…Understood, ma’am.”

“That’s all. Get going, we’re burning moonlight.”

Without another word, Kalina was gone.

Of all the ways Lieutenant Sylvanas Windrunner had seen herself spending her nights as a farstrider, guarding nobles from light knows what had not been one of them. It wasn’t that she hated Silvermoon’s magical and societal elite. Far from it, she could think of several members off the top of her head that she’d have no problem guarding. It was more the fact that guarding high profile individuals was simply not a matter to be wasting rangers on.

Ever since the guard attack, though, a more agile response had been called for, and when the Convocation asked, the rangers had little choice but to answer. At the very least, the guards had apparently gotten a name of the attacker out of a thistle dealer they’d caught a few weeks later: The Canary.

It was to that end that Sylvanas now stood atop the roof of Magister Erannis Salonar’s seven story home, surrounded by twelve rangers under her command. Two of them knelt in front of and behind her on each corner of the building, watching over the opposite roofs and the streets below.

The adjacent buildings likewise each had a pair of rangers on them, while the opposite buildings each had a single ranger. It was an excess of forces, all things considered, but no one would be thinking about that when Sylvanas would be the one to capture the bird that had so far eluded Silvermoon’s grasp. That alone would get her promoted to captain.

She put her hands to her mouth and let out a bird call. Check-in time. Twelve calls came back one at a time, signaling all was well. She looked out over the rooftops. 12 hooded silhouettes stood in the moonlight, watching vigilantly. Most of the roofs in this area of Silvermoon had gardens or lounges of one sort or another on them that provided cover as well as making them easily accessible.

15 minutes passed. Sylvanas let out another birdcall. Ten came back this time. She looked out again. One of her rangers on an adjacent building with a garden rooftop, Fenissa, had drawn and knocked an arrow, and was now kneeling near the far edge, looking down over the street. Sylvanas couldn’t get a visual on the woman’s partner, Braelynn, from where she was, but knew the ranger wasn’t far.

Suddenly, Fenissa turned and looked directly at her. Sylvanas barely had time to register the masked face under the hood before the arrow struck her in the thigh, eliciting a sudden cry as she fell to one knee.

“Contact!” Came several shouts as her rangers returned fire, a barrage of arrows now flying the assassin’s way as the masked figure dove for cover.

Sylvanas tried to stand up, only to find that she couldn’t move. The arrow had been tipped with a paralytic agent, she realized. Her nearby rangers meanwhile quickly began to close in on their target, crossing over to the roof she was on, while the far ones covered their approach with arrows.

The arrows stopped as the rangers got closer, drawing their swords just in time for the assassin to lunge right into their midst, embedding thrown blades in two of the rangers’ skulls, before getting inside a third’s defenses and swinging her into the path of a fourth’s blades.

It wasn’t long before all six rangers had been slaughtered in a similar fashion and the assassin was pinned behind cover as the barrage of arrows resumed. Sylvanas could only watch in horror. Half of
her rangers had just been killed off in the blink of an eye and she couldn’t so much as lift a finger to help them.

She could see from where she was, the woman was using one of the fallen as cover, holding the body up as a heavy, stationary shield with one arm, while the other reached for one of the one of the fallen’s bows before letting go of the body and lunging for a more solid, stationary cover from which she began returning fire. The sounds of the conflict slowing down told Sylvanas the battle was coming to a close. The Canary would kill her last, slowly and agonizingly, after wiping out her subordinates, the same way she’d done to Major Springweaver.

Before long the night was silent once more. She heard the clatter of the stolen bow hitting the ground as the masked figure rose, wearing Fenissa’s armor. Silently, The Canary stepped toward her. Sylvanas stared ahead defiantly as the woman kneeled down in front of her, clearly avoiding her gaze, before opening her kit and retrieving a bandage. She placed it on the ground next to the ranger along with what was clearly recognizable as a health potion, before standing up and stepping past her.

A few minutes later, the alarm sounded as the magister was found dead in his room, with the Canary having since been long gone.

The first thing Kalina did upon getting home was stash her payment somewhere where no one, especially not Rhalyf, would find it. The second thing she did was strip off all of her armor and gear, and likewise stow it away somewhere secure. The third thing she did was find a pillow, take it somewhere quiet where she didn’t expect to be disturbed, sit down, and shriek into it. She’d shot Sylvanas. The only women in Quel’thalas she cared about at all, the only happy thought in her mind for the last decade, and she’d shot her, and for what, some stupid scheme of hers to improve her home life?

She hugged her knees. What had she become? She considered turning herself in right then. If they didn’t execute her, she certainly wouldn’t ever see the sun again. She felt like she deserved both right about now. She should’ve said something, she thought, she should’ve at least apologized.

No. The more hardened part of her mind kicked in now, dulling her emotions. No, speaking would’ve just risked being identified. Letting her see her eyes would have risked being identified. She did all she could. It wasn’t her fault Lireesa let her daughter be put on guard duty for some pompous prick who got to go through life like it was one big festival.

Kalina let out a breath. What was done was done. She had her payment now. She’d just tell Lysenna she wouldn’t be taking any more jobs involving rangers.

She stayed there for hours, staring at the floor, wondering what life would’ve been like if she’d just thrown away all decorum and told Rhalyf to fuck off at the party all those years ago. She should’ve. At least then she’d have gotten to be a ranger. At least then she’d be happy.

She didn’t realize she’d fallen asleep until she awoke the next day, facedown on the floor. Slowly, she got to her feet. She didn’t have time to cry now. She had to get dressed and get to work to make sure last night hadn’t been for nothing. Taking a deep breath and steeling herself, she put one foot in front of the other, and went to start about her day.

The first thing Sylvanas did when she got back to base was to find a mirror and slam her fist into it. Her entire squad, wiped out one by one while she was forced to watch. If she had died there at least there would’ve been honor in it, but that assassin had had the nerve to let her live, even adding insult
to injury by giving her a healing potion, like she was mocking her for being so weak that she needed her adversary to save her.

She sighed. She could at least be thankful Kalina hadn’t joined up with her years ago. She didn’t think she’d be able to stay sane watching her die while unable to do anything. A silver lining to that fiasco if there ever was one.

She looked down at her hand. It was bleeding profusely. It didn’t matter. All that mattered was finding The Canary and making her suffer for what she’d done.
Chapter 8

The plan had worked perfectly. Rhalyf had chugged down his nightly pink potion the same as he had previous nights, not even noticing the small amount of bloodthistle mixed in. From that moment on, Kalina owned him. He didn’t know what was in the potion that was so addictive, meaning that she was the only one who could provide it to him, giving her absolute leverage over him to do to him or make him do whatever she pleased. Over the next 100 years, Kalina gradually increased the amount of bloodthistle in his potion, slowly deepening his addiction without him realizing while also crippling his magical ability whenever he went without any for more than a day.

Her ownership of Rhalyf quickly turned into political power, as she soon became the power behind the throne, pupetteering her husband’s every decision, his every action, even his every movement, with him powerless to do even the slightest thing to stop it, because at the end of the day he wholly depended on her for his nightly elixirs, and eventually she’d consolidated more than enough sociopolitical power for herself through her control over him where she didn’t need him around anymore. She could kill him any time she liked, and the only thing House Dawnblade would do would be to make sure Kalina was still one of them. She’d even used his cooperation to help seed rumors of the things he’d done to her - all the abuse, all the rape. It wasn’t the cry for help that it would have once been, however. At this point, it was justice. To that end, Rhalyf found himself with no choice but to live life in a constant state of desperation, depending entirely on his wife’s mercy for his survival.

Meanwhile, Kalina’s body count soared, first to hundreds, then to thousands as the streets of Silvermoon ran red to fund her ever strengthening dominance over the man who had once been the terror of her existence. It wasn’t just murder, she performed. For the right price, she could frame someone, she could kidnap someone, she could free someone, people even paid her just to guard them. She only had two rules. The first was that there be no rangers involved, something that a few contacts within the rangers helped her enforce. The second was that she wouldn’t take any contract which targeted any of Lysenna’s operations. The price of using their logistical apparatus had been her allegiance to the family. As the less criminal elements of society began hiring her to further their social and political statuses, she began to take another form of payment: blackmail. The more expensive the job, the juicier the secret would be required, but she always stipulated that the proof had to be absolutely undeniable. That was enough to turn many away.

Sylvanas meanwhile took a personal interest in the exploits of her declared nemesis, even as her career took her far away from Silvermoon. Any time the word “Canary” was so much as whispered in an official report, she made sure she was the first one to know. The pair engaged in combat several more times over the century, costing Sylvanas several rangers, but every time Canary either scored just the tiniest enough prick to poison Sylvanas again, or she got away before Sylvanas could capture or kill her. The woman infuriated the ranger beyond words. Never willing to do her the honor of killing her, and never willing to take honor in admitting defeat and yielding, or otherwise facing death. The Canary’s brand of fighting, close to that of a troll but more restrained, went against everything she stood for.

It was a warm spring afternoon like every other in Eversong Forest as Ranger-Captain Sylvanas Windrunner sat watching over her soldiers while they ate and trained. The sounds of both laughter and shouting in equal parts filled the air along with the smell of boar, brought back from a hunt, being roasted over an open fire. Despite the merriment in the air, however, Sylvanas wasn’t happy.

She was reading over a letter she’d received from her mother in regards to an incident a few weeks prior. Currently, her battalion was deployed to the town of Goldenmyst Village to maintain order and
reinforce the local guards if necessary. Given that it was the start of the Midsummer Fire Festival, she’d given her rangers time off in shifts to enjoy the local festivities.

Unfortunately, on the second night of the festival, one of the male partygoers had gotten very drunk and very cocky, and after being turned down by one of her rangers, had decided to take matters into his own hands. Sylvanas had been the first to find him holding her down, and hadn’t hesitated to put an arrow in each shoulder, along with one in a very special place to fit the crime. It wasn’t until afterwards that she learned he was an Embershield, a member of one of the seven major families, which was enough for him to intimidate the local guards into looking the other way while he headed back to Silvermoon.

It didn’t take long for the Convocation to hear of how Ranger-Captain Sylvanas Windrunner had drunkenly decided to prove her skill as the greatest shot in Quel’thalas by having her rangers hold down a random civilian while she shot him in the dick. Silvermoon had demanded an investigation, which wouldn’t have been a problem in and of itself, except that because her last name was Windrunner, certain elements of the Convocation - who’d long since wanted to see the position of Ranger-General moved from a hereditary one to one appointed by the magisters - had demanded that the investigation be conducted by a party outside of the rangers entirely, meaning the magisters. It didn’t take a political genius to see how this would turn out, and as a result - though she’d never admit it to anyone - Sylvanas was secretly terrified. If she was found guilty, and she would be, it wouldn’t just be her career that was destroyed. Her mother had already dug in her heels in her defense, meaning that her career could be wrecked as well, which would in turn give the aforementioned elements of the Convocation all the political ammo they could possibly need to have the Windrunner dynasty’s position abolished, allowing the magisters to consolidate complete control over the military and turn the position of ranger-general into something for them to bicker and fight over - something that no matter how things turned out, it could be absolutely guaranteed that Alleria, who had worked her whole life to fill her mother’s shoes, wouldn’t be chosen for. Even baby Vereesa would be forced to grow up bearing the shame of her family’s tarnished name.

She kept a brave face of course. No matter what might come, if there was one thing that could be said of Sylvanas Windrunner, it was that she would never abandon her dignity. She would remain defiant, even to the end. She wouldn’t give her enemies the satisfaction of seeing anything less.

“Um, Ma’am?” Came the raspy voice of Lieutenant Caledra Falconrest, pulling Sylvanas out of her thoughts. She turned to see the red haired woman standing at attention, looking nervous.

“Lieutenant.” She replied simply.

“Could I please speak with you in private, ma’am?” The lieutenant asked again, looking visibly nervous.

Sylvanas raised an eyebrow, before standing up. “You may. Follow me.”

It wasn’t long before the pair found themselves in Sylvanas’ office. A large map sat on a table dominating the center of the room, while a smaller desk with a slightly comfy looking chair sat near the back. Sylvanas noticed as she sat down at her desk that Caledra was very careful to close the door behind her.

“At ease, Lieutenant.” Sylvanas spoke as the woman began to stand at attention once more. “Tell me what’s wrong.”

Caledra visibly relaxed. The girl was always one of her more anxious rangers, something that quietly amused Sylvanas.
“Ma’am, I heard about what happened during the festival a few weeks back.” Of course she had. Every ranger and magister in Quel’thalas had heard. Windrunner daughter shoots Embershield son in a sensitive area. Whichever version of the story one received, it was not a trivial matter either way.

“And you wished to speak to me about this, why Lieutenant?” Sylvanas raised an eyebrow. She’d already had several rangers telling her that she had their support, a few even offering to perjure themselves in her favor, something which she swiftly informed them that she’d pretend she hadn’t heard. It didn’t matter. If her mother, the Ranger-General of Quel’thalas, wasn’t able to save her, a few rangers under her command wouldn’t be able to.

“I…” Caledra visibly hesitated, before taking a deep breath and continuing. “I have this cousin in Silvermoon, ma’am. She says… um…” the lieutenant shifted on her feet while Sylvanas leaned forward a little. “She says she can put me in touch with someone who’s good at solving these sorts of problems. Really high level problems.”

Inside, Sylvanas sighed. So this was what it had come to. “Well lieutenant, let’s pretend for a moment that you didn’t just suggest what I think you did and that I wanted to meet this person. What could they possibly do to help the situation I’m in?”

Caledra relaxed again. “I’m told she’s really good at making problems involving high level politics go away. She doesn’t accept payment in the form of gold, though. Or, sometimes she does, but, like, depending on how well connected the client is, she might ask for payment in the form of… um…” She looked down at the ground.

“Yes, lieutenant?” Sylvanas pressed the girl, leaning forward.

“She, uh, asks for payment in the form of blackmail material, ma’am…” She could see the younger ranger turning a shade paler.

“Calm yourself, ranger. Again, just pretending I wanted to meet this person for myself, how would I go about doing it?” Realistically she knew she had a lot more to gain than to lose by taking the risk. Her family’s honor was already in position to take a substantial hit, with their entire status on the chopping block altogether, not to mention what would happen to her personally if she was found guilty.

“I can get in touch with my cousin and have her arrange a meeting, ma’am.” The crimson haired ranger looked back up at her with hopeful eyes.

Sylvanas considered her. She didn’t seem like the type that would be working with the magisters to set a trap, but even if she was, Sylvanas was gonna be found guilty either way. She didn’t have anything to lose by trying. “Do it. Dismissed.” She briskly replied.

The smile that broke on Caledra’s face was one of pure ecstasy.

“Yes ma’am!”

Without another word, the younger ranger turned and left the room, leaving the ranger-captain alone to think about the box she’d just opened.

Kalina received a note the following day in her bag of reagents, informing her of a job she’d be very interested in. She’d came that night in a heavy, dark cloak. If anyone saw a lady of her status going to Augur’s Row, it’d breed all sorts of rumors.

When she knocked on the door this time, she wasn’t yanked inside. Rather Boat opened the door
gently, before stepping inside to allow her to enter on her own.

“Hi Boat.” The white haired elf spoke as she stepped into the building. Even at 136 years old, she was still incredibly young by elf standards. King Anasterian himself was thousands of years old, and hadn’t even begun to show signs of age. That was, after all, one of the reasons it was considered okay for Kalina’s parents to marry her off to a man 40 times her age at the time.

Boat just smiled at her and nodded. As it turned out, the nickname “Boat” came purely from the fact that he liked boats and they weren’t sure what else to call him. Kalina had curried his favor by bringing him a small toy boat every now and then, something he seemed to appreciate.

“There you are.” Lysenna called out as the assassin stepped into her office moments later.

“You said you had a job for me?” Kalina asked as she stepped forward.

“You bet your ass I do. Sit.” She gestured to the chair in front of her desk.

Kalina obeyed, taking a seat in the chair.

“Now okay, before I give you the details, I should note, this involves rangers.” She prefaced slowly, as if asking Kalina to bear with her.

“You know I don’t take anything that puts me up against the rangers.” Kalina coldly replied. Even after 100 years, she’d still been unable to get Sylvanas out of her mind. Their occasional battles on the rooftops of Silvermoon and deep within the forests and mountains of Quel’thalas certainly didn’t hurt to reinforce the memory. She wondered sometimes whether Sylvanas thought about her much, or if she’d long since forgotten her and moved on.

“I know, believe me I know, but this doesn’t put you against any rangers.” The boss replied with a sudden grin. “They’re your fucking clients.”

Kalina’s heart stopped. She’d heard the story going around Silvermoon’s elite. Everyone had, it was all anyone was talking about - the possibility of the Windrunner dynasty falling and all the powerful and noble families of Quel’thalas having a shot at seizing control of the military, not to mention the act itself, ranger prodigy Sylvanas Windrunner getting drunk and deciding it’d be fun to use her position of power to shoot a nobleman in the dick. The healers has made sure to fix that particular appendage, but even so the number of possible motivations Silvermoon’s upper class had been able to extrapolate from that would fuel their gossip for months to come.

Kalina didn’t believe any of it, of course. Sylvanas wasn’t the sort of person prone to such a lack of discipline. Even if she did do it, it wasn’t like it was a bad thing. Kalina had secretly despised the the nobility for over a century, ever since that night when her happily ever after was ripped from her to the sound of cheers.

All the same, the magisters and the rangers had always had a tense relationship at best. Kalina knew Sylvanas had plenty of reason not to expect a fair trial, considering the circumstances. She knew the kind of snakes Silvermoon’s upper class were better than most.

“... I’ll take it.” She spoke softly, her voice as quiet as a mouse.

“Good. You leave tonight. They can’t afford to come to Silvermoon so you’re going to go to them. Jayla here will make you a portal.” She gestured to the leather clad blonde to her right.

Kalina nodded, no longer looking at Lysenna so much as through her now.
It was a warm, dark night deep within the forest where they were set to meet. Sylvanas stood leaning against a tree with her arms crossed, having brought Caledra with her both for the increased numbers and for help navigating the deal she was about to make.

She didn’t have much in the way of blackmail to offer. She’d always worked hard to lead a clean life so as to bring her family more honor, and she’d die before betraying any secrets Alleria might have. The only thing she’d really been able to think of was the ring now kept safely in a tiny box in her pack. She’d planned to give it to Kalina someday. But that day never came, and all she had left of the woman after a time were the love letters Kalina used to send when she couldn’t make it to Windrunner Spire, and the ring with an engraving on the inside that mentioned Kalina by name and Sylvanas by initial. A relationship with another girl by itself wasn’t strong blackmail material in Quel’thalas. It wasn’t uncommon after all, even amongst the nobility, for people to at least experiment with each other or have the occasional fling. They were elves, after all.

Marriage on the other hand was a completely different matter. If the ring sitting in her pack ever saw the light of day, the word used for what she once planned would be “conspiracy”. It was enough to make her an outcast. It’d certainly cause her military career to grind to a halt, best case scenario.

She didn’t want to let go of the ring, and especially not the letters She didn’t want to let go of anything that reminded her of Kalina. All the same. The woman hadn’t spoken to her in over a century, not since the night of the wedding. She’d clearly moved on, and was more than happy with her husband. Maybe it was time Sylvanas did the same.

The roar of the portal signalled it was showtime. As Sylvanas stood up, she watched the first figure exit the portal and step into the moonlight. The figure was clearly female, wearing a set of soft black leather armor covering every inch of skin, with a hood that was clearly enchanted so as to show nothing underneath it but absolute darkness, granting complete anonymity to its wearer. The only exposed part of the woman’s body was her ears, strikingly pale.

A fury ignited in the Sylvanas’ chest as she took in the figure, recognizing her as none other than the nemesis that had taken so many rangers from her over the years.

The Canary.

Behind her, another figure she didn’t recognize stepped through the portal after her, before it closed, leaving the night quiet once more.

They stared at each other in silence. Sylvanas couldn’t suppress the look of rage adorning her features. This was the woman who would take her last memories of Kalina from her, just like she’d taken so many of her comrades in arms, just like she’d taken her dignity by sparing her every time she gained the upper hand in battle.

She could see Caledra’s face out of the corner of her eye. Clearly the ranger hadn’t been expecting Quel’thalas’ most feared assassin either, because she looked absolutely terrified.

“You.” Sylvanas spoke, the word laced with venom.

“It’s good to see you again too, Ranger-Captain.” The assassin replied calmly. “I was told you were interested in my services.”

Sylvanas couldn’t believe this conversation was actually happening. Her sworn nemesis, now prepared to accept a contract from her without a second thought. She silently pleaded with the light
for this to be some horrible nightmare that.

She sighed. “... Yes. I trust you’ve heard the stories?”

“I have.” The canary said. “I must say, I didn’t think you had it in you.” The smile in her voice was practically audible.

“He tried to violate one of my rangers. I regret nothing of what I did.” Sylvanas spat with renewed venom.

“Understandable.” Her nemesis said. “So I take it you need me to shoot down the investigation against you.”

“... Yes.” Sylvanas answered reluctantly. As if it wasn’t enough for the Canary to take her honor in battle, now the ranger captain was forced to come to her begging for help. “I know your price already. I brought-“

“A kiss.”

“Excuse me?” Sylvanas’ eyes narrowed.

“A kiss is my price. It’s far less than what I normally charge, I assure you.” A furious nod from Caledra confirmed the assassin was telling the truth.

The ranger stood there, unsure how to respond. She’d certainly had many suitors over the years, but this was a whole other level. This was perverse. They were sworn enemies, and yet here she was, offering a service that normally cost a small fortune, offering her family’s salvation, practically for free.

“Fine.” She agreed finally. If it meant she could hold onto her memories of Kalina, and keep her family safe at the same time, she’d do it.

The Canary tossed something to her. Sylvanas caught it. It was a blindfold. Of course she wouldn’t let her get a glimpse of her face. She tossed one to Caledra too.

Sylvanas stared at the blindfold, taking in what it represented. Trust. She was trusting the very last woman in Quel’thalas she’d ever want to trust, to save her and her family. Reluctantly, she put it on.

It certainly did its job, she couldn’t see a thing through it.

A moment later, she felt a hand on each shoulder as the shorter woman lifted herself up and pressed her lips to hers. They felt warm and soft, like washing off and tucking into a warm bed after a long day in the rain and mud, like her favorite food hot and fresh after a year of cold gruel, like Winter’s Veil morning as a kid.

They felt like home, and Sylvanas realized, to her horror, that she’d begun kissing back, her tongue now dancing a ballet with the assassin’s.

Forcing herself to stop before this turned into something far worse than what it already was, Sylvanas placed her hands on the assassin’s shoulders, before pulling away in one swift motion.

She felt the woman’s hands remove themselves from her own shoulders.

“The job will be done. I look forward to the next time we meet.” The Canary said.

Sylvanas ripped off the blindfold just as the portal opened, to see the assassin stepping towards it.
“Who are you?” She called out swiftly before the woman could disappear through the rift.

The Canary stopped. She didn’t turn around.

“... I’m your arch-enemy. Wasn’t that what we decided on?” She called back, before stepping through the portal just before it closed, leaving the pair of rangers alone in the forest once more.
It hadn’t been hard to get an invite to one of the parties at Matero Embershield’s home. He held them once a month, and enough nobles, magisters, and wealthy businesspeople attended for Kalina’s plan to work.

She showed up with her husband that evening, wearing a sapphire blue dress that matched her eyes. She’d given him enough potion to where he’d be able to function through the night without issue. His job was simple. He was to send his wife to wait in the target’s bedroom as a gesture of good will between their two houses. He was not to tell anyone other than Matero that he had done this. Past that, he was to play along same as every other guest at the party. If he did a good job, she promised him, he’d receive extra potion the next day. That alone was an offer Rhalyf couldn’t refuse if he wanted to. Kalina had made sure of that.

Beyond that, she’d had to put pressure on two other former clients of hers who’d be in attendance to each play a role. Truth be told, she loathed doing that sort of thing. It felt like something that fell outside the bounds of their concluded business, like she was no better than a goblin. All the same, blackmail was blackmail, and it made her former clients a valuable resource for small, discrete acts.

As Kalina and Rhalyf entered the building and joined the party, they were confronted by the sight of platters with piles of bloodthistle leaves on them scattered around the room, with Silvermoon’s new money eagerly enjoying the potent narcotic. This was bad, she realized. If Rhalyf had so much as a taste, he’d figure out exactly how to sate his addiction without her, and she’d lose all control over him.

Luckily, this wasn’t the first time she’d arrived at a party and found a threat to her control over her husband, and as such she’d prepared a contingency. She leaned into her husband’s ear. It was funny to her. Dressed up in a tuxedo and well groomed like he was now, he almost looked like a person. Almost.

“Stay with me until it’s time.” She whispered.

They began to move around the party, mingling with guests and shaking hands. It wasn’t even really small talk to Kalina anymore, let alone conversation. It was a dance, without rhyme or reason that she could do on autopilot.

“Matero!” Kalina exclaimed as she and Rhalyf approached the Embershield son, the white haired elf giving their host for the evening a greeting hug and immediately feeling his hand on her ass.

‘I might not even need Saietha for this.’ She thought with a wry smirk.

Saietha, or ‘client one’s job was simple. She was to slip a tonic Kalina had brewed into Matero’s drink when he wasn’t looking, which served as a mix between an extremely potent aphrodisiac, and a compound which would lower his sense of inhibitions to be near silent. Cruel, even for her perhaps, but as Kalina saw it, after what he did to Sylvanas and her rangers’, this was only justice.

She broke the hug. “I was so shocked to hear what that Windrunner did to you, are you okay?”

Matero smiled at her. It was not a pretty look by any means. “I am now.”

She put a hand gently on his arm. “Right well if there’s anything you need to feel better, anything at all, please don’t hesitate to ask.”
Kalina let her hand linger as she pulled away to mingle amidst the partygoers. She watched out of the corner of her eye as a dark haired elf walked up to Matero and flat out kissed him on the lips while slipping a small dose of crystals from her ring into his drink. If Kalina had blinked, she would’ve missed it.

‘Good girl.’

Seeing that that part of the plan was accomplished, she leaned over toward Rhalyf again, this time pressing a small pink bottle into his hands.

“It’s time. Once you’re done, you can drink this down all you like.” She kissed him once on the cheek, more as a subtle taunt than anything else, before letting go of him and heading for the stairs. The sedative she’d put into tonight’s potion would ensure that he passed out long before he got anywhere near a plate of bloodthistle, which at this sort of party, wasn’t unexpected.

A short while later, she found herself sitting on Matero’s bed, waiting for the man to arrive. She thought about Saietha’s contract while she waited. It had been a simple one, just a bit of surveillance on a rival of hers. She wondered if she’d compelled too steep a favor tonight proportional to the original job. She shook her head. No. They all knew what they were getting into when they hired the Canary.

The door slowly creaked open. In sauntered Matero Embershield, a creepy look adorning his face that he probably thought was charming, as he closed the door behind him.

“I knew you’d never be able to resist this.” He spoke, pointing not so subtly to his crotch area, where his pants were very clearly tented.

“I just couldn’t stop thinking about it.” Kalina breathed in the voice of an anxious virgin, rubbing her legs together and fidgeting with her hands like an addict. “I need it. I need you inside me, Matero. It’s all I can focus on.”

He snorted as he dropped his pants, revealing his member fully erect. “Well I’m sure we can come to an arrangement.”

Kalina let her breathing flutter as she caught sight of his cock, before looking back up at him with determination and a hungry glint in her eye.

“I know I may seem shy sometimes.” She stood up, her legs visibly weak. “But tonight I want you to rip my dress off like it’s made of pape-”

Before she could even finished, the man lunged forward with a look of starvation in his eyes as he pinned her to the bed with one arm, while the other began tearing her dress to scraps.

Despite this being her plan, Kalina was terrified.

‘Be brave. This is for Sylvanas.’ She thought to herself, trying to distract her mind with the memory of that kiss.

She let out a sudden cry of ecstasy as she felt him sharply penetrating her, before she was silenced by his tongue invading her mouth.

Pulling away for breath, she let out a moan. “Hit me.”

He didn’t hesitate, her fist immediately connecting with the side of her face. “I’ve always wanted to do that to a bitch.” He whispered with a smirk as he began to thrust back and forth.
Kalina let out a harder moan this time. “Hit me again!”

His fist immediately connected with her face again. She felt hot blood pouring down her face now as her nose broke. She wanted to stop. She wasn’t used to taking direct blows. Even with a century of experience, she’d always fought by evasion and deflection.

“Again.” She groaned, before immediately feeling his fist connect again. She swallowed the blood in her mouth.

“Yeah you like that you dirty bitch?” He asked with a smug, commanding look.

“Again!” She roared at him with a wicked grin as his fist connected again, cracking bone and shattering cartilage.

“Again~” She moaned weakly, his other fist this time connecting with her mid face. She felt something decisively breaking as it connected. That was it, she decided, she had to tap out, she couldn’t take any more. His thrusts were getting faster now. If he came before she could execute the next phase of her plan, this would all have been for nothing.

She sucked in a sharp breath, before crying out in a tone of pure bliss “Pin me to the floor facedown like the dirty animal I am!”

Thankfully, her request was granted almost instantly as she felt him pull out swiftly, before picking her up and slamming her to the floor with enough force to make her lose her bearings for a moment. The first thing she felt as she regained her senses was one hand holding both her wrists while the other kept a tight grip on her ass as he invaded her body again.

It was time, she decided. The stage was set. Sucking in a deep, bloodied breath, she let out a shriek of terror that’d make a banshee proud. Matero didn’t stop even so. Good, Kalina thought. If he did she’d see it as a failure of her alchemy skills.

A few seconds later she heard a shout come from the party area.

“It came from the bedroom!” Client two’s voice rang out on cue, followed by the thunder of a hundred footsteps.

Thinking of the look on Sylvanas’ face the last time they’d fought, it wasn’t hard for Kalina to start weeping softly, just in time for the doors to come bursting open, followed by a horrified gasp as the crowd took in the sight of the beloved socialite Kalina Dawnblade, beaten bloody, both eyes swollen, sobbing with her dress ripped to shreds and Matero Embershield pinning her to the floor, forcing his cock into her.

There were many people a man of his family’s power could silence - the city guards, an unknown and traumatized ranger from a commoner family, even the Ranger-General of Quel’thalas. What he could not silence, however; what he couldn’t even hope to silence, was the number of influential, well connected eyes seeing him for the animal he was. No amount of money or power could save him now.

He seemed to realize all at once just how bad of a situation he was in, because he immediately pulled it out of her, letting her hips fall to the floor.

“I swear, this isn’t what it looks like!” He started, before a magic user’s forcefield slammed him against the far wall, pinning him there with a look of horror on his face.

Kalina, meanwhile, finished selling the act by slowly, so slowly, like a wounded deer, curling up into
a ball on the floor and shaking profusely, the latter part of which was actually quite real.

“Someone get a healer!” One voice called out as a few pairs of footsteps took off downstairs.

“Find her husband!

“He’s passed out on the floor downstairs!”

“Bastard…”

“Lady Kalina, are you okay?”

“Can you hear us?”

“By the Sunwell…”

The cacophony of voices raged on and on. Kalina didn’t react to any of them. They were far too loud, and even if she wanted to say something, her face hurt too much now. She began to feel herself losing consciousness. A small part of her wondered whether this was her dying, but it was a whisper in a storm as Kalina’s mind slid into oblivion.
Chapter 10

A few days later a letter came for Sylvanas from her mother telling her that Silvermoon had called off the investigation in light of new evidence. Sylvanas noticed her mother hadn’t specifically said what the evidence was, but at that moment it didn’t matter. What mattered was that her family would be alright. She’d be alright. That had been the best kiss she’d ever spent.

That morning she went out into the training yard with a mug of coffee in one hand and a spring in her step. Despite the early hour of the morning, the ground was already full of activity, with the lower officers facilitating an early morning warmup. She’d never particularly enjoyed them, personally, though she supposed that was the point; but today she found herself setting down her coffee and making a special appearance to join in on the training. Early morning warmups were part of being a ranger, after all, and a ranger was exactly what she was,

Around lunchtime, Sylvanas stepped off the yard to take a break to find herself approached by a beaming Caledra.

“Ma’am.” The lieutenant spoke, standing at attention.

“At easy, Lieutenant.” Sylvanas said to the woman who had come in at the eleventh hour with a perfect solution and saved her. She had to remember to put her in for a promotion, for something. “Walk with me.” She spoke, before starting off toward her office.

“Did you hear the news?” The crimson haired ranger giggled as she followed, now positively giddy.

“I did.” Sylvanas replied with a calm, professional smile that did little justice to the level joy within her at that moment. “Apparently new evidence has come to light that’s caused the Convocation to rethink its investigation.”

Caledra nodded as the pair entered the small building. “Yeah! The Embershield prick got caught in the act raping some Dawnblade chick at a party. Girl was beaten within an inch of her life, too.”

Sylvanas felt her blood freeze as she stopped walking.

“Ma’am?” Caledra asked as she stopped too. Sylvanas’ face was white; not pale, white.

The ranger captain turned suddenly to stare absolute death at her lieutenant, giving the girl the sudden urge to take off screaming into the distance as the next few words came out like ice.

“Which. Dawnblade.”

Caledra had the inexplicable feeling that her next few words could play a significant role in her status as being an alive person.

“U-uhhhhh I don’t remember, I don’t really follow politics that mu-” She was cut off as Sylvanas’ hand shot out, catching her around the neck and pulling her in very close, to where she could feel her captain’s breath on her face.

“Try.”

“It started with a K.” Caledra spoke quickly, racking her brain for any possible details. “Like, Kylina or Kalessa or something like th-” She was cut off again as she found herself being thrown to the ground, Sylvanas staring down at her with eyes like burning ice.
“Dismissed, lieutenant.”

“Yes ma’am!” she didn’t wait to be told twice, scrambling to her feet and bolting out the door, leaving Sylvanas alone.

The minute the lieutenant was gone, Sylvanas fought back the urge to scream as she picked up a nearby mug and threw it against the wall with an only slightly satisfying smash. She’d signed Kalina’s death warrant, with a kiss of all things. She’d gone to the most hated and feared woman in Quel’thalas, her sworn enemy, someone who was known for accomplishing her goals through horrific methods, and asked her for help. Of course someone with as much information as the Canary would know about what she and Kalina once were. Her price wasn’t a kiss because she actually wanted to kiss Sylvanas, it was for this exact moment where Sylvanas would discover that she’d sold someone she loved dearly to a gruesome fate, entirely for her own gain.

She had to find her, she realized. She had to see for herself the carnage she had wrought.

It’d taken her a week’s ride to make it to Silvermoon, and half a day of asking around to find out where Kalina was being treated. 100 years of separation had introduced too many variables for her to be able to reliably track the girl in an urban environment, let alone with the last path taken being two weeks cold. She finally found her at a hospital in northeastern Silvermoon, one of the nicer areas of the city.

“She’s been unconscious since we got her.” A healer with short brown hair said as she led the ranger-captain down a corridor to the room where Kalina was being treated. “She was critical for a while afterwards, we’ve only just managed to stabilize her.”

Okay, so Kalina was alive. That’s a start.

“Is she going to be okay?” Sylvanas asked briskly. If the attendant found her tone rude, she didn’t show it.

“Her injuries are only physical, so the light should heal everything given enough time. The real question is how long. She’s suffered severe cranial trauma. Even in the best of circumstances, even with the light, that’s still a very slow and delicate process to fully mend.”

“I understand.” Sylvanas spoke, keeping a demeanor of cold professionalism.

They entered the room. The first thing Sylvanas saw was what she recognized as Kalina lying on a bed close to the door, her face a bloody, purple mess. A priest was standing over her, carefully examining her with a role of fresh bandages in one hand.

“Kali…” Sylvanas breathed softly as she took in the sight.

Only as she found herself standing there, staring like a complete idiot did she realize how truly powerless she was to help her friend. Just like all the times she was forced to watch the Canary take her friends from her in front of her, now she found herself forced to watch again as her once closest friend suffered without being able to help. She couldn’t even apologize to her.

She sat down in a chair at the far end of the room, before letting her forehead come to rest on her hand. Before she could allow herself to wallow in self-pity, however, she mentally slapped herself upside the head. Demoralizing her was exactly what the Canary would want. She would not let herself devolve into some mewling emotional wreck because she’d made a bad call. That was something a new recruit did, not a ranger captain.
She looked up at Kalina again, at the mangled state Matero Embershield had left her in. She’d find the Canary and make her beg for death. That, she swore.

‘I’m your arch enemy. Wasn’t that what we decided on?’

The words rang out in her head. She thought back to the first time they’d met, when the assassin had made a point of not killing her. They hadn’t spoken a word to each other, but ever since that day Sylvanas had taken a keen interest in seeing her brought to justice. She’d always assumed that she’d been spared as a way of taunting her, of singling her out for humiliation, but the Canary’s comments at the end of their meeting seemed to point in a different direction.

Sylvanas bit her lip. No. The Canary had forced her to helplessly watch her rangers be slaughtered on multiple occasions, and any duel between them where she couldn’t score a hit, she’d fled from. Surely she knew the level of mockery, of dishonor to the point of malice, that represented.

And then there was her husband. There’d been rumors about Rhalyf Dawnblade for years - horrific rumors of every sort imaginable. She’d never paid attention to them before, though. There were rumors about pretty much everyone of importance in Silvermoon. A friend in the guards had told her, however, that Matero Embershield had sworn under interrogation that Rhalyf Dawnblade had made his wife meet him in his bedroom.

The sound of a sudden breath interrupted her brooding as her eyes flew to the source. Kalina had woken up. Sylvanas looked at the bed to see the girl in it moving weakly, clearly trying to look around.

“Kali!” Before she could stop herself, she’d crossed the room and wrapped her arms around her.

“Sylvanas…” came a hoarse reply. “You’re here…” The next few words were so quiet Sylvanas would’ve missed them if she’d breathed too hard. “I love you…”

Sylvanas’ heart missed a beat as she processed the information, her hug on Kalina freezing. After over a century of separation, Kalina still loved her.

“…Sylvanas?” Came the whisper again, the white haired girl having clearly noticed the shift in the ranger’s body language.

“…I love you too, Kali.” Finally came her reply as her embrace softened once more. She pulled back out.

“I’m so sorry, for… so much.” She continued, absentmindedly running her fingers through the girl’s hair. She’d missed that sensation. “We should’ve never-”

She stopped as she noticed Kalina’s eyes starting to flutter erratically.

“Kali?”

All of sudden, her whole body descended into a jerking, twitching fit as blood poured from her mouth.

“Kalina?!” She looked up at the nearby priest. “Do something!”

The priest rushed over to Kalina, calling for assistance as he did so. Before Sylvanas had time to take in the sudden shock of what had just happened, and attendant was ushering her out of the room.
When Kalina awoke again, Sylvanas was gone. Weakly, she looked around, her head feeling heavy and her neck feeling so horribly light. Seeing an attendant in a white robe nearby, she tried to call out to her, only to elicit a weak sound from her throat. The woman turned to face her.

“Oh good you’re awake.”

Kalina tried to speak again, only to descend into a coughing fit, causing the attendant to bring her a cup of water. She took a sip, feeling her throat clear up enough to speak as she did so.

“... Thank you.” She finally spoke, feeling the air rush into her lungs. “Is the blonde ranger still here or...?”

“No one’s been here in at least a month.” Came the almost bored sounding reply.

Kalina sat up. “How long have I been out?”

A month unconscious was not a trivial matter, especially not with the delicate, drug fueled balance her entire life relied on.

“Two.” the attendant spoke, holding up two fingers

“Two months?!”

“Two years.”

Kalina’s hands clapped over her mouth. She’d been gone for two years. Only as she felt her fingers against her lips did she notice how thin she’d become. She looked down at her arms. She might as well have been a skeleton.

Sylvanas had been here, though. She’d been waiting for her to wake up. She hadn’t forgotten her. She still loved her.

“When was the last time I was awake?” She asked as her eyes drifted downward to look at the sheets.

“Maybe two weeks after you came in. The healers decided to keep you down after that, to prevent anything from going wrong again.”

Kalina lay back down in bed. Two years. She turned those two words over in her head. She’d been unconscious for two years. She wondered if she’d managed to save Sylvanas’ career, at least. She’d been in her ranger armor when Kalina had seen her, that was a good sign.

Her eyes returned to the attendant. She was a pretty woman, with long blonde hair and hazel eyes.

“Does this mean I’m okay now?” She asked as a hand reached up to feel her face. Everything felt like it was in its proper place, at least.

The blonde nodded. “Everything physical’s been healed good as new, the only thing we weren’t able to verify while you were under was your memory. Stuff like your name, where you’re from, where you live, etc. Once we check that, you’ll be free to go.”

Kalina felt a bit like a ghost as she exited the hospital early the next morning. They’d kept and
cleaned what was left of her outfit from the night of the party, so that’s what she found herself
wearing as she stepped out into Silvermoon. She supposed she looked like a ghost, too; or at least
some form of undead. She’d gotten to check herself in the mirror before she’d left. Sure enough,
everything was as it was before. The only major difference was how pale and emaciated she’d
become. She’d already been incredibly pale, even by Quel’dorei standards, but now her skin held a
more sicky hue, as if she’d died and was attending her own funeral.

As she began her walk home, she fantasized about a future where the hospital staff had told everyone
she’d died so she could run off to join the rangers under a fake name.

Fantasies aside, she was terrified. Rhalyf had been off his drugs for two years, meaning he’d either
found out it was bloodthistle or otherwise kicked it. Either way, it meant she’d likely lost all control
over him. What was even more terrifying was that the lipstick she’d carried and worn the night of the
party hadn’t been laced and she was far too weak to fight back now, meaning she had no means
whatsoever of keeping him from doing whatever he wanted to her again, and considering what she’d
done to him over the last century, there would be no restraint, and there would certainly be no mercy.

She couldn’t do it, she realized. She couldn’t go home to face what she wished was an execution.
She wanted to run away and join the rangers like she’d always dreamed. She’d fulfilled her familial
obligation, she’d gotten married and been what everyone thought to be a good wife for over a
century. It wasn’t her fault he could never get it up. Okay it was, but no one else knew that.

She stopped. She could do it. Right now, all she had to do was not go home, not collect her things,
not risk Rhalyf finding her, and not stop walking until she made it to the Farstrider training yard. She
turned around and began making her way in a vastly different direction from that leading home. Her
heart pounded in her chest. What if someone saw her? What if Rhalyf somehow found her before
she could make it there?

Suddenly she felt an arm on her shoulder.

“Sleep well?” Came a sly female voice.

Kalina froze as she felt her stomach drop. “Jayla…”

The woman smirked. “Good to see your memory’s still working.”

“What are you doing here?” The terror in her voice was apparent, even to her own ears.

“Well when the boss heard you’d woken up, she just couldn’t resist the chance to catch up.” With a
wave of the hand, the blonde elf conjured up a portal. “After you.” She spoke politely, gesturing
dramatically toward the portal with both arms.

“...Fine.” Kalina replied hesitantly, before stepping through. The inside office was more or less as
she remembered it. Lysenna was sitting at her desk, a glass of wine in one hand.

“Ah, there’s the fucking lady of the hour!” Exclaimed Lysenna as she raised a glass. “Sleep well?”

Kalina smiled weakly as she faced her boss, deciding not to tell her that Jayla had beaten her to that
one liner. “Good to see you too, ma’am.”

“Sit.” She said, pointing at a chair. “We got business.”

Kalina obeyed, taking a seat in the motioned to chair. She immediately noticed with a sinking feeling
how little of it she now took up.
“Right, our ranger contacts have raised all fucking hell trying to get in touch with you. We’ve stonewalled em for now, said you were booked up, but apparently your little makeout session with the ranger captain has been good for business.”

Kalina sighed. The fact that Sylvanas hadn’t figured out her identity when she’d gone unconscious was at least good. She supposed she had the magisters to thank for that. Every magister who was even remotely involved in politics loved to claim that they survived an attack by the Canary because it not only gave them prestige, but it also allowed them to make all sorts of claims against their enemies. Whether they actually believed they had survived her or not was another matter entirely.

Still, the fact that Sylvanas wanted to meet was ominous but at the same time, Kalina knew that the ranger captain was not the type to violate the rules of parlay, regardless of the circumstances.

If nothing else, it was a chance to see her again, something Kalina sorely missed now that she knew the woman hadn’t forgotten her.

“Understood.” Kalina gave with a nod.

“Good. Take some time to regain your strength, then once you think you’re ready, I’ll set something up.” Lysenna said calmly.

Kalina realized this would mean going home. She’d saved up more than enough money to get her own place, but her armor and weapons were there, and she was in no state for any serious exercise.

She wanted to ask Lysenna to send Jayla with her, just to make sure she didn’t get incinerated or raped tonight, when she couldn’t fight back. But she couldn’t. In this line of work, showing any sign of weakness never ended well.

“Yes ma’am.” Kalina spoke again after a moment’s pause.

“Good, now fuck off.” The Boss replied with a swift gesture toward the door.

It was late at night when Kalina finally dared try to go home. She definitely wouldn’t sleep in her own bed. All she needed was to get her gear from its hiding spot and get out before she was noticed. The armor and blades weren’t even the most important part, it was the paralytic agent she really needed. She could never hope to beat Sylvanas in a fair fight, let alone while trying not to kill her, which was why she’d always relied on paralyzing her before she’d even been seen in order to do whatever she needed. Without that, she faced the difficult choice next time they encountered one another in the field of either killing her before she’d even been noticed like she could’ve done while disguised as a ranger, or otherwise being killed by the ranger captain. Kalina wondered how Sylvanas would react if she saw who she was after killing her. She shook those thoughts from her head. Now was not the time.

The average Quel’dorei household held few good hiding places. Whereas the construction of a human house would allow for places such as under the floorboards to hide objects, buildings in Quel’thalas were constructed almost completely out of the ground using magic, meaning that such crevices didn’t exist.

As such, she’d had to make use of an unoccupied room in the servants’ quarters underground, somewhere that she knew Rhalyf would never think to look. As she stepped into the house, she began to quietly make her way downstairs, slipping out of her heels as she did so. One advantage of Quel’dorei construction was that nothing ever creaked, making stealth work exponentially easier. The downside was, of course, that because magic was used in everything, most of the house stayed
lit at night. As a result, Kalina was mostly just focussing on staying dead silent.

It wasn’t long before she’d made it into the servant’s quarters. It was a relatively simple setup, with doors to mostly vacant single room occupancies lining the halls. Walking on the balls of her feet, she reached the door in question, before gently opening it and quickly slipping through. A small bed on the opposite side of the very small room held her goal. Now moving much less slowly, she crossed the room, kneeling down as her arm shot under the bed to grab her gear bag so she could get out.

Her blood ran cold. It wasn’t there.

“Looking for this?” Came the voice Kalina had been dreading as she looked up just in time to see Rhalyf holding her hood in one hand while the other crackled with electricity, before said electricity shot through her every synapse. Her every muscle seized up, freezing her in place, unable to even shriek.

After what could’ve been seconds or hours, Kalina couldn’t tell, she was released, her head falling to the floor as her body began twitching and jerking on its own.

“Enjoy that? Good because there’s plenty more to come. After your little stunt at the party, I became hated by pretty much everyone in Silvermoon. I tore this place apart searching for more of your little concoctions.” He kneeled down so that she could see him directly. “And would you look what I found?” He sneered as he pulled what Kalina recognized as a leaf of bloodthistle out of his pocket. “Not one secret, but two.”

Kalina tried to speak, only for it to come out a stuttered mess as her body still twitched and convulsed.

“It’s funny, I could’ve sworn that this is the mask on all those wanted posters around Silvermoon. What was its name, the sparrow? The cardinal?”

‘You know perfectly fucking well what my name is.’ Kalina thought as she stared daggers at him.

“Oh that’s right, the Canary. The only person in Silvermoon more hated than I.” He smirked. “Oh but don’t worry, I won’t turn you over to the guards. I’ve always wanted my own assassin, after all.” He put the bloodthistle in his mouth. “So here’s what’s will happen. You’ll give me all the blackmail you’ve received over the years in exchange for your services. Any time you get a new job, you will tell me everything about it and wait for my approval to proceed. Anything I tell you to do, you will do without question. Am I clear, princess?”

“Go f-” Another series of shocks wracked her body.

“I said, are we clear?”

Kalina realized quickly the two directions this could head in. Either she could submit to him and resist quietly, or he could break her. If there was to be any hope of freedom someday, she knew, she had to pick the former.

“Y-yes sir.” She stuttered out, causing Rhalyf to stand up.

“Good. For now though, I’ve had a long two years.” He knelt down again, before picking her up by the neck. “What I could use right now farr than anything, is some nice… relaxation.” Kalina’s eyes widened in horror as she realized what he meant as he threw her back on the bed and began to disrobe.

It was that night that Kalina came to realize she’d be broken whether she submitted or not. It was
only a matter of how long it took.
Chapter 12

Weeks later, Sylvanas Windrunner stood leaning against the same tree as before as the moonlight overhead filtered down through the trees. She hadn’t been able to stop thinking about this moment for years. The moment she would finally make the Canary beg for death on her hands and knees, only to continually pull it away from her every time.

“Where is she?” She snapped at a meek looking Caledra.

The lieutenant shied away from her Sylvanas’ gaze. “T-they said she’d be here soon…”

As if on cue, the portal opened in the same place it had last time, before the subject of Sylvanas’ hatred stepped through, fully covered the same as before. Behind her stepped the one who conjured the portals, carrying a black case this time.

“You.” The ranger spoke with a cold fury, knuckles turning white as it took everything in her power to stop herself from pummeling the assassin to death right then and there.

“Me.” The Canary replied calmly. Sylvanas noticed the woman’s hand was trembling. Good. She should be scared.

“You hurt Kalina.” Sylvanas’ eyes at that moment blazed like the colors of the forest they stood in. “You had her beaten. You had her raped.”

The assassin was silent for a moment.

“I did.” She finally said.

Sylvanas’ volume rose now as she found it harder and harder to keep her temper in check. “She was sweet! She was innocent! And what did you do? You destroyed her! You could’ve picked anyone to hurt, anyone to leave as carnage in your wake like so many before but no you specifically chose h-”

“Was there a reason you called me here, ranger captain?” The Canary cut her off with a neutral tone. It was almost unsettling. Sylvanas knew she shouldn’t be surprised. The woman was a psychopath through and through. Of course she didn’t care.

She drew her bow. The woman behind the assassin drew a long, thin sword in response, while the Canary herself remained perfectly still, except for her hand, which trembled the same as before.

“I, Ranger-Captain Sylvanas Windrunner, hereby challenge you to a duel to the death.”

The forest was silent as the assassin seemed to consider her.

“I accept.” She spoke after what felt like an eternity. “My price is simple.”

Sylvanas’ eyes widened in rage. This honorless whelp dared to put a price on her revenge.

She gritted her teeth, gripping her bow so hard one might think it would shatter. “Name it.”

“A dance.”

Sylvanas could see the woman’s associate behind her setting down the case now, before opening it to reveal a violin. The ranger gritted her teeth even more, before forcing herself to put away her bow.
“Fine.” She went through in her head all the horrific things she was going to do to this woman over the coming months. Hell, she could make it last for years. What was one dance for an eternity of satisfaction?

She stepped toward the subject of her loathing, placing a hand on her hip and taking her hand in the other. The blonde behind them began to play as they began to dance. It was a familiar tune. Sylvanas couldn’t quite place where she’d heard it, but it had enough of an impact on her where she figured it must’ve been chosen specifically.

As they twirled around the forest clearing, Sylvanas could swear she heard the faintest sound of crying coming from under the assassin’s hood. She rolled her eyes and scoffed. Of course a psycho like her would be the type to cry at a moment like this.

‘At least go to your death with some digni-

It hit her like a warhammer out of nowhere. She remembered exactly where she’d heard this song before. It was the song she’d danced to at Kalina’s wedding.

Her expression slowly descended from one of rage to one of quiet horror as the pieces all began to click together in her mind.

‘No…’

All the hatred she’d spent a century cultivating all at once died in her, giving way to a sense of sorrow and despair. Of course it had been her. Who else would hate the people of Silvermoon so much?

Sylvanas tried to speak, only to realize she couldn’t find words. She could only stare down at the hooded figure in grief as she looked for a pair of sapphire eyes she knew were staring back up at her. She couldn’t do this, she realized. She couldn’t fight her. She couldn’t kill her.

“Ka-” Before she could even speak the girl’s name, she felt something prick the back of her hand. In the span of a single heartbeat, her entire body was frozen.

‘No.’

The music stopped. All was silent once more.

“The next time we see each other,” Kalina started, gripping Sylvanas’ hand more tightly now, “I won’t be myself anymore. So I’m sorry. For everything.” She leaned upwards and pressed her lips to Sylvanas’ before pulling away all too quickly and letting go of the ranger altogether.

Sylvanas watched as the girl she loved, the one she’d spent over a century holding onto the memory of, turned around and started away from her, towards the portal that was now being opened.

‘Please don’t go.’

Every fiber of Sylvanas’ being screamed at her to do something; to shout, to tackle her, to do anything; and yet she couldn’t even move.

Kalina reached the portal, before turning back towards Sylvanas one last time.

“I love you. Goodbye.”

‘NO!’
With just another step, she was gone. The portal closed, leaving Sylvanas standing there, tears rolling down her cheeks.

“What is your name?” He asked again, growing increasingly frustrated.

“K… Kalina…” she gasped as she went limp in her shackles again. She was no longer been allowed in the master bedroom, except for when Rhalyf wanted something on his dick. Instead, the room in the servants quarters where she’d once kept her stuff had been cleared out and converted into a cell, complete with chains and no bed. “Kalina Dawnblade…”

“Wrong.” He sneered as another series of shocks went through the girl chained naked to the wall. One of the first things Kalina’s husband had done upon her return home was make her put on an amulet he had enchanted twice. The first enchantment made it impossible for her or anyone but him to remove. The second made it impossible for her to harm him either directly or indirectly. Even the merest thought was enough to deliver to a jolt of pain to her. “What is your name?”

“Ka… Kalina Dawnblade…” she breathed again. She could feel her own mind fighting her, pushing for her to give in and give him the answer he wanted. It was either that or let herself break. She held both off, instead focusing on her memories of Sylvanas. She hadn’t told him about any of her dealings with the ranger. She wouldn’t let him take that away from her, not again.

“Wrong. Your name is Whore.” It wasn’t the most creative name Kalina had ever heard, but she supposed after 112 years of being denied, it was what he probably wanted to instill in her above all else.

Her body seized up again as pain once more filled her every sense.

“What is your name?”

Kalina drew in a shaky breath. “Kalina Dawnblade.” Her breathing quickened in intensity even before the shock hit her that time. His voice came again.

“What is your na-“

“Kalina Sunwing!” She shouted up at him with the last of her strength, earning her a swift kick in the gut. She saw something in his expression shift.

“Very wrong.” He spoke quietly, before giving her a much longer current of electricity. As the shock went on and on,

Kalina held on, focussing everything she had on her memories of Sylvanas. She remembered every detail - from the hot white sands beneath her feet to the way Sylvanas held her as she slept. She focussed on those memories, on every sensory detail, every single detail, as she felt everything else falling away, before her mind finally gave in, dissolving connection by connection, before going blank altogether, leaving nothing but an empty, mindless husk.

“What. Is. Your. Name?”

“… Whore.” Came the monotone reply.

Sylvanas sat at her desk with her forehead in one hand. It had been months since her and Kalina’s goodbye in the forest. Her unit has been rotated into Silvermoon again, something that she was eternally thankful for. She’d given the order to her rangers - capture, not kill. It’d been easy enough
to come up with a justification for her mother, just the basic spiel about putting the Canary on trial in front of everyone to show that justice was done and all that.

Really, though, her intentions were the opposite. She had no plans to let anyone ever take Kali from her again.

A knock on the door.

“Enter.”

The door opened to reveal one of her rangers, Captain Valessa. The lower ranger strode in before standing at attention.

“Ma’am.”

“At ease, Captain.”

Valessa relaxed. “Ma’am, one of my squads found something while on patrol.”

“And I assume this something is something you felt worth bringing to my attention, Captain.”

Valessa nodded. “Yes ma’am. You’ll want to see this yourself.”

The guards were already onsite by the time they arrived. They were standing in Augur’s Row, outside of a fairly nondescript looking building. Despite the relatively peaceful exterior, the steel-clad peacekeepers were swarming the place, along with the occasional ranger standing watch, bow drawn with an arrow knocked.

Valessa had been silent on the way over. Sylvanas found it odd, given that normally it’d be best to fill her in before they got there. As the pair approached, she noticed a group of guards gathered around a particular spot in the street. The ranger captain entered the perimeter, the two rangers standing guard in that direction saluting her as she approached the group, only to stop cold as she recognized what she was staring at.

A blonde elf with tanned skin and leather armor now lay sprawled in the street. A weighted dagger buried in her face almost made her unrecognizable, but Sylvanas knew who she was looking at. More importantly, she knew whose work she was looking at.

“As inside?” she asked, turning to Valessa.

The captain turned and led her inside. The place was a bloodbath. Dead lay everywhere, some having sustained thrown weapon injuries, others having clearly been either poisoned or stabbed. A few appeared to have even been used as shields against each other. In the center of the carnage lay a man half the size of a dire troll. A pair of guards were examining his corpse - multiple stab wounds to the arm, death by asphyxiation. Sylvanas guessed he’d picked her up and she’d stung him like a scorpion. She knew the girl’s poisons were powerful enough. She’d seen them in action far too many times already.

“This way, ma’am.” Valessa spoke quietly, helping her to step lightly through the carnage that covered almost every inch of the floor.

They eventually came to what was clearly the boss of the operation’s office. There Sylvanas could see the woman still sitting in her chair, an arrow having come through the back of it from out past the balcony and piercing her chest.
“... I trust we have a name?” Sylvanas asked as she turned to her subordinate.

Valessa spoke softly. “Lysenna Falconrest, ma’am.”

Sylvanas clicked her teeth together, her worst suspicions confirmed. Kalina was off any leash she might’ve once had. The question was why.

“Has Caledra been notified?” Sylvanas asked calmly.

Valessa shook her head.

“See to it then. Dismissed, Captain.”

Valessa nodded and gave her a quick salute, before turning and leaving. Sylvanas sighed. She had a long day ahead of her, it seemed.
One thing Sylvanas hadn’t expected that year was for her house to receive an RSVP from Rhalyf Dawnblade for this year’s Winter’s Veil Ball. Still, she was happy nonetheless. If nothing else it meant time to talk to Kalina. There was so much she wanted to say, she has a list in her head over a hundred years long - a list that had doubled in size recently.

She’d been on leave for a little over a week now, and had only just gotten home the previous night. She probably wouldn’t have been able to sleep if she hadn’t been riding for a week straight.

She shook her head and focused on applying her makeup. She always tried to look stunning on a day to day basis, but Winter’s Veil was special, in that she had an entire day to get ready. She used to love seeing the look on Kalina’s face when she first saw her that night. She always looked so breathless, that alone made all the prep work worth it.

Sylvanas could hear her mother greeting guests downstairs as she applied her mascara, a deep crimson. It wasn’t normally her color, but she wanted to try something striking this year.

It wasn’t long before she found herself downstairs amidst the festivities. Her eyes scanned the room, coming to rest on the object of their interest. She could see Kalina and her husband chatting rather pleasantly with Alleria, who had little Vereesa in one arm.

Seeing that the snow haired elf was occupied at the moment, Sylvanas decided to calm her nerves with a drink. She wasn’t sure what she was even so nervous about. It was painfully clear, in hindsight, how hard Kalina had worked to avoid her as a casualty as much as possible. If she had to guess, what she was more afraid of was Kalina telling her it was over for good. Their last goodbye had felt so horribly final.

“Dwarven whiskey.” She asked the bartender, an attractive woman with ebony hair, as she approached the bar. It wasn’t long before she was standing near the window pretending to stare pensively out of it in a very officer-like fashion. She hadn’t realized how much time had passed until she felt a gentle hand on her arm and turned to see Alleria there, no longer holding Vereesa.

“Eyes.” Her older sister all but hissed at her with a restrained look of alarm on her face.

“What?” Sylvanas asked with a look of perplexion.

“Eyes. Go.” She repeated, jerking her head in Kalina’s direction.

“Okay…” downing her drink, she placed the glass in her sister’s hand, before turning and starting toward the couple, circling around the room so she could perform the same greeting she and Kalina had always shared.

Sneaking up behind the pair, Sylvanas smiled as she leaned into Kalina’s ear and quickly whispered the words she’d waited so long to finally say again.

“Behind you”.

Kalina seemed to look back halfway, as if confused, before turning around to face Sylvanas, along with her husband.

“Oh! Hi! I’m sorry, I don’t think we’ve met before. I’m Kalina.” She chirped in a pleasant tone.
Immediately Sylvanas saw what her sister had meant by eyes. Kalina’s were blank. Not blank as in white, no, everything was still there, they were still looking at her. There was just no light to them, no depth either. It was like they were two dimensional, like they’d been painted on. They were looking at her, but they weren’t seeing her. It was something ranger officers were trained to look for in rangers who’d been captured and recovered. If someone’s eyes were like that, it meant they’d been broken; more specifically, that they were still broken.

Sylvanas’ smile dropped from her face into a look of horror. Her own eyes darted from the smaller girl to her husband, where she could see the most unrestrained smirk possible on his face.

‘The next time we see each other, I won’t be myself anymore.’ The words repeated in her head. Now she understood why Kalina’s hand had been trembling, why she’d been crying, the last time they’d seen each other. Now she understood why Kalina had slaughtered her allies. She’d been programmed to.

‘... I’m Sylvanas…’ the ranger-captain spoke, finding herself at a loss for words as she stiffly extended a hand. Kalina seemed to stiffen a fraction at the name, before blinking and returning to ‘normal’.

“Sylvanas! That’s such a pretty name. It’s so nice to meet you!” She said as she took the woman’s hand. Sylvanas was thankful that Kalina wasn’t wearing gloves at this event. If she had been, she could’ve poisoned her there, and she suspected it would be far more lethal than on previous occasions. ‘This is my husband, Rhalyf!” She exclaimed as she let go of Sylvanas’ hand and wrapped both her arms around his arm, leaning into him like something out of a romance novel.

She looked beautiful. That was what was perhaps the most striking thing about the whole situation, was how absolutely, breathtakingly radiant she looked, happy and smiling and full of life like she’d been so long ago. Sylvanas pushed those thoughts away. It wasn’t really her, no more than an embalmed corpse would be.

“Sylvanas Windrunner, so nice to finally meet you.” Came Rhalyf’s voice, snapping her out of her trance altogether.

Sylvanas forced herself to look at the man’s smug face with a smile that was downright venomous. “It’s so nice to finally meet you too, Lord Dawnblade. Kali, would you be so kind as to go get us a pair of drinks while we talk?” Sylvanas asked, turning a more gentle gaze to all that remained of her best friend.

An uneasy expression adorned the girl’s face. “I’m not sure my husband would-”

“It’s quite alright, Kalina. A chance to talk alone would be good, I think.” Rhalyf interrupted her, causing that beautiful smile to return to her face once more.

“Ohay!” She chirped happily, before starting off toward the bar.

Sylvanas watched her go, before snapping her head back toward Rhalyf with a cold gaze. “What have you done to her?”

His smirk somehow widened. “Why, I have no idea what you’re referring to.”

“Her hand isn’t shaking anymore.”

The magister’s expression faltered, before a less smug grin took its place as he leaned into her ear and spoke quietly. “Even if she did wake up, I doubt she’d remember you. The mind is so easily molded in her state. It’d be a miracle if anything changed at all. In fact, I’d stay far, far away from her
if I were you. She’s under orders to incur as much collateral damage as possible any time she finds herself near Sylvanas Windrunner.”

Sylvanas’ eyes widened in alarm as her gaze darted back toward the bar, where she saw Kalina planting a kiss on the bartender’s cheek.

“I’ll give you tonight as a freebie since you didn’t know. The next time I won’t be so lenient.”

Sylvanas saw Kalina coming back now, a pair of drinks in her hands. Rhalyf leaned back out from her ear. Sylvanas looked at his face just in time to see him give the ivory haired girl the tiniest shake of his head, causing her to set the drink in her left hand down on a passing table without missing a beat.

“Sorry I took so long!” She spoke cheerfully as she handed her husband his drink.

“Not to worry. As a matter of fact, we really should be going.” He spoke, turning to Sylvanas. “It was nice to finally get the chance to meet you.”

He placed his drink in her hand, before turning and opening a portal. The last of them Sylvanas saw as they departed was Kalina’s blank eyes staring back at her through the look of joy on her face.

That night, the party had to be cut short as the bartender collapsed into spasms, blood pouring from the eyes and nose. She was dead long before a healer could even be summoned.

The situation was bleak. While wasn’t impossible to piece broken rangers back together, it was rarely easy, and even then they were usually taken out of action and kept under close observation for a long time to come.

Sylvanas realized she needed Rhalyf Dawnblade alive in order to make the process easier. If she could find out exactly the conditioning and keywords Kalina was being controlled under, things would become far more simple. The problem was, if he was taken into custody, he’d likely sing like his wife’s namesake, and then Sylvanas would lose her forever.

At the same time, captures required far greater resources to accomplish with certainty than kills did. She thought about which rangers she could trust enough with something like this. Caledra, certainly. The two of them were in this together sink or swim. Beyond that though, this was a matter involving someone considered for all intents and purposes to be an enemy of Quel’thalas.

She decided she couldn’t risk it. She’d bring Caledra. No one else could be allowed to know.

It was to that end that she had the lieutenant pulled out of the standard rotation in order to tail the target for an indefinite period of time, develop a routine for him, and find Sylvanas a moment they could strike.

A month later, they had their intel. As night fell, the pair donned heavy cloaks under which their weapons and gear were concealed, and disappeared into the darkness to prepare their ambush.

While it certainly wasn’t impossible for a ranger to move along the rooftops the way Kalina did, it wasn’t something they were at all used to compared to the forest, and scaling the buildings took far more time than they had if they wanted this op to stay quiet.

The plan was simple then. Caledra would sit on a nearby bench out in the open, her face hidden underneath the hood of her cloak, while Sylvanas would wait in a nearby alley with an arrow nocked and tipped with a sedative.
Once the target was subdued, they’d move in, grab him, and usher him somewhere dark and hidden before the next guard patrol came by. From there they’d ditch their gear in a dead drop spot, bind him, gag him, put him in a preplaced coffin, and sneak him somewhere they could keep him in the city as their dear deceased uncle, light rest his soul.

Once Rhalyf was out of the picture, Kalina would be without direction or immediate orders, making her easy enough to find; maybe even subdue if they could get her husband to cooperate. An assault on a magister’s home was never a good idea, but the girl was never seen outside now except for formal events or assassinations, so there was little choice in that regard.

Sylvanas could hear footsteps approaching now. They had maybe two minutes until the next guard patrol came through, and maybe 10 minutes until the next ranger patrol. That was more than an enough time. She just needed at few more seconds and he’d be hers.

“Unless you want your friend to be gutted like a fish, I’d advise showing yourself.” The magister’s voice rang out calmly.

Sylvanas’ eyes widened. Kalina was here. She was here and she most likely had a knife to Caledra’s throat. They didn’t have time for this, it was meant to be a quick snatch and grab; and she certainly hadn’t expected Kalina.

Sylvanas stayed perfectly still and silent, trying to come up with a way to salvage the situation. Rhalyf’s voice rang out again. “I’ll give you to the count of five. One…”

Sylvanas bit her lip. Caledra knew the risks, she decided. Her only option now was plan B.

“Two…”

Sylvanas shed her cloak, carefully to make sure it hit the ground as quietly as possible.

“Thr-” Rhalyf was interrupted by an arrow in his throat as Sylvanas dived out of the alleyway and through the air, reaching for another arrow in midair as behind the now falling magister, the ranger-captain saw Kalina lift the weighted knife away from Caledra’s throat before chucking it directly at her. She blocked the blade with her bow, landing on the ground in a roll just in time to see the lieutenant elbow the assassin in the face, before breaking free from her grip and whirling around to face her just in time for Kalina’s dagger to find itself buried in the ranger’s neck a fraction of a second later.

Before Caledra had even hit the ground, Kalina was reaching for another weighted knife. Sylvanas was faster, her fingers already finding the nock of another poisoned arrow. Kalina raised her arm to throw the projectile just in time for Sylvanas’ arrow to drive itself between the bones of her forearm, causing the knife to fall from her fingers as the sedative started to take effect.

Kalina tried to make for cover, only for her legs to give out beneath her, causing her to hit the ground as her eyes closed. Sylvanas wasted no time, having already stowed her bow the second the sedative hit. She rushed forward, grabbing what was left of the girl she loved and quickly dragging her back into the darkness, ripping off her hood and casting it aside as she did so. The rest of her armor wasn’t particularly recognizable, but the hood with only darkness under it was unmistakable.

She could hear shouting from the street they’d just left. The patrol was early. Thankfully Kalina was far lighter than she was. Sylvanas hoisted the girl over her shoulder, before disappearing into the night just as the guards arrived on scene.
Without Caledra to help her move the unconscious assassin, Sylvanas had found herself with a fairly limited area of places she could hide out. Luckily they were already close to Kalina’s home. The moment Sylvanas got inside, she set the girl down before locking the door as quickly as possible and drawing a pair of short swords. The whole place could be booby trapped. Setting her swords down for a moment upon seeing that the foyer was clear, she quickly stepped over to her broken captive before swiftly removing the arrow in her arm followed by her armor. It certainly wasn’t the best situation she’d imagined seeing Kalina naked again under, but she had no idea just how many tricks like the needle in the glove the girl had on her. Once that was done, she poured a healing potion on the wound, before carefully moving the various bits of armor and weaponry to the other side of the massive room. Everything came off easily enough except for the amulet around her neck. That had proven agonizing to even try to take off, so she left it for now. Her last step was to gag Kalina just to be safe before tying her to the staircase at the far end of the room.

She could only imagine how creepy this all must’ve looked to a passive observer, but it was necessary to keep what was left of her love staying put and in order while Sylvanas cleared the house.

It took a few hours for her to clear out everything above ground. Once that was done, she moved downstairs into the underground section. It wasn’t long before she came upon the now vacant servants’ quarters. She kicked open the first door, rushing in only to stop cold. There was blood on the floor - long since dried, but there all the same. A moment later, she noticed the shackles bolted to the walls.

She lost track of how long she stood there, staring at the scene and imagining the sort of person she’d let take Kalina so long ago, before finally shaking herself out of her trance. She had to get back before dawn. She finished clearing the place a few minutes later. When she got back upstairs, she could see the sky was starting to get lighter. Kalina wasn’t moving so she was still likely out. The more pressing concern was that Sylvanas needed to book it if she was gonna make it back in time.

It was only as she was about to go, that she noticed Kalina’s eyes were open. She wasn’t unconscious or even asleep, she’d been staring at the wall without the slightest trace of movement.

Sylvanas stood there in silence for a moment.

“... I’ll find a way to fix what he did to you.” she finally spoke softly, before turning and rushing out the door.

The next night, Sylvanas returned with a couple of Kalina’s favorite foods in a paper bag. It was a long shot, but it couldn’t hurt to try using them to jog something back into function. She opened the door to the tower to find the pale elf still sitting there in the exact position she’d left her. Sylvanas strode over to her before kneeling down and removing the gag while setting the bag down.

She recalled her training on how to handle broken rangers. Steeling herself, she took a deep breath before starting with the simplest question.

“What’s your name?” She asked gently, causing Kalina’s gaze, or what passed for a gaze, to turn toward her.

“Whore.” She replied without missing a beat, earning a shudder from Sylvanas. Of course it was.
The ranger bit her lip for what she’d have to do next. It wasn’t the hardest thing she’d ever had to do by a long shot, but it hurt all the same.

“Whore. Eat.” she hissed coldly at her captive, before reaching into the paper bag and retrieving a kabob, which she held up to the girl’s mouth. Kalina obeyed, thankfully. Good. That meant Sylvanas had a way of keeping her alive.

Her eyes moved to Kalina’s bindings. She couldn’t just keep her tied naked to the stairs, but at the same time, if she cut her free, would she attack her? Rhalyf had said she was programmed to cause as many casualties as possible in her presence.

Sylvanas looked down. Kalina’s ankles were still bound. She wouldn’t be able to do much.

She sighed. “Please don’t make me regret this.” She whispered as she got up and stepped around to where her best friend’s hands were tied behind the bannister. Once they were cut, Sylvanas tensed, as if waiting for Kalina to spring into action. Only she didn’t. She just sat there, staring ahead still.

Sylvanas breathed a sigh of relief. Maybe it was because her ankles were still tied that she wasn’t trying anything, or maybe it was because she’d seen her tormentor die. Regardless, this wasn’t a bad sign.

“Whore. Eat.” She snapped again, causing Kalina to reach into the bag and this time pull out a small glazed rib, before tucking into it.

Sylvanas really had no idea what she was doing, if she was being honest with herself. This was the kind of thing even the healers struggled to fix, let alone a ranger. She knew firsthand just how many of the ranger guidelines and procedures were made just as a morale boost more than an actual working protocol, and this was very much one of them. On top of that, she only had so long before her unit was rotated away from Silvermoon. If that day came, she’d have no choice but to give her love the ultimate mercy.

She pushed away such thoughts. Better not to let despair overtake her just yet.

“... Cmon, let’s get you upstairs. Better to at least lie in bed where you’ll be warm.”

The next next several nights were spent in a similar fashion. Usually Kalina would pass out in bed at some point which Sylvanas would take as her cue to go get some rest herself. She still didn’t trust Kalina’s programming enough to sleep next to her, so this usually meant heading home. Despite the unwillingness to sleep near her, however, Sylvanas had taken to lying on the bed next to her, if for no other reason than if she was gonna be there for hours each night, she might as well be comfortable.

After three months, Sylvanas found herself lying on the bed again, same as all the nights before, but now facing a new line of thought: she was beginning to lose hope. It tore at her heart every time she had to use the ‘whore’ commands on Kalina, and yet it was the only way Sylvanas knew to get her to do anything. There were so many rangers who never woke up, who had to be put down by their commanding officers so they could be listed as killed in action. She’d had to do it herself more times than she wanted to remember. She couldn’t give Kalina the honor of being listed as KIA, but, at least some mercy was better than none.

She began preparing herself for the possibility, like she had many times before. She always hoped after each time that she’d forget ever seeing them in that state, and could just conjure up the false memory of them being killed in some heroic way fighting for Quel’thalas. She wondered if she could
even come close to doing that with Kalina, knowing everything she knew now.

She’d think of something, she assured herself. The question was did she really want to lose even a second of her. Could this wreckage even be considered Kalina at this point?

Her thoughts were interrupted as she felt something grab onto her. She turned her head tiredly to see Kalina there, both arms wrapped around Sylvanas’ left one - the same way she used to sleep back when they trained together.

She was smiling, Sylvanas noticed.

She couldn’t help but smile in kind, admittedly much more tiredly. She supposed one night here wouldn’t hurt. She was a light sleeper, after all.

“I love you.” She whispered as she put her other arm around Kalina and closed her eyes.

Pain. Agonizing, omnipresent, unending pain. That was the last thing Kalina remembered as she bolted up in bed, her limbs thrashing and a scream escaping her lips before she realized where she was. She began panting heavily, her knuckles whiter than they already were as they gripped the bedsheets. She was in bed. She wasn’t being tortured or raped or anything. She was in bed. She was fine. Why was she in bed. Something was wrong. She looked out towards the balcony. It was night out.

“Kali?”

Kalina froze, recognizing the voice better than her own. She turned around to see Sylvanas lying there, in bed, with her, in place of her husband. This couldn’t possibly be real.

“... Am I dead?” she asked slowly. Her answer came in the form of a bear hug.

“No.” Sylvanas sniffled as she held her so tightly Kalina thought her ribs might break. Was she crying? “You’re very, very much alive.”

“O… kay.” Kalina returned the hug. “Um, sorry, how are you here, in bed, with me?”

Sylvanas pulled away from the hug with a soft smile, before kissing her on the forehead.

“I’ll tell you soon. I love you.”

A smile spread across Kalina’s face. “I love you too.”

“I did what?!” Kalina exclaimed as the pair walked side by side down the empty streets of Silvermoon, the moon hanging high in the sky above them.

“Shhhhh, before someone hears. But yes, you may have tried to bury a knife in my skull.” Sylvanas replied with a small smirk. “Lucky for you that I’m such a good shot.”

Her hands clapped over her mouth. She’d tried to kill Sylvanas. Even worse, she’d done it because her husband had told her to.

“I… I didn’t… I-“

Sylvanas stopped, turning to place a hand under Kalina’s chin to shut her mouth.
“It’s okay. You did everything you could to warn me.” The ranger spoke with an air of definitiveness to her words.

Kalina closed her eyes and exhaled, before nodding. They started walking again in silence.

“Where we going, anyway?” The shorter elf asked after a few minutes.

“We,” Sylvanas smiled, “are signing you up for the rangers.”

And so it was that with all who knew who she was apart from Sylvanas dead, including her husband, Kalina was finally free to pursue the dream she’d waited more than a century for. One of the first things they’d done was find a magister to destroy the enchantments on the amulet around her neck, destroying the piece in the process. With that done, Kalina was free to go off to training, something that with her skillset and 120 years of preparation, she sailed through with flying colors and as a result was placed in the farstriders. Even after all that time, Lireesa kept true to her promise, and once Kalina graduated from training altogether, she was placed under Sylvanas’ command, meaning were finally together, after a lifetime apart, and for the first time since she’d been taken away from Windrunner Spire all those years ago, Kalina was truly happy.
The rain came down as a thick wall, drenching everything it touched as the hooded rangers rode south. Normally such a group would be the size of a single squad or even a battalion at most. Today, however, the entire ranger force found itself mobilized at the king’s behest. Quel’thalas had been invaded, and after some rather bold persuasion on the part of Alleria Windrunner, King Anasterian Sunstrider had ordered everything the kingdom had at its disposal to defend the south from the invading Horde.

At the head of the ground rode Sylvanas Windrunner, having only recently taken up the mantle of Ranger-General after her mother, Lireesa, had been killed early on during the initial incursion. It’d been a major surprise to everyone paying attention that Alleria, next in line for the position, had turned down the promotion in favor of the more expeditionary role allowed by her rank of Ranger Captain.

Behind Sylvanas rode Lieutenant Halduron Brightwing, covered in heavy plate armor and carrying a massive shield as he was followed by his ranger company. Among them rode the hooded figure of Farstrider Kalina Dawnblade, her knuckles white as she tightly gripped the reins of her horse, her snow colored hair plastered to her face. They’d been riding for easily over a week, having passed through Tranquillien just the previous night. Normally mobilizing on the scale they were would take more time, but their enemies’ scorched earth tactics meant that every inch of ground lost was lost for good. As a result, their unit’s primary directive was to engage at first opportunity with the hope that the humans would provide enough reinforcements to make it a viable strategy.

Like Halduron, many of the bigger members of the unit were kitted out in heavy weapons and gear, an assignment Kalina had been thankful to not receive, due in no small part to the set of weighted throwing knives kept hidden under her cloak. They weren’t the type of weapon one would normally see a ranger use, and for that reason alone Sylvanas had strongly discouraged her from using them. They were, after all, the signature weapons of the Canary, one of Quel’thalas’ most hated and feared assassins who had mysteriously vanished the same night that Kalina’s husband had been killed, leaving her free to join the rangers and be with her former lover like she’d always dreamed.

It hadn’t been difficult restarting her relationship with Sylvanas. Not nearly as hard as she’d expected it to be, given their shared past. All the same, it certainly hadn’t been easy. It’d been so long since they’d talked without being quite literally at each other’s throats; to say nothing of the social shame of her reconnecting with her lesbian lover just months after her husband was brutally slaughtered in the streets by a person who was quickly determined to be the famed assassin after the guards found her iconic masked hood at the scene.

Now however, 25 years onward, they were stronger than ever. They’d both learned a long time ago what caring about social expectations wrought, and neither of them truly cared anymore, even if they pretended to for appearance’s sake. It was also for that reason that Sylvanas’ inheriting of the title of Ranger-General had been a scandalous piece to news to a majority of Quel’dorei society, and a quiet outrage to some. Nothing had come of it, however. The more important issue at hand was the pressing invasion, and so no one dared to try and make a political move against Sylvanas while she was coordinating a response to said invasion.

Despite the directive not to bring the knives, Kalina had brought them nonetheless. The entire country was being burned one foot at a time by an enemy whose primary form of fighting was thrown weapons. No one would notice a couple extra knives flying around, and she was far more comfortable with them than she was with her bow.
Part of her wondered how Sylvanas would react. The woman was not a weak leader by any means. She supposed it would depend on how the battle turned out.

Her sense of cavalierness at the sudden invasion was something she kept very carefully hidden. Loving her general was easy, it came as naturally to her as breathing. Loving the rangers was also easy, it was a dream she’d spent a century chasing. Loving the rest of her country, on the other hand… well, her time in the rangers had helped that flame slowly rekindle, even if it still was only just embers. At the very least, that alone made her country worth defending, in her eyes. Adding in Sylvanas and everything to do with her, and she at least hoped Quel’thallas was very much not burned to the ground.

Her musings were interrupted as a dark bolt came flying out of the trees, impaling Halduron’s horse and sending both ranger and steed crashing to the ground.

“Contact right!” A voice called out as the entire unit came to a halt, dismounting immediately. All at once the muscular jade forms of the forest trolls came from every side. A lean one wielding an axe in one hand lunged for Kalina, the elf quickly deflecting the attacking arm as it came down while sidestepping outside of his guard and bringing up a standard issue dagger with her other arm, which first found itself in his bicep, followed by his lower back. Another one charged at the girl, only for another ranger’s arrow to embed itself in his head before he got close, causing him to hit the ground faster than one would think possible.

As quickly as it had begun, the fight was over. Whatever the trolls had been expecting, it clearly hadn’t been a force of their size.

“Clear!” A voice rang out as Sylvanas went around observing the swift carnage.

After only a minute or so, she stopped, before turning around to face her subordinates, shouting over the heavy downpour. “Amani scouting party, likely one of hundreds!” She turned to face the blond lieutenant. “Halduron, take a patrol and have them clear the forest of any other trolls that might be hiding out! We can’t have them hindering the main force!” Most of the ranger force was still half a day behind them, making them the tip of the spear.

The armored ranger nodded, before barking out twelve names including Kalina’s and giving the order to leave the horses and form up. And so it was that the main battalion force took their horses with all their personnel effects on them, while the team of 13 rangers stalked through the forests, moving as shadows except for Halduron himself, who stayed out in the open under a heavy cloak.

It took maybe an hour for them to encounter the trolls’ next patrol. Naturally, the verdant invaders took the bait, all of them forsaking their hiding places to move in on Halduron, only to be dropped in rapid succession. After repeating this process several more times in succession, they were on maybe their fourth party eliminated when, as the leader slid off Halduron’s spear, the loud sound of sprinting without regard for stealth came from deeper in the forest, audible even over the rain.

Kalina knocked an arrow and raised her bow, only to nearly drop it a moment later as the drenched form of Alleria Windrunner came bursting out onto the path.

“Halduron!” She called out, approaching the lower officer. “Good! I’ve spoken with the Alliance commander and Sylvanas as well. She needs all our forces along the southwest edge of the forest. That is where the Horde has gathered, and she cannot hold them for long.”

Halduron gave her a quick nod. “I shall inform Lor’themar, for his band is near here as well, and we will come to the aid of your friends. Their fight is now ours, and we will not allow them to fall before these foul creatures.” He considered her for a moment. “Are you well, Alleria? You seem flushed.”
Kalina could see the frown cross her face like it’d been in slow motion. If there was one advantage to her time playing politics in Silvermoon, it was that it taught her to look for even the tiniest detail in a person’s reaction to something.

“I am fine. Now go! Bring our warriors! I will return to my sister and to the Alliance and reassure them that aid is on the way.” With that, she disappeared into the forest once more.

Halduron turned back to the group, yanking his spear free of a troll.

“Kalina, Nyana, you deliver the message to Lor’themar. The rest of us will move to engage.”

Internally Kalina sighed. A part of her always hated being alone with Nyana Springweaver, likely because her father, Major Renarus Springweaver of the Silvermoon City Guard, was… not technically her first kill, but her first kill that she’d specifically planned. She’d looked him in the eye and smiled as she poisoned him while he talked about his daughter graduating the Ranger Academy.

It was for that reason that being alone with Nyana, among other things, set her on edge. Luckily the dark blonde ranger didn’t seem to notice anything. In most matters, the girl was incredibly stoic, but that mask all but shattered any time she got the opportunity to talk about her undying hatred of the Canary and dreams of getting revenge someday. Kalina supposed there was a long list of people with that same dream out there.

“Yes sir.” They both replied in unison, before turning and sprinting off into the forest without another word.

The trip went without issue, something Kalina was thankful for. It was near Nyana that she was nervous about getting into a fight. Even if she hadn’t brought the throwing knives, the woman was obsessed with the Canary, and had read over all the reports a hundred times. If anyone could recognize Kalina’s style of combat, it was her. That wasn’t even counting the fact that she was in Sylvanas’ former unit, a unit Kalina had clashed with on more than one occasion. For all she knew, Nyana had already seen her in action.

They now moved swiftly, each sitting on the back of a horse controlled by an armored ranger. Lor’themar’s forces had been given the order to prioritize armored loadouts above lightweight ones, and as a result, most of his rangers were carrying heavy spears and shields.

They stopped about a hundred feet from the treeline as the Ranger-Captain barked out a dismount order. Immediately the armored soldiers began to form into rows while the few that were in their standard lightweight gear quickly darted off either way into the woods.

“Brightwings!” Came Lor’themar’s commanding voice, addressing the pair. “Go with the other lightweights and flank around while providing fire from the treeline!”

“Sir!” Came the simultaneous reply as the pair sprinted off in opposite directions, Kalina flanking left while Nyana moved right.

As the white haired elf vectored closer to the treeline she could begin to see the battle taking place. She’d heard rumors of orcs on the way down south, but to actually see them in action was daunting, to say the least. They were nothing short of massive, and wielded weapons to match. She watched as they swept the humans aside like they were made of paper, while toward the rear of the formations, even larger two headed creatures with small horns showered the Alliance forces in jets of magical fire.

Once they had suitably encircled the battlefield, Kalina knocked an arrow and let loose her shot,
striking one of the two headed mages in the arm. It didn’t seem to do much more than tick it off, but before Kalina could feel the repercussions of her actions, the armored formations broke through the southwest treeline, quickly working together with the human forces to encircle the tightly knit Horde invasion force.

Despite the Horde’s superior numbers, it wasn’t long before they were completely surrounded by an Alliance shield wall that was slowly closing in while Kalina and the other archers continued to rain arrows on the invading army.

A loud roar sounded in the distance. She turned to see an army of the two headed monsters now emerging from the treeline, carrying clubs the size of an orc as weapons and hosing down the human formations with fire, completely shattering them and causing the battlefield to descend into absolute chaos.

As the armies broke, she could make out Sylvanas amidst the fray battling alongside Halduron and what remained of her unit. She cursed the massive sea of bodies between them. It was bad enough that their enemies were massive and could wield magic, but they far outnumbered both the elves and humans combined, and now that the Alliance’s formation were broken, that difference in both strength and numbers was making itself painfully clear. She watched as entire groups of Alliance forces were effortlessly swatted aside.

Deciding now was as good a time as any to link up with her unit, and more importantly, Sylvanas, she stowed her bow and rushed out of the treeline, drawing a pair of short swords as she dove into the fray. Slicing trolls was one thing, slicing other elves was one thing, but the mountains of muscle before her were a whole other endeavor.

Luckily, she’d brought a friend. Despite her willingness to pack the throwing knives, even she had to admit that bringing her signature paralytic agent would be a dead giveaway. That didn’t mean her blades - or her arrows - had to stay dry, though.

An orc lunged at her, its massive green form hefting an axe the size of her body. Kalina sidestepped the blade as it came down, burying itself in the earth while she quickly drove her blade into the edge of his abdomen. Even on an elf, it wouldn’t have been a significant enough hit to do much, but it was the best strike she could get in the moment and it was enough where in the middle of battle, no one would look twice as the orc hit the ground, no doubt finding himself very tired all of a sudden as his blood congealed in his veins.

Kalina didn’t stop to make sure he was dead. Her priority was getting to Sylvanas. She turned just in time to bend backwards as a gargantuan hammer passed where her head had been a moment before. Rolling back, she recovered into a standing position.

‘Whatever you do, do not pull out the throwing knives.’ She told herself. Her enemy was strong and fast, but a single poisoned blade chucked his way would drop him in seconds. Still, it was too big a risk of being found out. She’d wait for the situation to become more dire first.

Her quarry raised his hammer again. Kalina could see he was about to charge her. Before he could get the chance, however, an arrow came through his forehead, causing his body to fold as he fell.

It didn’t take long for her to locate the source, as it came dancing across the battlefield like a goddess of war, putting down orcs as naturally as breathing. Before Kalina had had time to really appreciate the sight, Sylvanas had reached her and taken hold of her arm.

“Kali, with me!” She shouted point blank as she jerked Kalina in her direction before letting go and resuming her hail of arrows.
The ranger didn’t need to be told twice, immediately dashing past Sylvanas and slicing one of her blades along a nearby orc’s thigh, before another one swung at her, causing her to drive a sword between the bones of his forearm. Both fell almost immediately as the poison took effect. A third rushed Kalina, almost scoring a hit before an arrow from Sylvanas caused him to go crashing into the ground. And so it was that the pair slowly cleared a path to what little remained of the Alliance’s northern line, where Alleria and Halduron held off the Horde alongside with the rest of Kalina’s unit and a number of humans.

Despite their superior skill, the Alliance was losing ground. They were few in numbers to begin with, and it didn’t help every time one of the two headed beasts would wipe out an entire unit with a single swing.

“Kalina, nice of you to join us.” Spoke Halduron as the pair made it to what remained of their line, Kalina immediate whirling around and swapping her swords for her bow as she began sending poisoned arrows into the ocean of green that was slowly closing in on them.

They couldn’t hold out like this much longer. Their company had already been the first to make contact with the Horde, meaning they’d sustained severe losses early on. Adding to that the current attrition rate, along with the fact that they’d been separated from the main Quel’dorei force when the formation broke, and things were looking increasingly grim.

From high up in the sky came the sound of a splitting shriek like that of an eagle as a number of small, dark shapes suddenly broke through the cloudline, each one Kalina could just barely make out as being a small figure riding what appeared to be a gryphon.

The sight before the group was nothing short of magnificent as the winged cavalry dove from the sky, their overwhelmingly agility on full display as they pulled up only just in time for their hammers to meet the invaders’ skulls, eliciting cheers from the remaining soldiers.

The ensuing Horde losses were swift and brutal as the aerial assault threw their forces into chaos, breaking what little semblance of a formation they had and causing their ranks to all but collapse.

Neither Kalina nor any of the other elves wasted any time capitalizing on the opportunity as they began to press the offensive, gaining ground at an incredible pace. Their victory was short lived however, as the girl looked up at the sky just in time to see a dark, massive shape dive beneath the clouds, swallowing a gryphon and its rider whole without even stopping as it sped towards the Alliance forces.

‘No…’

The gargantuan red dragon was swiftly followed by another, and another, and another as more and more of the great firey beasts dove straight for the Alliance forces.

‘Nononononononononononono!’

Kalina’s arms fell at her sides. She knew at that moment that the battle was lost. No, at that moment, the entire war was very likely lost. Quel’thalas would surely burn now, taking her and her general with it.

She hit herself mentally. Now was not the time for despair. Her whole life she’d been a fighter, against impossible odds she’d been a fighter, against all of Quel’thalas she’d been a fighter. She was not gonna die at the end of a dragon’s fire or an orc’s axe without at least putting up a fight.

Shaking herself out of her trance, she located where Sylvanas was on the battlefield and all but
sprinted for her, diving and weaving between the carnage without even bothering to draw her blades.

“Sylvanas!” She shouted over the sound of the battle, getting the ranger-general’s attention. As the blonde turned to stare at her, she hesitated. She had to choose her next words very precisely, lest they amount to treason. “We can’t hold this position anymore, we need to pull back!”

Sylvanas gave her a friendly smirk. “You’re not serious.” Good, not treason then. “In case you haven’t noticed, we’re w-” She was cut off by the sound of another roar, now coming from right on top of them as jets of flame began strafing the human and elven forces alike, decimating them almost instantaneously and igniting the forest around them. Sylvanas went quiet. “... Okay time to pull back.”

Raising her bow in the air, she signaled the command to retreat, a command which was swiftly echoed by the various ranger captains. The elven forces clearly did not need telling twice as they, along with what remained of the rest of the Alliance, immediately broke formation in favor of bolting for a still intact section of the treeline.

“Come on!” Sylvanas shouted, as started off into a sprint, Kalina following closely behind.

All around them, fire rained down, igniting the retreating forces and turning their armor into molten metal. It was only then as she followed Sylvanas did Kalina realize how hot it had suddenly become, to the point where it felt like the air itself was trying to suffocate her.

The pair hit the treeline, not slowing down in the slightest as the fire spread faster than they could run, the entire forest now igniting behind them in a hellish inferno. They weren’t going to make it, Kalina realized with a pang of horror. They couldn’t breathe as it stood, let alone keep up this pace, a pace which the forest fire now greatly outmatched. She could see the blaze closing in from three sides, maybe 500 feet from them and rapidly gaining.

They were going to be burned alive, and there was nothing either of them could do about it.

No, she realized, not nothing. There was one thing they could do to spare themselves the impending agony. She reached out and grabbed Sylvanas hand before stopping, causing the woman the whirl around just in time for Kalina to shove one of her weighted daggers into her arms before drawing another for herself.

Sylvanas stared, panting, at her with an initial expression of shock, which quickly gave way to resigned acceptance. Giving a single nod of agreement, she gently took Kalina’s hand in her own, pulling her in closer until they were pressed against each other.

“I love you.” Kalina could just barely hear over the roar of the fire now less than 300 feet from them.

The snow haired elf smiled sadly. “I love you too.” She mouthed in reply, not having the breath to speak anymore.

Leaning into each other, the pair pressed their lips together in one final kiss goodbye, each raising their blade to their own neck.

They found themselves swiftly interrupted, however, by the sound of hoofbeats suddenly passing by them, causing them to break their kiss and look around to see Lor’themar on horseback, circling them.

“Get on the fucking horse!” He all but screamed at the pair, causing them to quickly let go of each other’s hands and sprint for him, each of them being helped up to sit with Kalina in front of him and Sylvanas behind.
The fire was maybe a hundred feet from them as Lor’themar kicked his steed into a full gallop once more. It was closing in rapidly, but now they were faster, the air slowly getting less painful as they neared the edge of the forest.

As they broke through the treeline, Kalina couldn’t help but laugh. They’d made it. They’d actually made it. She could see they were riding up a hill now, covered with surviving human and Quel’dorei troops, all semblance of formation gone as most of them either sat or lay down in a chaotic jumble. Some appeared fine, others were being treated for kinetic injuries sustained in battle, and still others had suffered severe burns. Her laughter was cut abruptly short as she caught sight of one ranger with his armor melted in parts, still attached to his body. She couldn’t imagine the agony he was in.

They came to a stop at the top of the hill, where she could see Alleria standing with a number of Alliance commanders. As they dismounted, Lor’themar immediately jogged over to the group while Sylvanas and Kalina hung back. The girl could see a million emotions flash across Sylvanas’ face, but before she could open her mouth to say anything, she felt the officer nearly deck her as her arms gripped her body tightly.

“Never scare me like that again.” Came the whisper in her ear before the blonde let go, leaving her able to breathe again. “And never let anyone else know you have these.” She handed the weighted dagger back to her. They weren’t the same style Kalina had used as an assassin - even she wasn’t that foolhardy - but all the same she could see where Sylvanas was coming from. It was a risk

Kalina grimaced. “Yes ma’am.” She supposed she should consider herself lucky. Sylvanas could’ve given her a much more severe verbal lashing. Part of her wondered if it had something to do with the fact that they had just gotten absolutely destroyed, that the situation was severe enough to explore all options. If so, at least that answered her earlier question.

Sylvanas leaned in and kissed her on the forehead. “Good. Now go find Halduron. I’m sure he probably thinks you’re dead at the moment. Dismissed.”

“Yes ma’am.” Kalina repeated with a soft smile, before turning and starting down the hill to find her unit.
It took her about five minutes of asking around to find Lieutenant Halduron, along with about half of her unit. To her slight disappointment, Nyana was among them. It wasn’t that she wished her sister in arms dead, quite the opposite in fact. Whereas Kalina’s love of Quel’thallas was a questionable feeling at best, her love of the rangers was absolute. But if any half of her unit had to be killed in action, it wouldn’t have been a bad thing for that half to include one of the few rangers who posed a serious threat of taking her dream away from her, as opposed to a ranger who didn’t pose such a threat.

“Kalina Dawnblade reporting, sir.” She spoke as she reached the group and stood with her hands behind her back.

“At ease.” Halduron replied offhandedly. “Have you seen anyone else from our unit?”

She shook her head.

“Dammit!” He looked like he was about five seconds away from punching something as he rested his forehead in his hand.

Kalina looked out over the blaze that was the forest. In the distance, she could see the dragons circling, still raining fire down on Quel’thallas, having now moved north past them and past the river, deeper into Quel’dorei territory. She sat down. A part of it felt almost surreal. For so long, Quel’thallas had stood untouchable, a bastion of Highborne prowess, and now it was to be forever destroyed by an army of half naked brutes with crude, improvised weapons.

She supposed they were lucky the humans had been willing to lend their aid when they had, otherwise the situation could’ve been much worse for their numbers even without the dragons.

They made camp there on the hillside that evening. Sylvanas had officially pledged Quel’thallas’ full support in the war, effectively making them an actual part of the Alliance, as opposed to the token battlegroup King Anasterian had initially sent. That plus the fact that both sides had just saved each other in battle meant that for the first time Kalina had seen in living memory, humans and elves were getting along. Well, first time apart from Sylvanas’ pet project, but he’d sworn himself to Quel’thallas altogether.

Kalina hadn’t spoken with Nathanos much, despite them being in the same company. While she trusted Sylvanas’ judgement on him, more than a few times she’d caught him giving her the absolute coldest stare she could ever conceive of, which - considering she’d lived in Silvermoon for 110 years - was a high bar to say the least.

The blaze in the surrounding forests was too much for them to move anywhere, so they made camp there that night. The sun was setting when Kalina’s unit got a fire going. Luckily most of their supplies had been kept far back and away from the battlefield to begin with, so it hadn’t been hard to get them away from the inferno. Normally the sunset over Quel’thallas was beautiful to behold. Today, however, the oranges and reds dancing across the trees made a number of people uneasy. Trying not to focus on the color of the sky, Kalina focussed instead on stirring the pot suspended over the flames.

“Um… hi.” Came a soft voice from behind her. She looked up from what she was doing to see a red haired human girl, likely no older than 20, standing there wearing crimson robes and carrying a staff with a bright red crystal at the tip in one hand, along with a small rucksack in the other. She
looked… anxious, to say the least.

“Oh. Hi!” Kalina chirped back, trying to be as friendly as possible. It couldn’t hurt to make friends now that they were going to be working together. “Was there something you needed?”

The girl looked a little taken aback at the directness of the question, her body language closing up a tad while her grip on her staff visibly tightened.

“I, just… um… well, I just kinda, wanted to maybe see if it was okay if I ate with you…” She almost squeaked, before holding up the rucksack. “I brought my own dinner…”

Kalina looked around. Most of the other rangers in her unit were off accomplishing one task or another. Cooking dinner had mostly been her job. Looking back up at the timid girl, she nodded.

“Fine by me.” She replied with a smile, placing a lid on the pot and standing up to face the human. She was almost a head taller than the mage, something that was clearly not lost on the red haired girl as her visible nervousness only increased. “I’m Kalina.” She spoke, extending a hand.

“Um… Serena. Serena Morley.” the magic user replied, hesitating for a moment before taking her hand and shaking it.

Turning back toward the fire, Kalina sat back down, gesturing casually to Serena to take a seat next to her. “Where are you from, Serena?”

Serena sat down next to her, peering curiously at the pot of stew. “Hearthglen. It’s a small town in Lordaeron. What about you?”

“Tranquillien.” She replied with a half-hearted smile. “It’s a town a bit northwest of here. Terrible place.” Technically insulting one’s own city was considered sedition and punishable by all sorts of horrors, but Kalina hadn’t been a resident of Tranquillien in a very long time. Plus no one was going to punish someone from Silvermoon for bad-mouthing southern Quel’thalas. Everyone there did it, after all.

“Oh? What’s so bad about it?” Serena asked, seeming somewhat surprised. Quel’thalas was supposed to be perfect and idyllic in every way, after all, an image which a lot of work went into.

Kalina smiled fully now. “It’s a secret.” She pressed a finger to her lips. What she wanted to say was that the people running it were absolute sadistic psychopaths. Saying such a thing about a pair of ruling magisters however, even her own parents, would’ve unquestionably been sedition - perhaps even treason when said to a foreigner. So she stayed quiet. Better not to ruin the magic for her anyway. There’d been so much left in the world when she was Serena’s age, she would’ve loved to have held onto it for just a little while longer.

“I hope I’m not interrupting anything.” Came Sylvanas’ voice from behind the pair, causing Kalina to immediately bolt up and around to stand at attention.

“No ma’am.”

This earned her a giggle from Sylvanas, a sound Kalina would never get tired of so long as she lived. “At ease, Kali.” she replied with a soft smirk as she stepped around to the other side of the younger elf and sat down, staring at the pot. “What are you cooking?”

If there was one thing that always amused Kalina about Sylvanas, it was the woman’s appetite. She tried to hide it for more formal social functions, of course, but in reality it was enough to put even a dire troll to shame; which was perfect because Kalina always loved cooking for her.
She sat back down. “Just some beef stew.”

“Can I have some?” The blonde asked immediately in a manner which reminded Kalina of a perky teenager, eliciting a laugh from the snow haired elf.

“You do realize you’re the general.” She replied with a grin that made it clear she’d love to make her some.

The taller elf leaned on her shoulder. “Yeah, but you’re the cook.”

Serena piped up. “Um, sorry, should I maybe go? You two seem like you’re in the middle of something…”

Kalina chucked. “Don’t worry about it.” She replied before turning back to Sylvanas. “I’ll go get another pot.” With that she stood up and started off towards the cart. Sylvanas watched her go. The girl always did have an amazing… bow. Yes, that was it. Sylvanas was admiring Kalina’s standard issue bow, and how… standard issue it was. That was a sufficient explanation for anyone who asked.

“So, um, you’re the ranger-general?” The human girl piped up, causing Sylvanas to look away from Kalina’s “bow” a little too quickly.

She smiled with just a touch of melancholy. “I am.” She glanced down at the girl’s left hand. There was no ring there. “Sorry, what was your name?”

“Oh! Uh, Serena Morley, ma’am.”

“Serena Morley.” Sylvanas repeated. “Got it.”

Kalina returned with another pot and some more ingredients, and soon she had another stew going, this one being watched by Sylvanas the way a dog might watch a treat being held out in front of it.

It wasn’t long before the rest of the unit returned from their respective tasks, and soon after were all sitting around the campfire, eating bowls of stew - with Sylvanas scarfing down the entire second pot all on her own. Though Kalina didn’t notice it, the officer was keeping a careful eye on her new human acquaintance.

That night, she slept with both arms wrapped around one of Sylvanas’, the same way she always did when they were together. By next morning the inferno around them had died down enough to where the humans pulled out immediately, being completely gone by the time the sun was up.

The order was given meanwhile for the rangers to pack up and prepare to mobilize pending the return of the scouts that’d been sent out that morning. The southern scouts were the first ones back, having confirmed what was already known: everything south of their position was carnage. It was around midday when the first northern scouts returned bearing news - as expected, the Horde had pushed deeper into Quel’thalas, having hit

Kalina was just finishing packing her gear and getting ready to move when she felt a tap on her arm. Turning around, she found herself face to face with Lenara, a captain from Ranger-Captain Aeriel’s battalion.

“Ma’am.” Kalina addressed her.

“At ease. The Ranger-General wants you, me, and Nathanos to meet her at the northern edge of the camp.”
She nodded. “Understood, ma’am.”

It wasn’t hard for her to imagine what they were meeting for. They were forming a vanguard to ride ahead and slow down the invasion force before the main force could arrive to deal with them. Unlike their previous movement, which was a hard scramble for anything and everything to engage the Horde as soon as possible, vanguard teams were specially designed and selected to maximize speed and effectiveness at hit and run engagements.

It took the pair of them a few minutes to find Nathanos, before finally setting off for the northern edge of the camp. As they arrived, they could see eight other rangers standing there, along with Sylvanas. Kalina recognized most of them by first name. In addition to her and Nathanos, she recognized pair of rangers she knew to be named Caelynn and Elsia from different companies of Lor’themar’s battalion. From Areiel’s battalion, she recognized Lyana, Vamir, and Anya. The others, Koltira, Taela, and Kharis were all from separate battalions from everyone else.

“Is everyone here?” Sylvanas asked, looking around the group. “Good. As you may have already expected, we’re forming the vanguard to ride up and engage the Horde ahead of the main force. Are there any questions before we head out?

Nathanos raised his hand. It made sense. This was his first time being selected for such a mission. “Who’s gonna be leading the main force while you’re gone, ma’am?”

Sylvanas turned to face him. “As my second in command, Lor’themar will take control while we’re gone. Any other questions?”

No one raised their hands this time.

“Good. Inform your commanders and pack lightly. We leave in half an hour. Dismissed.”
True to Sylvanas’ word, they left after half an hour to the second. By the time they reached Tranquillien to the north, the Horde had long since moved on. It wasn’t Silvermoon so much that was in danger as it was everything else. Ban’dinoriel, the shield around the city, had held up to everything the trolls had ever been able to throw at it, and while that was nowhere near the power of dragon fire, it still put Silvermoon itself in a far better position than most of the country.

Even from a distance they could see the smoke rising over the town as they got close to the outskirts. A part of Kalina was genuinely worried for her parents. That part was promptly fed to a pack of trolls on the grounds that it was stupid. It didn’t matter anyway. Their job wasn’t to assess damage, search for survivors, or even hit potentially occupied places. Their job was to catch up with the main force.

She must’ve been staring because Sylvanas fell back to ride alongside her.

“Are you okay?”

Kalina bit down on her lip. It was a simple question, and yet probably the single question she loathed more than any other in Azeroth. It was always so hard to keep one’s emotions buried when someone asked that.

“I’m fine.” She replied as gently as she could.

Sylvanas clearly wasn’t convinced.

“Alright, but remember I’m here if you need me.”

They circled the town. The Horde’s trail was easy enough to follow without going through Tranquillien. Based on what Kalina could see, they couldn’t be more than a day’s ride behind them by the time they’d made it to the other end of the town.

She caught herself looking back for a moment, at the tower that dominated the municipality, stretching far above all else. She quickly corrected herself. Her last name wasn’t Sunwing anymore. They’d made sure of that. She had a job to do. All she could do for them right now was honor their decision.

It was nightfall when they began to slow down. There was a river about 500 meters ahead of them, Kalina knew. It’d be a good chance to water the horses while they could, grab a bite of jerky, and set down to sleep for the night. Vanguard duty was often romanticized as being sexy, high speed, elite work. What it really meant was spending 17 hours a day with your face buried in a horse’s mane, only eating a piece of jerky or two before bed, and sleeping in two hour shifts spaced often days apart. Still, there was glory in it, if one cared about that sort of thing. Really all Kalina cared about was spending time with Sylvanas.

As they reached the river, they were disheartened to find their worst fears confirmed: the dragons had burned the bridge after the Horde had crossed it.

“Rangers hold!” Sylvanas called out as the group came to a stop. She was silent for a moment, clearly considering the situation at hand, before she called out again. “Dismount and set up a perimeter! We’ll only be here long enough for the horses so don’t get comfy.”

Kalina kept herself from sighing. The moon was at its apex in the sky. If they’d cleared the river, she
could’ve gotten two, even three hours of sleep, maybe; an absolute decadence considering the circumstances. But with the bridge gone, finding a way to actually clear the river was now a top priority.

Once she had dismounted and led her horse to the water, she grabbed her bow and turned to stand about 15 feet behind it, her fellow rangers each performing similar actions. Only Sylvanas stayed back behind the perimeter, keeping her eyes on the horses so she could give the mount up command as quickly as possible.

Even despite the moonlight, the tree canopy rendered much of the forest pitch black. While the rangers were a little bit more well trained for a forest environment than the trolls, that didn’t mean much when they were out in the open and the trolls were hidden in complete darkness.

As if to confirm their worst fear, a spear came flying out of the darkness, impaling Kharis just under his left collarbone and sending the unit into chaos as trolls leapt from the forest on all sides.

“Ambush!” Kalina heard Anya call out. She only had time to loose a single arrow into one of the giant cannibals’ ribcages before she was forced to switch to her swords as they closed the distance.

Thrown weapons flew through the air all around her as she deflected an incoming strike from a troll wielding a pair of axes, taking the opportunity to move inside his guard and drive her first sword between his ribs, before stepping under his arm and driving the second one into his spine.

The battle was over in less than a minute as the last troll fell. Kalina withdrew her blades from her adversary’s corpse, wiping them off quickly before sheathing them. She looked around. Kharis and Vamir were dead, and a Ynara was seriously wounded. Seeing Sylvanas moving over to the wounded girl, she sighed. That was another reason vanguard work was considered more intense. Anyone too wounded to keep going or to fight was considered a liability they couldn’t afford given that their job was to intercept as quickly as possible. That combined with the fact that they knew all of the vanguard unit’s movements and tactics, as well as those of the main force, and they became a loose end as well.

Kalina saw the girl give a final salute, a declaration of loyalty to the end, before Sylvanas drove her sword into the ranger’s heart. She and Sylvanas were the only ones that didn’t look away as it happened, the girl’s hands shaking from the blood loss at first before they started trembling less and less, until she went so horribly still.

Sylvanas stood up, her face grim. “Mount up. Kali, ride up front with me.”

Kalina simply nodded. “Yes ma’am.”

No one else said anything as they finished retrieving their arrows, before getting back on their horses and setting off at a gallop down the river. There were only a few bridges across the southern river in all of Quel’thalas, such design being for exactly the reason that was now being used against them - to make it easy to block off advancing enemy forces.

The sun was high in the sky by the time they made it to the next bridge. They were tremendously relieved to find this one intact. The Horde likely assumed their forces decimated, and so was prioritizing hitting Silvermoon above all else.

Rather than dismount on the other side, however, they kept going. Kalina could feel her stomach yelling at her but she ignored it. They’d lost too much time trying to cross the river to waste anymore stopping. Tightening her grip on the reins with one hand, she reached into her pocket with the other and pulled out a piece of jerky, before shoving it in her mouth haphazardly and taking hold with both
hands again.

They stopped halfway to the northern river as the sun was setting. They’d been going for easily 40 hours at this point. Whether they wanted it to happen or not, sleep was going to happen.

“Rangers, dismount!” Sylvanas called out, her own speech slightly slurred. Even the invincible ranger-general needed sleep.

Kalina, for her part, didn’t need to be told twice, shambling off her horse as much as climbing off it. The horses were packed light to enhance mobility, meaning no bed rolls. While normally this would be a discomfort, at the moment Kalina couldn’t be happier. It meant she could just collapse wherever she felt like it. She felt a pair of hands on her forearm and turned to see Sylvanas had taken hold of her and was now pulling her towards a remarkably comfortable looking patch of dirt.

“Koltira, first watch, do it.” The blonde called back to one of the farstriders in their party before half lying down half collapsing, taking Kalina down with her and causing the white haired girl to land on top of her. They were both out cold almost instantly.

A few hours later, maybe, the snow haired elf was unceremoniously ripped from unconsciousness by the feeling of someone lightly slapping her face. She woke up to see Nathanos kneeling over her, his gaze, usually cold and dead, now openly disdainful.

He jerked his thumb over his shoulder. The gesture was clear, it was her turn to keep watch.

As she began to get up, she felt something pulling her back down with the strength of a dire troll, and looked down to realize Sylvanas’ arms were wrapped around her. Looking back up apologetically, she saw something she immediately recognized flash in Nathanos’ eyes, causing her jaw to immediately fall open.

‘You’re kidding.’ she mouthed at him in disbelief while trying to slowly extricate herself from her lover’s hold.

He snorted and looked away while she carefully removed Sylvanas’ left arm from its grip on her.

“How long?” She barely whispered to him.

His reply was an annoyed shrug as he continued to look away from her while she slowly navigated herself out from under Sylvanas’ right arm, before quickly standing up and giving him the official tap on the shoulder to let him know he was relieved.

He immediately laid down on the ground right next to Sylvanas with one arm under his head, facing her. Kalina rolled her eyes and turned toward the forest, drawing her bow.

It was maybe a half hour into her watch when she noticed something staring at her from above her and forward, something far worse than a troll, an orc, or even a dragon: A spider, one easily her size.

‘Nooooonoonoonoonono.’ was all she could think as her entire body froze, eyes now locked on the hanging beast. ‘We’re cool, we’re cool, just please go die in a fire somewhere far away from me and out of sight.’

If there was one thing she feared in all of Azeroth, more than anything else, it was spiders. She began to reach for an arrow, only for the spider’s massive limbs moving as it lowered itself just slightly towards her to get her to abandon that course of action immediately.
Slowly setting her bow down, she instead opted for a course of action that involved much less conspicuous movement, carefully reaching inside of her cloak and being relieved to find the hilt of a weighted dagger there.

She allowed herself a single breath, before yanking the blade from its sheath and burying it in the arachnid’s head in one practiced motion, causing it to curl up where it hung. Looking over at Nyana, she was relieved to find that the woman was still sleeping.

She sat back, before forcing herself to look up at the abomination against all things good and decent again. She’d need to retrieve her dagger before Nyana woke up.

Reaching a now only slightly trembling hand for the bow at her feet, she grabbed a tight hold of it, before - while standing well off to the side - raising it to try and catch the hilt of the dagger. The first few times she missed, much to her slight terror as she watched to make sure the spider didn’t move again.

“Fuck you fuck you fuck you fuck you fuck you!” She hissed at it quietly enough that she was sure it wouldn’t wake the others.

Finally after the sixth or so try she caught the tip of her bow around the hilt. Smiling anxiously, she yanked downwards, only to find that the dagger was embedded much more tightly than she intended, causing her bow to slip off the hilt and the dead spider to swing back and forth.

It was at that moment, as she fell backwards and covered her mouth to suppress a terrified sound, that she found herself thankful that whoever was keeping watch with Nathanos had clearly forgotten to wake someone to take over their shift. Incredibly sloppy by ranger standards, but considering the circumstances, it was a gift.

She waited for it to stop swinging. At least now she knew it was really dead, she figured. Once it was still enough again, she reached up again, this time applying a steady pressure to loosen the blade. Once she was sure it was out of its initial position, she yanked down again, causing the dagger to go falling to the ground as blood began trickling from the wound.

She reached out with her bow again and pulled the thrown weapon towards herself, not daring to touch it yet. After kicking some dirt over it to make sure it was hidden from view, she circled around the area beneath spider toward Sylvanas, who was still fast asleep. Standing to the side of the woman so that she’d have a full view of the spider hanging there, Kalina gently nudged her a few times.

The officer’s silver eyes opened to look up hazily at her.

“My turn?” She asked with a friendly smirk as she reached up and placed a hand on Kalina’s cheek.

The girl shook her head, before pointing silently ahead of them. Sylvanas’ eyes followed her finger tiredly for a moment, before bolting open as the ranger-general suddenly sat up and knocked an arrow, putting it in the spider’s head in maybe a second, followed by another.

Kalina smiled. Now no one would question how it died, at least.

Sylvanas sprang to her feet, before, upon noticing Nathanos next to her, nudging him awake with her boot. It wasn’t long before the entire unit was awake, a few of them having also put arrows in the spider the moment they saw it. Only Lyana really seemed not to mind its presence.

“Everyone here?” she called out once they’d woken everyone.

“Here.” Kalina called back, raising her hand, followed by a chorus of similar responses.
Sylvanas paused. “... We’re one short. Where’s Caelynn?”

As if to answer her question, a necrotic arm fell from the tree canopy above the spider, sending a shock through all present. Nine pairs of eyes slowly looked up to see a headless silhouette missing an arm just barely visible, wrapped in webs that reflected the moonlight.

Kalina clapped both hands over her mouth. That had almost been her. The spider had almost eaten her alive, facefirst.

Her breathing became shaky as her legs suddenly felt very weak. She sat down. Quel’thalas was their home, but that didn’t mean the forest was theirs.

“Who was keeping watch with her?!” Sylvanas demanded. Kalina noticed a look of muted fear come over Nathanos’ face. She bit the inside of her mouth. Of course it’d been him.

“Kalina was.” He spoke finally, causing Sylvanas to whirl to face her.

‘Is that really how you wanna play this?’ The snow haired elf thought with a sudden sense of indignant fury.

She opened her mouth to retort, pulling her hands away as she did so. “Except, Nathanos, that I was positioned directly under the spider, and thus in Caelynn’s previous position, when I noticed it and killed it, so I couldn’t have been keeping watch at the same time as her.” She stopped short of calling him out directly. Sylvanas had put herself out there to have him allowed to join the rangers. Shooting him down would be shooting her down.

Sylvanas seemed to have the same thought, because she turned back and stared at him with a blank expression for a moment, before sighing.

“Either way we still have a job to do. Mount up.”

It was after midnight when they finally got moving again. If they were lucky and kept at a hard gallop, they’d cross the river by midday, and hit Silvermoon in the early hours of the morning. That was assuming the Horde wasn’t there ahead of them.

They turned east, moving through one of the valleys towards the lake before turning north again. It was a path they were fairly certain the main invasion force wouldn’t take, meaning it was likely intact. On top of that, across the bridge there was the Farstrider Retreat, where they could grab supplies and rangers to replace their dead.

By late afternoon they hit the northern river, keeping a hard pace as they crossed. It was another few hours before they reached the Farstrider Retreat. As they neared the base, the sight of their comrade’s heads mounted on spikes came into view.

“Hold!” Sylvanas ordered as they slowed down. “Dismount!”

They immediately obeyed, each nocking an arrow on their bow and taking a low stance the moment their feet touched the ground.

Sylvanas raised a fist in the air silently, her arm at a 90 degree angle, before flicking her hand forward a few times in rapid succession. The order was clear: move in.

As they slowly approached the compound, they took a wide formation, spreading out in a vague triangular shape. Kalina’s eyes instinctively searched for nearby cover as they entered. The Farstrider Retreat, for all the warmth and merriment it usually held, now felt downright eerie.
The place was ransacked. Arrows, blood splatters, and burn marks littered the buildings while pieces of debris - everything from broken doors to smashed pieces of furniture - littered the ground. That wasn’t what was eerie about it, though. What was eerie about it all was the fact that despite there being clear signs of very heavy fighting having taken place throughout the camp, there wasn’t a single body to be found. Heads, sure. There were plenty of heads scattered around, of both trolls and elves, but it was only ever heads.

Even noise itself seemed to die as they searched the place, until finally ascertaining that the entire base was deserted, with not a body sight.

Of course, that judgement was quickly corrected as they reached the center of the camp and found several naked bodies suspended in the air over campfires.

Kalina clapped a hand over her mouth as she took in the sight. She’d of course been briefed during training on the fact that the trolls ate flesh, but she’d never truly believed it before. To see it now, on full display on her comrades, was somewhere between demoralizing and maddening, to say the least.

Sylvanas held up another fist as she took in the sight. Before giving a sigh. “Spread out, search for any supplies, and cut them down.” She nodded towards the roasted corpses.

Kalina couldn’t take her eyes off the sight as she otherwise set to work, searching the rest of the camp only to find absolutely nothing of use left.

“Place is picked clean…” she spoke absentmindedly as she returned to Sylvanas.

“Same here.” Came Koltira’s voice as he returned from his searches.

“Same” Lenara added.

Sylvanas looked around. They were all getting more and more hungry, and their supplies wouldn’t last too much longer.

It was Lyana that spoke up, gesturing to the bodies. “Maybe we could just-”

“No.” Sylvanas cut her off. “We’re not them.”

“It’s not like they need them any-”

“I said no.” Her voice was cold and sharp. “That’s an order, Ranger Lyana.”

The girl swallowed and nodded.

The group went silent.

“... Mount up.” Sylvanas finally spoke again. “We don’t have anymore time to waste.”
Chapter 18

It was morning when they neared Silvermoon to find, to their dismay, that the Horde had arrived before them. The good news was that Ban’dinoriel was holding, and the city was currently under siege, meaning they hadn’t actually been able to destroy anything inside the barrier yet. The fact that the Horde was set up and dug in though meant that simply hassling them would no longer be as effective. At most it would psychologically soften up their forces so the main force could hit harder, and they were likely still days away. No, it was better to make their strikes count.

It was to that end that Kalina now sat in the trees just outside the light of the Horde line, doing recon in the hopes of identifying possible targets - really whatever the closest thing the Horde had to officers were. Given the hard and fast nature of their mission, Sylvanas had told her that while technically it would be dishonorable to take the shot if she had it, and officially she wasn’t telling Kalina to do anything that could sully the rangers or their image, if the former assassin did unilaterally decide to drop a few officers here and there with poisoned arrows, neither she nor anyone else would complain.

Kalina had been watching her section of the line for several hours now, identifying possible VIP’s. She didn’t know their names, or even what troll names really sounded like, so she’d come up with her own names for them. Currently Bone, so aptly named for the bone in his nose, was the one everyone seemed to be coming to.

Her biggest concern when she shot wouldn’t be the veritable army that could chase her and very likely catch her, it would be the dragons. They’d been raining fire on the shield for hours, to no avail.

She paused to consider how they’d see the attack. If a single arrow came out of the darkness, their first assumption would be an assassin, meaning a greater chance of them simply sending a party to hunt her rather than deploying the dragons. If several arrows came out of the darkness, they’d assume a larger force, and would hold off their ground forces in favor of more conservative movement, but also would have a greater chance of deploying the dragons.

Her thoughts were interrupted as she gazed upon the form of a white haired troll with a scarf wrapped around his mouth, carrying a pair of heavy looking axes, stepping onto the scene.

Zul’jin, leader of the Amani trolls, had just stepped into her sights.

It was at that moment that she abandoned all careful planning of exfiltration. If she took a shot right now, that would be a crippling blow to a major component of the Horde’s forces, particularly their ability to navigate Quel’thalas. It could even break the siege. Sylvanas would be so proud of her, especially if she survived.

She nocked an arrow. Making Sylvanas proud, alone, was worth it.

Moving her head to the side to gaze at the arrow, she made sure the tip was laced with plenty of one of her more horrific poisons. It’d hurt the Amani morale more if their leader died without dignity rather than more honorably, and her poisons always delivered in that regard.

She was careful to modulate her breathing. If any shot she ever made in her career as a ranger mattered, it would be this one.

Finally, once she was sure that everything was perfect, she smiled and loosed her arrow. It flew through the air towards the troll leader like a beautiful falcon, but it could hit, she saw Zul’jin snap
into motion, swinging one of his blades upwards. It took Kalina a second to register what he had done, until she saw each half of the arrow, divided down the middle, hit a troll, the first one grazing one of their hands, the second pricking another’s foot. It wasn’t much, but it was more than enough to deliver the poison as both devolved into horrific spasms, thereby attracting the attention of every single Horde member in the vicinity.

‘... Okay.’ Kalina thought as she took in the utter catastrophe that had just taken place, her expression blank. ‘You count and I run.’

Not waiting for an imaginary reply, she turned and immediately began leaping through the trees as quickly as she could move.

“Spread out an’ fin’ de assassin!” Came the order being shouted behind her.

As she scrambled from branch to branch, the minor druidic magic employed by rangers allowed her feet to find a perfect grip on each one.

She heard the beat of some heavy beast charging behind and under her, slowly catching up, followed by shouts in what she could only assume were the orcs’ attempt at communicating coherently, though could have easily been just incoherent snarling. She did not have high expectations for the orcs, based on what she’d seen so far.

Regardless, she made the mistake of looking back to see she was now indeed being chased by one. He was almost under her at this point. Kalina wasn’t sure what he could do considering the height difference, but it was something she very much did not want to find out. Still, it wasn’t like she could outrun him, not while he was on wolfback.

Still, this gave her an advantage. If she could draw him and anyone else hunting her deep enough into the forest, she could isolate them and outmaneuver them, thereby allowing her to pick them off.

A spear flying past her face told her now was a good time to start shooting back. Stopping cold on a branch, she saw the orc on wolfback pass under her before coming to a stop. She put a single poisoned arrow in his mount, followed by a second. She wasn’t sure if it would be enough considering the creature’s size, but it would at least slow it down.

A thrown axe embedded itself in the branch she was on. She turned to the source to find a forest troll rushing the tree. It was at that point she became aware of how actually bad of an idea it was to engage an enemy with ranged capabilities from a single, suspended spot, with no cover. Seeking to rectify this, she quickly dropped her bow before leaping from the branch, her arm catching on the massive troll’s shoulder and throwing him off balance as he went spinning to the ground face first while she drove a dagger into his neck.

She rolled out of the way just in time for the orc’s axe to come down where she’d just been, burying itself in the troll’s spine.

‘So much for cooperation.’

The orc pulled the axe out, lifting it into the air again with surprising speed. Kalina didn’t give him the chance to bring it down again, chucking a knife into him, causing him to stumble backwards before falling back as the poison took effect. She didn’t waste time to see if it’d kill him as she put another dagger into his chest. At that point, the dose had to be lethal.

She turned to see two more trolls come rushing towards her, likely attracted by whatever the orc had said. One was carrying a pair of axes like their leader had been, the other held a spear. She put a
thrown blade in the spear carrying one first. Spears were one of the hardest weapons to defend from in single combat, let alone two on one.

As the emerald savage began sputtering and clutching at his throat, his companion dove forward, swinging his left axe in a wide arc that Kalina found herself having to dive backward from as she drew both swords. The troll didn’t give her the opportunity to counter, spinning around with the momentum from the first swing and delivering an overhead cleave that barely missed the girl as she dodged at the very last moment.

Before she could take advantage of the momentary lapse in his guard, however, he’d already recovered. This was not a good situation to be in. She was losing ground fast, and couldn’t recover fast enough to find an opening. Plus it was only a matter of time until more of them showed up.

He feinted forward, causing her to instinctively step back again and earning her what she was sure was likely a confident smirk, though honestly it looked more like a leer. Seeing an opportunity, Kalina waited, altering her body language to appear more tense. Sure enough, the troll feinted again. This time she took the opportunity to catch one blade under the axe head, immediately moving outside his guard and driving the other through his elbow, before letting go of the axe and driving the first blade into his stomach.

He drew in a sharp breath. Rookie mistake, Kalina thought. With what she had coating the blades, he’d want all the breath he could get. As his blood began to congeal and his body lost oxygen, Kalina ripped both blades from his body, letting him fall to the ground where he began shaking uncontrollably while she resheathed them.

Suddenly she felt her own body stop working as the horribly familiar sensation of an electric current tore through her. The next thing she knew she was on the ground, a pair of trolls and an orc standing over her, one of them wielding some sort of primitively ornate looking staff.

“What we be doin wit dis one?” one of them spoke.

“Da chieftain be wantin her.”

The orc chuckled. Now no longer focussed on fleeing, Kalina could make out what he said this time. “Your chieftain can wait. She’s ours, here and now.”

“Da big one be right. We enjoy da spoils of victory first.”

Kalina wasn’t sure what they meant, until she felt that massive brute’s hand holding her head against the ground.

‘No.’

“Stay down. It be easier for ya dat way.” the one with the staff spoke as she felt the orc ripping her leggings off.

‘Please not again, I’ll be good…’

Kalina could only whimper, tears beginning to fall as she felt the orc lift her hips into the air.

“I’ll be good…” She whispered without meaning to.

Suddenly she felt the orc letting go of her as the trolls sprang into action, before being swiftly cut down by something out of her field of vision. She rolled over to see Koltira standing there.
“You okay?” He asked as he spared her a quick glance, before noticeably averting his eyes again.

She took a deep breath and nodded. “Yeah. Yeah, I’m alright.”

“Good.” He extended a hand. “We need to move.”

Taking it, Kalina stood up before quickly retrieving her bow from where she’d dropped it, along with her daggers, and setting off with Koltira.
They got back to camp without further issue. Camp wasn’t really the right word for it. Camps were generally on the ground, for one thing. Such placement would be far too conspicuous for the guerilla nature of their mission, however, so they ate, slept, planned, and kept their supplies in the tree canopy. It was well hidden enough to where unless one knew what to look for, it’d prove incredibly difficult to find.

As they neared what could very loosely be called the perimeter, Kalina placed her hands against her lips, let out a quick bird call to signal that they were friendly so as not to earn them each an arrow, before crossing over into the camp. From where she was sitting, the girl could see what appeared to be Lenara sleeping on one of the branches, arms wrapped tightly around the length of wood.

“What happened to your leggings?” Came a concerned whisper from behind them. The pair turned around to see Sylvanas perched on the branch they’d just stepped off.

“Ma’am...” Koltira started, before Sylvanas held up a hand.

“In a minute, Koltira. Kali, what happened to your leggings?”

The white haired elf opened her mouth to speak, before feeling the words die in her throat as she looked away in shame.

It was Koltira that answered for her. “Ma’am, Kalina was... very briefly subdued.”

She looked away further, letting her hair fall so that it hid her face.

Sylvanas’ tone hardened. “What happened?”

“I don’t know for sure, ma’am. I only got there aft-”

“I took a shot at Zul’jin…” Kalina’s voice was barely a squeak as she looked up just slightly at Sylvanas, whose gaze snapped to her immediately.

“You what?!” she hissed.

“I thought I could get him… poisoned the tip and everything...”

“And?”

Kalina realized she was shaking. “He... he split the arrow in mid air...”

Sylvanas gaped. “You’re kidding.”

She looked away again.

“...You’re not kidding.” The blonde spoke, before letting out a long breath. “Regardless, there’s another problem at hand: supplies.”

Kalina looked up. Vanguard detachments weren’t meant to operate for more than a few days on their own; a week at most, with only five days of supplies packed on the assumption that they could acquire what they needed in the field.

“How long until Lor’themar gets here?” She asked.
“Unknown, with the bridge out. We have to assume we’re on our own for the time being. In the meantime you two get some rest. You’re going to need it.”

They both nodded. “Yes ma’am.” Koltira answered, before climbing off to find a branch to sleep on.

Sylvanas turned to Kalina. “Are you okay?”

The girl closed her eyes and nodded. “I will be. Koltira got there before they could actually…” she trailed off. “I still managed to kill, like, five trolls and an orc.”

The ranger-general smiled, something that to Kalina, made it all worth it. “Good.” Reaching up to grab an overhead branch, the woman leaned forward and kissed her gently. “Sleep well. I love you.”

It wasn’t long before Kalina had found a nice branch to wrap herself around and fallen asleep. Sylvanas watched her and sighed. Everything that could’ve gone wrong in this mission had. They’d lost four rangers before even engaging, they’d been delayed by several days, they were unable to replenish their supplies because the Horde had picked everything clean, and most of all they were never meant to function as siegebreakers. It was a thousand times more difficult for them to hit a stationary enemy meaningfully than to slow down and throw into disarray a mobile one.

She thought about her family. Alleria had pulled out with the humans to follow Turalyon, and Vereesa was still for all intents and purposes a trainee, one she’d been keen to assign to Silvermoon to help maintain order. Lirath was safe at home on the very edge of the southern coastline, far removed from the invasion that’d torn through central Quel’thalas, and her mother...

She pushed all thoughts of her mother away. There would be time to mourn later. They still had a war to fight, one that they were not currently winning by any stretch. The shield around Silvermoon had done its job, but the city still relied heavily on the rest of Quel’thalas for food and supplies. They wouldn’t last long under siege, a siege that wouldn’t be breakable with the dragons still afoot. That wasn’t even to mention the fact that most of the towns that’d been in or near Horde’s path had been evacuated to Silvermoon.

Another pressing concern was her unit’s survival. The nearest settlement that held even the possibility of supplies was Fairbreeze Village, and they’d been on the evacuation list. Even if they did want to make a supply run, it’d mean abandoning their mission. The most they could do was make the siege more costly for the Horde. She’d been having her rangers let themselves be detected so as to lure a pursuing group into the forest, where they could be picked off and wiped. Great from a psychological warfare perspective, but barely a drop in the bucket in terms of hard numbers.

She looked back up at Kalina, who was clearly having some sort of nightmare. She sighed. At least her lover’s skills were being put to good use. Openly Sylvanas could never endorse such dishonorable methods as assassination without the chance to fight back; and even privately she could barely stomach the idea of sinking to such a level, but at the same time, she wasn’t the one actually employing such methods or even ordering them employed. All she was doing was being sure to give her love the operational freedom afforded to any ranger on their own in the field, while also just happening to not grill her on mission details or methods. Surely there was no blame in that.

It was night time when Sylvanas noticed Kalina stirring. The girl’s muscles seemed to loosen around the tree branch for a moment, before she saw her remember where she was and sharply renew her grip, as if thinking she’d fall.

“Sleep well?” She asked with a friendly smirk.

“I have an idea.” The girl replied quickly, sitting up on her branch.
“An idea for…?”

“Breaking the siege.”

Sylanas blinked. “I’m listening.”

Kalina took a drink of water from her cantine before beginning. “Okay, so back when I was… married, you know I did a lot of political work in Silvermoon.”

Sylanas froze up. Deep down she trusted Kalina to know what to say and what not to say to avoid being caught, but all the same, the girl had a tendency for being reckless. The presence of her throwing knives was one example of that. She gave a nod.

“Well one thing that would happen a lot was if you wanted to drive a wedge between an alliance, you just made it disproportionately costly for the ones who had the least stake in it, while making it ridiculously easy for those with the most stake in it, so as to create resentment.”

It was then that it dawned on Sylanas exactly what Kalina had in mind. “The orcs.”

She nodded. “The Horde has issued no demands as far as we know, meaning they’re likely just here to help the trolls pillage. So if we focus our fire on the orcs while giving the order not to so much as touch the trolls, all while their attempts to break the shield continue to fail, we can make them begin to question how much they really need to help the trolls here.” Kalina took breath before continuing. “If they were a mobile force it’d be a lot harder to push specific targets or objectives, but because they’re stationary and always in our sights…”

“… We can target whoever we want.” Sylanas finished.

“The Horde will splinter and pull out while the trolls find themselves alone and outmatched.”

Sylanas’ lips pulled upwards into a smile to match Kalina’s own. “It’s perfect. We only have a few days to pull it off, though. Our supplies are dangerously close to running dry, and once they do things are going to become a lot more difficult.”

“And no idea when Lor’themar’s showing up?” Kalina asked, her face falling.

“Even if they do there’s still the dragons.”

The ivory haired elf nodded. “Then let’s get to work before they show up, so that we don’t all burn with them.”

It took about six hours for enough rangers to return where they could prepare a six person team. The plan was simple. Kalina would move to the front of the treeline around one of the orc sections of the siege and, however she chose to do so, get their attention. At that point, she’d retreat back into the forest and lure her new pursuers into an ambush set by the other five rangers. They’d rinse and repeat as many times in as many different places as they could.

It was to that end that she now took a careful position just inside the treeline. Her own plan was even simpler. She’d nock three arrows at once, loose them into a decently tight crowd, and then keep sending singles in until she knew they’d seen her, at which point she would turn and run like her life depended on it, which it very much did.

She waited there, hoping for a group of them to pass by so as to cause more carnage. Even with the poison, the most the arrows would likely do is choke them enough to take them out of action - maybe kill them over the course of a few days if she was lucky, but more likely than not they’d pull through.
After maybe ten minutes, her opportunity came as she saw a bald brown orc with a beard and a disproportionately large hammer step onto the scene along with a bent over green orc in a robe. She drew back her shot and released immediately. The three arrows flew in a tight group, slowly spreading out. The first arrow struck the bald one in the shoulder, while the other two flew by and buried themselves in an orc behind him. Kalina wasted no time in letting loose more arrows.

The bald one doubled over and began throwing up blood before falling to his knees and pointing roughly at her position. Kalina knew that was her cue to leave. She took a final shot at the robed one, grazing his arm, before turning and running.

Sure enough, she could hear right behind her the heavy footfalls and shouting of the orcs as they stormed the treeline after her. She turned back and shot another arrow at the first one she saw; better to keep them from losing her. There were at least 20 of the musclebound beasts after her now. The trap would be a meat grinder for sure. It was only as she turned to run again that she began to hear it:

Wingbeats overhead.

Her blood ran cold as she picked up the pace, now fleeing for real. A roar sounded, before the entire forest behind her was engulfed in flames, orcs and all. She saw movement in the trees ahead of her. The other rangers were pulling out. She needed to get to Sylvanas, she realized. The ranger-general was far enough away where she could have no idea the sounds coming from the edge of the forest were anything other than the dragons hitting the shield again.

The good news was the dragon didn’t actually seem to know where she was. Even without the dragon though, there was still now a wildfire to outrun. She looked left and saw Nathanos slip from the branch he landed on, going plummeting to the ground. Of course he fell. Humans didn’t have access to the same innate magic the Quel’dorei did.

It would be so easy to let him die there, she thought. To let the fire overtake him.

No. Sylvanas cared about him somewhat. Kalina at least had to honor that. She dropped from the trees to where Nathanos was slumped over on the ground.

“We need to move, come on!”

He looked up at her with what could best be described as a restrained scowl. “I think my ankle’s sprained, I can’t put weight on it!”

“Oh for light’s sake, Nathanos!” She reached into one of her pockets, pulling out a small healing potion which she shoved into his hand. “Drink before I force it down your throat!”

The human didn’t waste any time, chugging it down as quickly as possible. Kalina grabbed his tricep and pulled upwards. “Now move!”

He shakily got to his feet, before nodding and pulling his arm lose from her grip. The fire was already spreading, engulfing the forest in the distance behind them.

Confident that he could handle himself from here, Kalina took off without him. As they got back to camp on foot, Sylvanas dropped from the trees.

“What in the Sunwell hap-” She was cut off as Kalina rushed past her, grabbing the woman’s arm as she did so.

“No time, just run!”
Their horses were tied a few hundred meters from the camp; a necessary precaution. She heard the sound of boots hitting the ground and turned around to see the other rangers in the group dropping from the trees behind them, following them at a sprint to reach the horses.

“Pull back to the pond!” Sylvanas commanded as they mounted up and immediately took off at a gallop.

They could see the fire in the distance now. Even so, they had a good lead on it. If they could make it to the shoreline of the pond, they’d be safe.

By the time they made it, the fire was maybe 100 meters behind them. The second they hit the pond, half of them simply leapt from their horses into the water. Kalina wanted to do the same, but the amount of poison in her sheaths and quiver made it a hazardous endeavor, causing her to quickly strip off what remained of her armor and drop all her gear where she stood before rushing in. As she turned around, she saw Sylvanas standing on the shoreline facing her.

“What in the Sunwell happened up there?!” She shouted as the blaze caught the treeline behind her, causing her to nonchalantly take a single step into the water.

Panting, Kalina simply shouted back “Dragons!”

“I can see that but I mean how?!”

“I don’t know! They started chasing me like normal and then they just lit up their own guys!”

Sylvanas put her face in her hand, visibly exhaling, before looking up.

“Right, everyone count out how many arrows your have! From now on we’re rationing shots! If you have a problem, try to deal with it by sword!”

Kalina sat down in the water, staring down at it in an expression of shock. She didn’t know what else she could say. Her mind was too occupied with what Sylvanas probably thought of her right now. What if she hated her now? What if she wanted to end things? What if she had to return to Silvermoon and go back to being the Canary?

She snorted sadly. That was assuming the siege broke anytime soon. Lorthemar’s forces would arrive and be absolutely annihilated. Silvermoon would starve to death while the trolls had their way with everything outside the barrier, and that’s how the Quel’dorei would be wiped out. She used to hear tales growing up of how their cousins, the Kaldorei, banished them from their home for daring to claim their birthright, the ability to wield arcane magic; banished them to a cruel, frozen, hostile, and unforgiving land which somehow against all odds they’d still managed to turn into a paradise. She wondered what Tyrande Whisperwind would say if she could see the state of their nation now, facing extinction from a race of savages drunk on fel.

She’d probably laugh; and why wouldn’t she? It was pretty funny, from where Kalina was sitting. All her life she’d hated Quel’thalas on one level or another, had wanted to burn Silvermoon to the ground and everyone in it, and now that it was actually happening, all the snow haired elf could feel was a mounting sense of horror that her home and her people would be forever annihilated.

If it was just the nobility, she could live with that, but 25 years in the rangers had taught her that not everyone was as horrible as them. Even before then, there’d been Lysenna’s gang. Now that she thought about it, they were probably the closest thing to an actual family she’d ever had. And then there was Sylvanas’ family. They’d always been wonderful, without fail.

Quel’thalas was really a wonderful place, the more she thought about it. She’d just never had time to
explore it. She’d been barely an adult when she’d been torn away from everything she loved and thrust into the worst part of Quel’dorei society, a position that was designed to be inescapable.

It was Lyana that broke the group’s silence. “So what’s next?” Kalina turned to see her looking up at the general.

Sylvanas sighed. “We’re pulling out. Silvermoon is lost. We’ll head west tomorrow, and assuming we can make it there, we’ll hit Fairbreeze first and raid them for supplies. Once that’s done, two of us will go off in different directions to try and find Lor’themar and keep the main army from walking into a slaughter while the rest of us continue on to Sunsail to evacuate the people there out of Quel’thalas, along with the rest of the towns not already evacuated.”

Everyone went silent as the implication hung in the air. Kalina looked up to see the sky getting darker. It must’ve been sunset, though it was hard to actually see over the flames.

“We’ll camp here tonight.” Sylvanas finally spoke again. “Everyone get a good night’s rest.”

The fact that they were actually being given a good night’s sleep instead of a couple hours in a tree seemed to drive home the fact that the war was lost.

One by one, each ranger climbed out of the water, stripped off their gear without a word, and went to sleep on the ground. Kalina was the last out. As she lay down to go to sleep, she was relieved at least to feel Sylvanas lie down next to her, before wrapping her arms around her and burying the girl’s face in her chest.

That night, for the first time in decades, she cried in her sleep.
Chapter 20

The next morning they woke up around dawn, put their gear back on, and rode west in silence. None of them had eaten in at least two days, something that was compounded by the level of exertion they were putting themselves through. The forests around them were charred and ashen, enough where there was no way they could hide there anymore even if they wanted to. The last of the fires were dying down, leaving only a blackened wasteland for miles. At the very edge of the horizon, Kalina could see a speck she recognized as Silvermoon, still under the shield.

A few hours into their journey they came to a stop. A quick gesture towards the horizon told them why. They could see a staggering number of silhouettes heading west while also slowly getting bigger. The sight of a winged silhouette high up in the sky confirmed their suspicions.

“It’s the Horde.” Kalina spoke in disbelief. It didn’t appear to be a small detachment either.

After a moment of collective quiet, Sylvanas spoke just two words: “Silvermoon. Now.”

The group turned and swiftly rode northeast, giving the Horde as wide a berth as they could. As they neared the city, they could see a much smaller detachment of trolls than there had been before still standing there, throwing spells at the shield in futility. They still outnumbered the ranger detachment ten to one, but at the moment, it was an absolute gift - one they’d happily accept.

Kalina couldn’t believe what she was seeing as tears of joy began to well up.

“Rangers.” Sylvanas spoke with a tired grin as the unit took in the sight. “Forward.”

No one needed telling twice as they kicked their steeds and charged through the blackened remains of Eversong Forest, towards their miraculous victory.

As Kalina’s horse approached the battlefield, she didn’t bother slowing down. She was tired, starving and half naked, but she didn’t want anything to slow down what was about to happen. By now the trolls had seen them. Good, she thought. Let them see their deaths.

Upon getting close enough, she outright leapt from her horse, her arm immediately catching on one of the green invaders as the other drove a poisoned sword into his chest before he could even realize what had happened.

“For Quel’thalas!” She shouted with an almost manic glee as she felt the adrenaline coursing through her. Before any of her kill’s friends could react, she’d already dropped her swords and driven an arrow into one’s skull and another into one’s collarbone.

A heavyset troll with a long, thin looking mace swung at her from the right, causing her to fall back to avoid the blow while grabbing her swords again before sitting up and awkwardly thrusting one into his thigh, opting to let the poison do the work, before rolling out of the way and to her feet as another troll came at her with some form of brute cleaver.

“Kali behind you!” She heard Sylvanas shout, and without bothering to check ducked and spun around with her blade outstretched, slicing a troll’s guts open before turning back to face her cleavered adversary, who was now lunging at her for an overhead strike which she quickly deflected with one blade fast enough to step out of the way and drive her sword into his side, before resheathing both to renew the poison on them.

She looked across the battlefield to see Sylvanas dancing through the air like an acrobat, putting
arrows effortlessly through each troll’s skull.

Kalina saw another troll charging at her. Before she could engage him, however, she felt another electric current rip through her nervous system, forcing her to the ground, before the current was suddenly cut short. She looked up, panting and twitching to see the witch doctor that’d come at her falling to the ground with no less than four arrows in his chest, while the one that was charging her had taken another two. She smiled.

She loved the Ranger Corps.

She loved Quel’thallas.

“Come on!” She felt a hand grab her by the arm as she started to get up, pulling her up all the way. She turned to see Elsia standing there.

“My thanks.” She breathed before a spear passed between them, carving a deep gash under Kalina’s left arm. She tried to move it, and upon finding it still functional, leapt back into the fray.

The battle was over a few minutes later. Those who didn’t die could be seen scrambling back across the charred wastes, some of them with arrows in them.

Kalina felt her legs buckle as the adrenaline began to leave her, along with her swords suddenly falling from her hands. She tried to reach down to pick them up, only for her fingers to not work properly. She was so tired, and so, so hungry. She probably just needed some rest. She turned to see Silvermoon towering over her as she fell back to a sitting position. Inside the shield she could see movement as guards and rangers alike now rushed out towards the group, along with what she recognized as healers.

It felt almost like she was in a dream now. She didn’t even realize just how tired she was until she felt her eyes beginning to close again. She fought to stay awake. Just another few minutes, then she could sleep again.

“We need food, go bring food.” She heard Sylvanas quickly say to one of the healers before sending the woman back into the city.

The white haired girl looked over at her shoulder. It was still bleeding profusely. That was okay, though, she thought. There were healers here. None of them would blame her if she just lay down for a nap, just for a moment. She’d been going for at least a week, now. She earned it.

As she lay back and closed her eyes, the last thing she could hear was the sound of sudden shouting, and someone screaming her name.

Darkness filled her senses. The space she was standing in was innumerably vast and yet incalculably small. She tried to call out, only to find that the had no voice. She tried to take a breath, only to feel something pressing on her windpipe the moment she inhaled. It was a hand, she realized. She struggled, tried to scream, tried to kick; only to find herself too weak to even move.

Suddenly she could feel something entering her, violating her. In and out, in and out it thrusted, with her powerless to so much as whimper. Tears welled up as she began running out of air, before all at once the hand was released, causing her to gasp for breath.

Her hands immediately went for her neck, only for them to be suddenly jerked up over her shoulders. Panting, Kalina looked up to find them now shackled to some invisible source far off in the darkness.
'Oh no…' Her heart raced as tears began to roll down her cheeks. 'Please no. I’ll be good I’ll be good I’ll be good I’ll be good—' Her thoughts were cut short as she suddenly felt every one of her nerves shrieking now as the arcane electricity tore through her.

“What is your name?” She heard a voice calling out for the darkness, neither far away nor close, simply existent.

‘I’ll be good I promise please don’t do thi—’ She was cut off again as another shock froze her entire system in pain, before releasing her once more.

“What is your name?”

‘I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I promise from now on I’ll do any—’ Her attempts proved futile as every muscle in her body seized up in pure, unfettered agony again.

“What is your name?”

‘My… my name is… my name is…

Her eyes shot open as she bolted up, tears streaming down her face as she instinctively reached for her swords, before realizing where she was. She was in bed at a hospital in Silvermoon.

“Kalina?” She turned to see a silver haired elf sitting there, bow slung across her back.

Kalina smiled. “Vereesa.” She addressed the trainee. “What are you doing here?”

Vereesa smiled back. “Sylvanas asked me to keep watch over you while she was busy planning the counter-offensive. How are you feeling?”

“Good!” she chirped “Really good actually, thanks for asking. Um…” she paused. “Sorry, why am I here?”


Her eyes widened. “I did?! When?”

“Right after the battle against the trolls. Sylvanas said you just went limp and started shaking.”

Kalina went quiet. She remembered getting cut and then later her hands stopped working and then lying down to take a nap because it’d been a long mission and she was tired. “… I was bleeding out, wasn’t I?”

Vereesa looked at her like she had just asked whether two plus two equals four. “Uh, yeah. Sylvanas was freaking out about it. I’ve never seen her like that before, like there were actual tears. From Sylvanas.” she sat back in her chair. “It was… demoralizing.” She paused. “Anyway, the rest of the Ranger Corps arrived last night, so at least it’s not just you guys out there anymore.”

Kalina opened her mouth before holding up a finger as a question hit her. “Sorry, how long have I been out?”

“About three days. The king came by to see you, that was cool.”

“The king…?” She trailed off, as if to ask ‘the king of what’.

“King Anasterian.”
Kalina’s jaw dropped, before she tossed a pillow at the younger elf. “No way!”

Vereesa deflected it with a grin. “Really! He did a whole dramatic monologue too! Took your hand gently and everything!”

Kalina clapped both hands over her mouth. The King of Quel’thalas had come to visit her, specifically.

She lowered her hands. “Why?”

Vereesa shrugged. “Apparently you had some brilliant plan that made the Horde leave. Everyone’s been talking about it. A lot more people than just the king have been here to visit.”

Kalina raised an eyebrow. “Like who?”

“Well, Sylvanas obviously, Lieutenant Halduron, a bunch of members of House Dawnblade, a bunch of other nobles I’ve never even heard of—”

“How many?” Kalina cut her off.

“Like, all of them. Anyway, your parents were here, though they didn’t seem particularly pleased to be, more like it was just for appearances. The crown’s already been pushing an image of you.” The young elf struck a dramatic pose. “A heartbroken widow and member of the nobility who left her posh high society life to find solace in service to the kingdom, now fights so that no other woman must ever be stripped of her purpose in life the same way as she. Ladies and gentleman, the Heroine of Silvermoon.” She gestured grandly to Kalina.

Her jaw dropped again as rage welled up inside her. “That’s not… I…”

Vereesa cut her off. “I know, believe me I know. My sisters told me all about how horrible your husband was. I’m with you here.”

The ivory haired girl sighed. “And I suppose I’m expected to maintain this image now?”

“For the foreseeable future, yeah.”

“They do realize I’m with Sylvanas, like, openly.”

She shrugged. “They haven’t addressed that so far. Right now you’re an icon to inspire morale or loyalty to the crown or whatever they wanna push.”

If there was one thing Kalina liked about Vereesa, it was the girl’s cynicism, more specifically, her willingness to acknowledge Silvermoon as she saw it, as opposed to everyone else who pretended they couldn’t. It was abundant and hazardous in equal measure, something Vereesa knew she could get away with where no one else could even come close, just by virtue of being Lireesa’s daughter and Sylvanas’ sister. It was a refreshing change of pace from all the fake smiles and backhanded politics Kalina had grown so horribly used to.

The room went silent. Kalina was the first to speak again.

“So if I’ve been getting so many visitors, why is no one here now?”

Vereesa chuckled. “The King’s put royal guards in front of the door now. No one’s allowed in or out other than healers and rangers.”

Kalina lay back in bed with a grin. “Nice. So when do I get out of here?”
“They told me to send word once you were awake. The council wants to see you before you do anything else. They’re planning to have a magister portal you to Quel’danas and everything.”

She bit her lip, before nodding. “Alright, tell them I’m up and ready.”

“Sure thing.” Vereesa stood up. “It was good to see you again, and good luck.”

With that, she left the room. The moment the door opened, Kalina could hear a crowd of voices outside.

‘Here we go. And here I thought I’d escaped this life.’ It wasn’t upper Quel’dorei society Kalina had abandoned, by any stretch. After all, she and Sylvanas still got leave around Winter’s Veil, and for the past 25 years had spent each vacation together at Windrunner Spire, during which time they naturally attended the Winter’s Veil Ball together. It was more that Kalina had thought she’d escaped the life of having to play the part of the beautiful young straight girl who wanted nothing more than to please her husband and bring honor to her parents by having as many kids as possible.

She smiled again. At least Rhalyf was dead this time. She just had to play the mournful, fervently patriotic widow - a far easier role, she imagined. And at least this time, Sylvanas would be onstage with her.
Chapter 21

The chamber of the Convocation of Silvermoon was grand yet not imposing. As Kalina stepped through the portal to Quel’danas, in full uniform once more, she found herself in an ornate room of sorts, although it could just as easily be called a porch, open on three sides, with ornate blue, white, and gold aesthetics. Looking around, she saw she was surrounded by eight seats, each containing a grand magister of Quel’thalas, except for the one opposite the entrance, sitting in which Kalina immediately recognized the form of King Anasterian Sunstrider.

She kneeled at once, moving faster to the ground than one would think possible.

“My king.” She addressed him with a tone of reverence.

“Lady Kalina. An honor to have you join us.” His voice was gentle and warm, yet not in a way that would suggest weakness. “Please, rise.”

She stood up. It wasn’t her first time seeing the king by any stretch, but it was the first time she’d actually spoken with him as anything more than a quick passing greeting at some grand event, usually as an accessory to her husband.

“We understand we have you to thank for the Horde’s sudden retreat.”

Kalina smiled. “I couldn’t have done it without the rest of the team.”

The king nodded slowly. “Of course. Still, I’m told it was your plan that ultimately saved our kingdom from annihilation.”

At that Kalina gave a nod. “Yes, my king.”

“I’m also told you’ve become something of a heroic figure amongst the other rangers.”

‘Here it comes.’

“I hope you don’t mind, but we’ve been discussing it, and we think it would be best to encourage this image, so as to boost general morale.”

It was only then, upon looking around at all the faces of the convocation that she realized - every single one of them, including Veloran Dawnblade, the head of her house and her great grandfather in law, was staring at her with what could only be described as a cold, tightly restrained fury.

The king’s voice brought her back to attention. “Is something the matter, Lady Kalina?”

Kalina pushed away the thousands of questions suddenly piling up in her head as she turned her attention back to the king, trying to ignore the stares. “No, your majesty. My sincerest apologies.”

She paused as she opened her mouth to speak again. “Um, if you don’t mind me asking, what image would this be, exactly?”

The king gestured to Veloran, who cleared his throat. “We all know how inseparable you and Rhalyf were,” he sounded as though he was forcing every word out “and how devastating his murder by the Canary must have been for you.” His eyes bore into her.

He knew who she was, she realized with a sense of dawning horror. They all knew.

Belo’vir Salonar was the next to speak. “But rather than simply grieve, you did better, finding relief
from your emotional torment in service to the kingdom; picking up the banner of Quel’thalas so that no one should ever have to suffer as you did, again.”

It was exactly as Vereesa had described it.

Kirillan Embershield spoke next. It was like they’d rehearsed it. “If you, a grieving widow without a purpose, could still dedicate yourself to Quel’thalas, and rise to become the Heroine of Silvermoon, who knows what anyone else could accomplish once they dedicate themselves to their people?”

Kalina bit the inside of her lip as her eyes locked with the latter speaker. He’d always been the primary political enemy of Lireesa’s. She supposed she herself was partially to blame for that.

She hesitated, before nodding. “Very well.”

The king clapped his hands together. “Splendid! I sincerely hope you don’t mind, but there are some details we must work out in order to better facilitate this morale boost.”

‘HERE IT COMES.’

This time it was Andoril of House Starsong who spoke again. “For starters, where exactly your plan came from.”

That got a number of nods and sounds of assent from the others.

Kirillan Embershield almost immediately interjected. “We understand you got the idea from your time living as a noble in Silvermoon.” Without so much as pausing for breath, he continued. It dawned on Kalina that it wasn’t that they’d rehearsed this or designated a particular order; they were all quietly fighting for the chance to be seen speaking as much as possible while the king was there. “However, we’d ask that these origins of your plan remain a secret for the foreseeable future.”

He was immediately cut off by Veloran. “We’re at war, and what the people need for morale more than anything right now is to see their kingdom united and strong in the face of adversity. Does that seem fair?”

Kalina knew she didn’t actually have a choice. The convocation’s word was law. “I suppose so.”

She noticed that the three grand magisters sitting closer to the door were far quieter.

“There is another matter.” The king spoke again, his face having grown somewhat more tired. Kalina was glad she wasn’t the only one who could see the politics at play. “Your relationship with the ranger-general.”

Her stomach dropped. “Lady Sylvanas and I are good friends. Surely that’s not a problem, your majesty.”

The king smiled. “With all due respect, Lady Kalina, lying to the king or the council is a treasonous offense. I’d respectfully ask that you not commit it.”

She noticed the guards in the room all suddenly staring at her far more pointedly, as if they were just waiting to pounce.

Kalina gave a bow. “My apologies, your majesty.”

“You are forgiven.” Unlike everyone else in the room, his own expression was almost friendly.

“Lady Sylvanas and I are… close, I will admit. But I still do not see the problem.”
Andoril spoke. “The problem is that now national attention is on the both of you.” Before Kirillan interrupted.

“A war for our survival is no time for social upheaval, especially not within the military!”

Veloran appeared the angriest. “Not to mention how it looks so soon after my great-grandson’s murder!”

“I respectfully disagree.” Kalina’s voice was quiet and calm, and yet her words silenced the chamber.

The king held up a hand as the quiet stretched out, before finally speaking. “I was afraid this might happen.” He turned to a nearby guard. “Please, bring them in.”

The armored woman gave a short, gentle bow, before leaving. Silence dominated the room again.

She returned a few moments later magically levitating a cloth covered tray in front of her, which she brought to the center of the room before stepping back, allowing it to float on its own. An effortless charm to keep up, especially so close to the Sunwell.

“Would you happen to recognize these, Lady Kalina?” The king asked as the cloth dissolved into pure mana.

Kalina’s blood froze as her worst fears were confirmed. Upon the tray sat her throwing knives. She tried to speak, only to feel her voice leave her, causing her to instead opt for a slow nod.

“I assumed as much. They were found on your person when you were taken into the city for healing.”

The king levitated one into the air for the entire convocation to see.

“Along with these blades, a type of weapon very much not employed by the average ranger, were found several poisons of an extremely rare and high profile nature, notably used by one of Quel’thalas’ greatest enemies - an enemy which first appeared shortly after your marriage, and which disappeared with the murder of your husband; and who was known to specialize in the type of weapon shown here.”

She knew it was over. Every family represented there, including the Sunstriders, had lost money, power, and people to the Canary.

“Normally such a discovery would warrant your holdings seized, your name and title stripped from you, your loved ones” he placed emphasis on that part “questioned and possibly purged, and you yourself publicly executed in a slow and humiliating manner.”

‘Sylvanas, oh by the Sunwell, I’m so sorry…’

“However,” he continued, his expression and tone gradually turning colder “given your recent salvation of our capital city, our armies, and our people, the crown is willing to grant a degree of both leniency and secrecy, provided you continue to work with us for the betterment of Quel’thalas.”

The underlying statement was clear: ‘We own you’.

“Does that seem fair?”

Once again, Kalina knew she had no choice. A tear rolled down her cheek. She swallowed.

“Yes, your majesty.”
All at once the same friendliness as before returned to the king’s expression. “Wonderful!”

“However…” The room went silent again as Kalina now stared at the ground, hands shaking. “I would respectfully plead that I still be allowed to maintain a friendship with Lady Sylvanas.”

It was Kirillan Embershield that stood up. “You’re lucky we don’t have you-” He was cut off as the king held up a hand once again.

“Encouraging friendly camaraderie between soldiers can only serve to improve morale both amongst our military and our people. Your request is granted, Lady Kalina.”

She sniffled and nodded. “Thank you.”

“In exchange,” The king began “we would like a full confession of all acts performed in totality.”

Kalina looked up in surprise, silent for a moment before speaking. “Your majesty…” she began “every major house and a great many minor houses in Quel’thalas has to one degree or another solicited my services. If I were to give a full confession of everything I’ve done, everyone in this room would tear each other apart.”

The king shook his head. “While I’m sure I speak for all of us when I say we all greatly appreciate your concern, Lady Kalina, I believe you might be underestimating the strength of Quel’thalas’ resolve.”

The assassin blinked. “... Yes, your majesty.” She looked around. “Could someone please bring refreshments and a pillow to sit on? We’re probably gonna be here into the night.”

The convocation looked at her incredulously, but the king nodded, before turning to one of his attendants. “Could you please fulfill the lady’s request?” The attendant left the room.

Kalina smiled, before turning away from the king to address the convocation. “It’d be best if we started off with a sample, to test the waters.” She turned to face one of the members who’d so far been quiet. “Grand Magister Saevel Valnorin, some time ago your house entered into an alliance with House Starsong to gain majority control over both the treasury and the merchant’s guild, thus securing you the economy of Quel’thalas. At the time, you held the primary control over this alliance through your granddaughter, Verrona, who headed up the royal treasury and was set to be married to Galaeron Starsong to strengthen the alliance and create an equal joint control over the venture. Speaking of which, whoever planned that wedding, top notch.” She held up an OK sign, as if to punctuate her statement.

The attendant returned carrying a plate of hot flatbreads and beef tartare, along with some wine and a pillow.

“Thank you.” The assassin said to the woman, before taking a bite of the food. She hadn’t realized just how hungry she was until the food hit her stomach. She turned back to the council. “House Starsong’s strongest enemy, House Coldspring, however,” She gestured to Grand Magister Adamar Coldspring “stood in opposition to the union, because it would turn their plurality control over the treasury into minority control, and put Houses Starsong and Valnorin in a position to severely undermine House Coldspring’s carefully controlled trade network.”

She took another bite. “We all know how the wedding ended. Verrona dead, along with a number of other key members of House Valnorin, and a few members of House Starsong.” She took a sip of wine. “At the time, the event was locked down by the royal guards and an empty bottle of the poison in question, along with a list of names was found on Theoden Coldspring, who was immediately
dragged off despite his protests and killed.”

She let the room go silent for a moment as she took another bite of her meal.

“The result was overwhelming support at every level of Quel’dorei society for the alliance between houses, while near universal outrage towards House Coldspring caused their power, holdings, and influence to be cut down to a fraction of where they once stood, almost overnight.” She smiled.

“However, because of the severity of House Valnorin’s losses at the wedding, they could no longer continue to be the powerful force they were before. Luckily however, their good friend and ally, House Starsong, was more than happy to pledge total support for the wounded house, while having their own members fill the positions vacated by the Valnorins, including having Galaeron take Verrona’s place heading up the treasury. Where before House Valnorin held overwhelming leverage and control in the alliance, now it had switched places with House Starsong, placing House Starsong as one of the most powerful in the convocation while reducing Houses Valnorin and Coldspring to be at the very bottom, far enough down where even today rival houses frequently make attempts to steal their places in this council.”

The bitter look on Saevel Valnorin’s face told her she had hit a nerve.

“Would you like to know what really happened, Grand Magister?”

He didn’t say anything, only continuing to stare at her in rage.

“Well the king has asked that I tell you.” She smirked. “I killed them all.”

She saw a few jaws drop, even heard a gasp.

“Well okay, not all of them, you lot killed Theoden.” She continued to snack on her food. “Andoril Starsong, at the time second in line for his father’s seat, hired me to gut House Valnorin along with a few of the more worthless members of his own house, and then make it look like the Coldsprings had done it, so as to create a power vacuum to fill whilst annihilating his family’s enemies in one move.”

Every pair of eyes was on Andoril now.

“Oh don’t look at him like that, your houses are all just as guilty of one thing or another.” Kalina could feel the magic crackling in the air at this point. Just a little more and they would destroy each other.

The king held up a hand. Whatever had been building up simmered down quickly.

“Lady Kalina, in the interest of doing justice to all parties involved, yourself included, perhaps it would be best if you started at the beginning.”

Kalina turned and bowed her head. “As you wish, your majesty.”

She sat down on the provided pillow, before pouring herself a tall, tall glass of wine.

It was from there that she told them everything, starting from when she’d first come of age and ending with her joining the rangers. She told them how she was forced into the marriage to Rhalyf, everything he did to her, and everything she did to save herself. She told them how she ended up becoming Quel’thalas’ most feared assassin, going through each job step by step and everything in between. More than a few times, to her quiet shame, she broke down into tears.

The only thing she kept hidden from them was Sylvanas. As far as her story was concerned, Matero
Embershield genuinely attacked her after her husband got drunk and thought it would be a funny way to teach her some manners to trick her into meeting Matero in his bedroom. The brutal aftermath of her recovery made it believable enough. Beyond that, the way she broke free from her husband’s control was that he gave her orders which were poorly worded and resulted in his own death, instantly shattering the conditioning and allowing her to escape to find somewhere to hide and cry in solitude for a long time, before, three months later, picking herself up and putting herself back together as someone who sought to fulfill her original dream before the entire ordeal began, of serving her kingdom as a ranger. There, she and Sylvanas reconnected after over a century apart, and that’s how their relationship began anew.

It was late into the night when she finally finished. The convocation had long since conjured coffee for themselves to keep awake, not that they needed it with the level of detail she had given. She looked over at the scribe, a timid looking boy sitting in the corner who had taken down every word she’d given. He was as white as a ghost. Kalina surmised he must have been new on the job.

The room went silent as the girl sat there, snacking on a flatbread the king had been happy to have replenished as she told her story.

It was he who finally spoke again. “I’m sorry for what happened to you, especially at such a young age. I’m sorry you weren’t given the chance to live a life outside of your husband. I’m sorry you were ripped away from a future with someone you loved.” His tone hardened. “But that does not for a moment justify the river of blood you’ve left in your path, nor the catastrophic damage you’ve done to the Kingdom of Quel’thalas for your own gain. So long as you continue to serve faithfully as you’ve stated your intent to, you will remain a free woman. Should you fail in this, however, the crown will see no other option than to enact all previously stated consequences.”

The ivory haired elf stood. “I understand, your majesty.”

“Very well. If there’s nothing else, then you are free to return to your unit. We will take the liberty of informing the ranger-general of the new restrictions.” A portal materialized in front of her.

Without another word, Kalina stepped through the portal, immediately finding herself back in Silvermoon again, on the steps of Sunfury Spire. The Court of the Sun was different from how she remembered it. Where once it was a relaxing, tranquil area, blue and gold banners with the kingdom’s emblem now hung everywhere, as if to inspire a sense of power. The upper level was dominated by large tents with smaller banners in front of them - ranger high command, no doubt. Sylvanas was likely in there.

As if the confirm her assessment, a furious shout rang out through the courtyard seconds later. “THEY WHAT?!”

From where she was sitting, she could see the blonde storm out of the largest tent. As Kalina stared down at the woman, all she could think was that even when furious, her general looked so beautiful. Her eyes watered.

‘No tears. You already cried in front of the convocation. Do not let her find you crying here. You’re stronger than that.’

She sniffled, trying to hold back. For the first ten seconds or so, she succeeded, before all at once she broke down into silent sobs.
Chapter 22

Sylvanas didn’t find her that night, thankfully. Once her general had disappeared through the portal to Quel’danas, Kalina took the opportunity to pull up her hood and go find where her company was.

Silvermoon as a whole had changed radically, she noticed. Whereas before it had looked tranquil and idyllic, even for a city of its size, now banners and flags hung everywhere. Fortifications dominated the streets, blocking its denizens from any movement other than a slow, careful navigation. Guards stood on every corner, while rangers patrolled both at the street level and on the rooftops regularly. Even the arcane guardians were out in full force, routinely broadcasting messages reminding people of who they owed their loyalty to, and of the fact that the war would be won and the Quel’dorei would prosper as always.

One thing Kalina noticed in particular was that the streets were devoid of civilians at night. Martial law must’ve been in effect, she surmised. She turned a corner and found herself staring at a poster of herself, standing valiantly on a rocky outcropping with a bow in one hand, the wind flowing through her hair, and a look of determination in her eyes. A charm on the poster made the hair actually blow in the breeze as the wind flowed through it. On the bottom of the poster, in big blue letters, were the words ‘IF SHE CAN DO IT, WHY CAN’T YOU? ENLIST TODAY!’

She wasn’t sure whether to feel like she’d been complimented or insulted. The picture certainly seemed to lead her towards compliment. She noticed, among other things, they’d given her a bigger chest - or, more precisely, they’d given her a chest. She smiled as she imagined an artist being told to draw her, and then someone higher up on the chain sending it back because her boobs weren’t big enough.

She could actually see that happening, the more she thought about it.

“Ranger!” Came an authoritative voice from behind. “What are you doing out here alone? Turn around at once!”

Kalina complied, turning around to face the patrol, which was made up of a pair of the hooded archers. She recognized one of them, a dark haired woman, as being one of what were technically Alleria’s rangers.

“Remove your hood and state your name and rank.”

She sighed. She didn’t remember the last martial law being nearly this strict, though that was probably because she was a recognizable member of the nobility at the time.

“Farstrider Kalina Dawnblade, ma’am.” She spoke gently, pulling down her hood.

The effect was immediate. She saw the other ranger clap a hand over her mouth while taking a noticeable step back. Their dark haired one’s cheeks, meanwhile, flushed a remarkable shade.

“L-Lady Kalina, my apologies! I didn’t realize it was you!” The woman stuttered.

Kalina gave a small, purposeful laugh. It never hurt to make friends, after all. “It’s fine, really, I’m just looking for Lieutenant Halduron. Could you point me in his direction?”

The woman rubbed the back of her neck. “Uh, sure! Well, I don’t actually know where Halduron is, but I know Lor’themar’s battalion is stationed in the south-east corner of the city.”
She nodded. “That’s plenty. Thanks a ton.”

“Anytime! Uh, if you need anything else, my name is Elarae Darkflight.”

“Elarae Darkflight.” Kalina repeated. “Got it.”

With that the rangers turned and continued on their patrol.

It was almost sunrise when Kalina made it to where her battalion was stationed. She’d had to take a longer route around the city, due to the Grand Bazaar being cordoned off for use as a refugee center. It took her another 20 minutes to find Halduron’s company, so that by the time she reported in, it was sunrise, and she was exhausted.

The ranger on duty had penciled her in for an evening patrol schedule, meaning she had plenty of time to get some much needed rest. She found her bed among several others in a large room of an even larger house, roughly the size of her own, that’d clearly had several rooms commandeered for the purpose of housing soldiers. The moment she got there, she all but stripped off everything she was wearing and tucked herself head to toe under the sheets.

She was woken a few hours later by a rough hand shaking her shoulder. She opened her eyes to see Nathanos standing over her.

“She’s standing outside.” He jerked his head towards the door.

She yawned. “Alright. Just lemme put something on real quick, okay?”

“Take all the time you need.” He replied in a self-satisfied tone that told her he knew exactly what the conversation would be about, before turning around and heading back out.

Feeling it best not to keep Sylvanas waiting, Kalina just threw on her basic bra and panties before getting up and heading for the door.

The moment she was through, she felt the force of a ballista slam into her as a pair of warm, strong arms wrapped around her.

Sylvanas didn’t say anything as she took hold of her, nor as she held her there in her arms. Even so, Kalina could feel herself starting to break down again.

“You were right…” She whimpered into the woman’s chest as she buried her face there. “I shouldn’t have brought the knives… They found them and they figured everything out and they said they’d come after both of us if I didn’t agree to it and I’m so sorry…”

Sylvanas stayed silent, not letting go of her.

“Do you hate me?”

Sylvanas smiled. “No, Kali. I don’t hate you. I could never hate you. Besides, they said we could stay friends.” She leaned in to whisper “And I’m going to make sure we stay very, very good friends.” before running her tongue slowly up the side of Kalina’s ear, causing the girl to draw in a sharp breath before shuddering as she exhaled.
“I love you.” She whispered so that no one else could hear.

The blonde smirked. “I love you, too. As a friend of course.”

Kalina giggled, all sorrow immediately forgotten. “Totally as a friend.”

Sylvanas broke the hug. “I have to get back to Sunfury Spire. The counter offensive begins in a couple days and I have to go over the final preparations today.”

Kalina gave a quick nod, before a thought occurred to her. “If we don’t see each other for a while, what about Winter’s Veil?”

The ranger-general laughed. “Don’t worry. I have a feeling we’re going to be seeing each other a lot throughout the rest of this war.”

She turned and left. Kalina was left standing there in her underwear with the giddiest look possible on her face. As she turned to go back into the makeshift barracks, she caught sight of Nathanos staring at her with a look of contemptuous fury.

Feeling a rush of sudden confidence, she gave him a quick wink and a wiggle of her hips, before going back in to get some shuteye.

It was a few hours later that she was out on patrol. Halduron had seen fit to take advantage of her newfound status as a poster girl, and so it was ordered that she walk around with her hood down for all to see.

Alongside her walked Nyana. Part of Kalina was almost amazed at how in the dark the woman was about everything. Her direct role in the death of her father was now known by all of Quel’thalas’ most powerful men, and yet this woman who’d spent over a century obsessing over finding her stood next to her now completely oblivious.

As the pair walked along down the crowded street, people gave them a wide berth. That was expected. Even if the rangers weren’t magisters, from a civilian perspective, they were still an arm of Silvermoon’s authority, and in Quel’thalas people were taught from an early age what happened to those who questioned Silvermoon’s authority.

At the same time, though, the looks they received weren’t of fear. On the contrary, they were of adoration. The rangers were heroes in the eyes of the people, a bright shining beacon of Quel’thalas’ strength and ability to overcome anything, there to protect each and every elf from anything and everything. Anything and everything just happened to include dissenters.

One thing that was out of the ordinary, on the other hand, were the excited looks Kalina could see being tossed her way, let alone the pointing and giddy whispering. She kept herself from sighing. A long time ago she’d wanted history to say her marriage to Rhalyf had been against her will and that she’d resented him for every second of it.

The chances of that happening now were slim to none.

She supposed this wasn’t her worst nightmare fulfilled. After all, he was still dead, and Sylvanas was still alive and with her. Past that, though, it was definitely up there.

“Kalina!”

She turned to see who had called her, fake smile already primed. The answer turned out to be far
worse than any noble Silvermoon could offer.

Strolling towards her with the most overconfident swagger possible was her father, Velaris Sunwing.

“Dad.” She replied with what was possibly the least convincing fake smile she’d ever given in the century and a half she’d been giving them. Somehow she found the idea of pretending to love her now former husband far, far easier than pretending to love the dad who’d sold her to him. Maybe it was because of the fact that she hadn’t spoken with them since first joining House Dawnblade.

“How’s my perfect daughter doing?” He seemed to make point of asking as loudly as possible. Knowing him, that was exactly what he was trying to do. Whereas her mother was a psychotic shrew, her father had absolutely no sense of shame when it involved money or attention.

She knew she had to play along, one way or another. Being the perfect poster-girl didn’t give her a choice.

“Vengeance will be soon be ours! I couldn’t be better!” ’I was doing alright until you showed up.’ She felt like a cardboard cut out designed by the convocation. Then again, she realized, she pretty much was.

“That’s excellent to hear! Your mother will be so pleased! She’s been off her feet a lot more lately, what with the baby and all.”

Kalina blinked, immediately assuming a faux state of excitement despite herself. “By the Sunwell, I’m getting a sibling?!” ‘One ruined life wasn’t enough for you psychos?’ “Boy or girl?”

Her father smiled even wider, seeming to make a subtle attempt to match her excitement. “Girl, and she’s already been born.”

‘Mistake number one.’

She visibly deflated, all the excitement leaving her at once as her expression turned to one of poorly concealed hurt.

“You didn’t tell me…”

Velaris seemed to realize his mistake, because his eyes darted around quickly at the people trying to watch them without actually looking like they were watching. “We figured you were so busy being a ranger and all, your mom didn’t want to bother you.”

‘Mistake number two.’

Kalina smiled sadly. “It’s okay, I get it. I know how much you didn’t want me joining up, and I should’ve respected your wishes.”

Filial piety was strong in Quel’thalas, but even it didn’t outweigh saving the country from being razed by dragons. Kalina could see a couple of less than pleasant looks now being passed her father’s way.

She briefly noticed his eyes flash. She made gazed into them just long enough to let him know she was doing this deliberately, before resuming her performance.

“If it’s okay, could I still have her name, though? I don’t want to have to go through the rest of the war not knowing my own sister’s name.”
Velaris was silent for a moment, his smile now significantly smaller, before he spoke. “Valya”.

Kalina smiled softly. “Valya. That’s such a pretty name.”

Her father’s response was immediate. “It is. I’m sorry to have to do this, but I really must be getting back to your mom.”

A look of surprise. “Oh? So soon?” Followed by a mix of optimism and hurt confusion “Alright then. Tell mom I said hi, and be sure to come visit sometime. I missed you.”

“I’ll check our schedule and get back to you. Take care.”

“See you around, dad.” She gave a single wave, before turning around to see Nyana staring at her. “What?”

“You never told me you had parents.” She said as they started on their walk again.

Kalina gave her a moment to process what she had just said.

“I misworded that. I just meant that you’ve never talked about your family in the 25 years I’ve known you.”

Nyana did have a point there. Quel’dorei were not solitary creatures by any means, and as such it was weird not to talk about one’s family every now and then.

Kalina shrugged. “There’s not much to talk about, and even if there was it’s not like I could talk about it now that my job is being the face of the war effort.”

“So there is something there.”

She bit her lip. Nyana’s inquisitive nature was specifically the reason she’d avoided her for a solid 25 years in the same company together. “No more than any other household in Quel’thalas.”

“Except you disobeyed them.”

The snow haired elf smiled. “And look what a good decision that was.”

The rest of their patrol went without issue. Part of Kalina thought they were there more to boost morale amongst the general population than to actually maintain order. After all, it was the arcane guardians that people truly feared. There was something absolutely paralytically terrifying about an enemy that massive and powerful, that could never be hidden from even for a moment, and could see everything without even looking in a certain direction. Even as the Canary, she’d given them a wide berth.

When she got back to her bed, she noticed that the bed next to hers - previously untaken - was now occupied by the sleeping form of a brunette woman with very slightly tanned skin sprawled out as though she’d ragdolled into bed. Sitting on her bedside table was a thin, curved dagger, and tossed haphazardly at the edge of her bed were a set of what Kalina recognized as priest robes.

She looked around to see Nyana was getting ready for bed across the room.

She leaned forward in her bed towards the woman. “Pssst! Nyana!” She whispered loudly, hands cupped around her mouth.

That at least seemed to get the ranger’s attention, as she snapped her head towards Kalina before mouthing ‘What?’
Kalina pointed to the unconscious priest in the next bed over and mouthed ‘What’s she doing here?’

She could see the blonde roll her eyes before beckoning her over. Trying to make as little noise as possible, the now naked elf slowly stepped out of bed before stepping over to where the woman was standing, one hand on her hip.

She leaned into Kalina’s ear and whispered, “The king ordered healers embedded with all ranger companies for the offensive. Be nice to her, she saved your life.”

Before the former assassin could let out any noise, she’d already clapped a hand over her mouth. Slowly lowering it, she asked “She what?”

“Yeah. According to what I’ve been told, she stopped you from bleeding out at the very last second.”

Kalina looked back at the healer. Had she really been the one to save her after the siege? More importantly, had she been the one to find her daggers?

“Go. I need to sleep.” came Nyana’s voice as the woman got into bed. Without paying attention to the blonde, Kalina returned to her own bed, lost in thought.

There were a lot of ranger companies stationed in Silvermoon right now. The chances of the exact priest who saved her life getting put in her battalion, in her company, sleeping right next to her couldn’t have been coincidence. Okay maybe that last part could’ve been, but the rest was too unlikely. Sylvanas must have put her there.

She got back into bed. If Sylvanas put her there, it meant she trusted her. Kalina trusted Sylvanas.

The healer was safe.

Confident in that knowledge, Kalina turned over in bed onto her belly and wrapped her arms tightly around her pillow, before letting herself drift off into a warm, peaceful sleep.
Chapter 23

The sound of hooves beating against the ground en masse sang vengeance on the winds as the entire ranger force, supplemented with a healer and a mage for each company, departed from Silvermoon, each battalion slowly diverging from each other as they all made a move for their primary targets.

The rules of engagement were relatively simple: don’t overextend and don’t engage alone. Past that, they were given a green light for whatever their hearts desired. Silvermoon had even been kind enough to reissue Kalina her daggers, notably sans poison however. She’d tried to get more from her stores in her house, but when she got there, she found the place had already been searched on convocation authority, with any and all evidence seized.

Apparently the king didn’t agree with her methods. Who would’ve guessed?

The silver lining, of course, was that now there was far less to worry about in terms of Nyana discovering her, something that after 25 years of avoidance and carefully planned opsec, felt positively liberating.

One thing that separated her battalion from others, however, was that whereas other battalions were being specifically sent to hit primary targets such as Fairbreeze Village and Sunsail Anchorage, her battalion was directly following the Horde’s path, a mission that involved Sylvanas and thus had her in command.

At the moment, the Horde’s path led to Fairbreeze Village. They’d been following it for about a day and a half along with two other battalions that’d been given the town specifically as a primary target. Overall, it was overkill for an assault on the town, but then they’d have to shed a number of rangers to actually hold the town and press forward.

They got there about two and a half days after they’d started out. Like during the invasion, the Horde had destroyed the bridges on their way out. This time, however, they’d done a far more haphazard job of it, and the mage embedded with Ranger-Captain Thalessa’s battalion happened to specialize in frost work. It hadn’t been hard.

What was different, however, was that Sylvanas had insisted on Kalina staying near her whenever possible. Riding alongside her, standing nearby while she discussed things with the other officers, making camp for the night, whatever it was, they were never more than 25 feet from each other. It wasn’t that it discomforted Kalina. On the contrary, she loved every second of it; but it made her worry for her general. The last time Sylvanas had gotten like this was when Kalina’s parents had sent word they were looking at remarrying her. Ultimately nothing had come of it. She was a Dawnblade, not a Sunwing, after all. Even so, Sylvanas had kept her close at all times for weeks afterwards.

As they crested the hill which they’d spent the past hour climbing, they came within distant sight of the town. Dark plumes of smoke could be seen coming from inside. Evacuating Fairbreeze had been a good call, it seemed. The question was whether there were any trolls still left crawling around or whether they’d scattered.

“We have to assume they’ve seen us.” Sylvanas spoke quickly, before turning back to face behind them. “Rangers!” she barked out. “Forward!”

With that, they broke into a gallop. The dragons hadn’t burned the forest on the way out like they had when coming in, which meant they still had the tree canopy to cover their approach in the event they hadn’t been seen.
Kalina nocked an arrow as they came within direct view of the town. While archery wasn’t her favorite method, her first priority was taking out any casters she saw, and the bow had a much longer range than her knives did.

They were about 200 meters from the edge of the town when it happened. All at once both Kalina and Sylvanas’ horses, as well as those two rows behind them, let out a sound of agony as they ragdolled midgallop, sending their riders flying through the air before crashing hard into the dirt road. Before either of them had even gotten their bearings, the tall green figures leapt from the trees on all sides, invoking swift and brutal casualties.

Kalina tried to stand up, only to find herself unable to put weight on anything as the horrific gashes trailing down her body, her left leg, and across her arms made themselves known. From where she was sprawled, she could see Sylvanas slowly stand, one arm broken and another hand bearing a piece of twisted metal going in one side and coming out the other.

Caltrops, she realized. The trolls had created a choke point, and by halting their advance, they’d trapped them in it. Easy killings.

The battle raged on over her head as she lay there, quickly bleeding out. From the direction her head was angled in, she could see the results of the ambush laid bare before her. One ranger was crushed to death under her horse and likely impaled by the trap on the ground. Another was very clearly impaled, judging by the spike going through her head. Still another fought on one knee with one of the pieces of metal in his leg and another just below his ribs.

She could feel her hands losing feeling as she began to shake.

“Kali!” She heard the ranger-general shout, before the woman turned and shouted back over the chaos. “Liadrin! Over here, now!”

She wasn’t sure if the robed priestess got to her in a matter of seconds or centuries. All she knew was that the chaos was quickly dying as the sheer number of rangers flanked the trolls through the trees before overrunning them.

A warm, peaceful feeling came over her as the healer’s hands ignited in a brilliant blaze of the holy light, causing her wounds be undone in a matter of seconds.

“You’re lucky none of the major arteries were severely hit.” The brunette spoke. “Otherwise you’d be dead already.”

Kalina slowly sat up as she felt her strength return. “So I guess that makes two times you’ve saved me now.”

She smiled briefly. “Three, actually.”

The snow haired elf raised an eyebrow. “When was the first time?”

“A few decades ago, you suffered severe cranial trauma at a party. I was the first on scene.”

The girl’s mouth fell slightly open, its owner at a loss for words. “… Three times, then. Thank you.”

The healer took her arm and helped her to her feet. “Come on, we still have a country to take back.”

“Dismount!” They heard Sylvanas call out, followed by several echoes as the message was passed back.
Stepping off the road and into the trees, the battalion pressed forward. Fairbreeze had no walls. It was a peaceful, idyllic town, for those who wanted to be close to Silvermoon but not actually in it.

“Barrage!” Sylvanas called out, followed again by several echos, before like dwarven mortars, balls of fire and arcane missiles filled the sky one at a time as the company mage, Vor’na, began casting them in rapid succession, along with the mages from every other company; and just like dwarven mortars, each one rose brilliantly into the sky, before coming down and hitting the ground with explosive force.

Seconds passed. Collateral damage wasn’t a problem for the work ahead. Buildings in Quel’thalas weren’t very flammable, and even if they were, they were made with magic, meaning entire towns could be rebuilt overnight. What was more important was purging the enemy from them. Soon the barrage gradually crept further into town, meaning the rangers were clear to start moving in on its tail.

Kalina nocked another arrow as she moved forward, keeping her head low. The first troll that ran out at them was thankfully not a caster. At least, Kalina didn’t think he was. It was rather hard to tell given the fact that he was on fire and screaming.

She drew back a shot. Before she could release it however, she heard Halduron call out.

“Let them burn!”

She drew down. It was an easy enough command to follow. She had no more love for the trolls than anyone else; even less, all things considered.

The troll ran closer toward them before collapsing. The rangers stepped past him wordlessly.

As they entered the town through what might be considered an alley if it had paving, the freshly burned corpses of a number of trolls could be seen lying out in the open.

“Watch the buildings.” Sylvanas spoke quietly. “If any survived, they’re in there.”

Sure enough, all at once the buildings around them burst to life as the survivors realized what was happening and came rushing out at them, weapons bared. Luckily this time the rangers were prepared, and half of them had arrows in their chests before they could make it more than a few steps. The rest made it through.

Kalina stowed her bow as the trolls closed the distance, before ducking as an axe swung over her head, followed by a second. Before their wielder could recover, she swiftly drew her sword and drove it into his abdomen.

Another burning troll ran past her, this one shrieking like a banshee.

She yanked her sword out of the first one, before diving to the ground as a spear passed where she’d been less that a second before, grazing another ranger. She looked up while reaching for her one of her knives just in time to see several more trolls rushing towards them from down the road.

One of them had a staff.

Before she could even react, however, the sound of a nearby explosion signaled an errant fireball hitting near them, and one of the trolls immediately collapsed as a piece of debris came down on his head. Time seemed to slow as Kalina saw where it was coming from. The massive tower that they were fighting under was coming down.
She wasn’t the only one who noticed.

“Get away from the tower! Move!” She heard Lor’themar shout as all at once the rangers broke contact and scattered, Kalina scrambling to her feet and bolting in the first direction she saw as the trolls now pursued them.

As the shadow of the tower darkened her path, she realized she wasn’t going to make it. She’d been too close when it had started coming down, and it’d taken her too long to get to her feet. She stopped where she was. Better to let the trolls spend their final seconds focusing on her, so they might all die together.

All at once, darkness clouded her vision, and the world fell into silence.
Chapter 24

She was running. She had to keep running, no matter how far she made it, no matter whom she screamed out for help to, everyone just turned and stared at her curiously, before bursting into laughter as behind her the crackle of electricity followed her.

She ran into a crowded ballroom, hoping someone there, one of the guards, one of the kinder lords, anyone, would do something. They all simply laughed harder. She tripped, and before she’d even regained her bearings, they’d already descended on her, cackling maniacally as they took hold of her limbs and held her to the floor while he got ever closer.

Her eyes bolted open. The first thing she noticed was that she was still in complete darkness. The second was how dry her throat was. She reached for her canteen, before draining the whole thing in a few gulps. As she knocked her head back, she could see a faint light far above.

At once the events preceding this moment returned to her again. She wondered if this was death. This was how it had always been described by the faith.

Her hand brushed something cold and clammy. She recognized the feeling of dead flesh against hers instantly. There were bodies around her. She wasn’t dead.

She wasn’t dead.

Bursting into laughter, she fell backwards, unable to contain her joy at the sheer miracle that had just occurred. Of all the sections of the tower to land on her, she must’ve been hit by a window. She couldn’t believe her luck.

She looked up at the light again. It was far up, easily a couple of rooms over - or, up, she supposed. That meant the first step was getting to the door. She needed more light. She didn’t have any torches though, and she certain couldn’t cast any fire-

Her expression burst into an impossibly grand smile as she remembered the one spell her parents had allowed her to learn. It was just enough fire to cook with, meaning it was just enough fire to light a piece of wood. She felt in the darkness for torches, for kindling, for anything she could light.

Her hands found her bow.

She took it in one hand, the other one reverently unstringing it.

‘You’ve served me well, friend.’

She thought as she held it. It certainly wasn’t her preferred weapon, but in the 25 years she’d wielded it, it had come to hold a place in her heart.

‘Enjoy your rest.’

Without another thought, she let the tiny flame spring from her fingertips, catching the piece of wood and igniting it as all at once, the room was thrust into view.

She could never tell Sylvanas about this, she knew. For most rangers, a bow was a sacred part of themselves. Burning one’s bow for light wasn’t just sacrilege, it was intolerable.

She dismissed such thoughts as she looked around. The room was less a room, more a cavern made
of rubble and debris that had clearly once been a room. She certainly couldn’t vouch for its structural stability at the moment.

Planting what remained of her bow in a nearby pile, she set to work searching the not completely buried parts of the trolls for anything she could use.

Nothing.

Kalina looked up at the light again. She wondered if she could try calling out. No, it was too risky with the stability of the room.

She looked around. It had once clearly been a bedroom, judging by the wreckage with a mattress and sheets mixed in laying against one wall. It reminded her of her own back in Tranquillien. She remembered the last time she was there, how many times she’d dreamed of tying her sheets together and climbing down the tower to a waiting Sylvanas.

It hit her just then. One of the trolls had been carrying a curved axe. She could use that.

Kalina glanced over at the light. It was about a quarter of the way gone. She had to move. Scrambling to her feet, she rushed over to the bed and began frantically tying the sheets together into a haphazard rope.

Her light was more than halfway gone by the time she was finished. Rushing over to grab the axe, she quickly tied it to one end of the rope. It wasn’t exactly a grappling hook, but it would have to do if she didn’t want to die slowly and horribly.

Her light was almost out. She’d likely only have one good shot at this. Gripping the sheets with both hands, she swung the axe in a wide arc before letting it fly up into the darkness.

She was relieved to feel the sheet in her hands stiffen as the axe found purchase somewhere above. She wasted no time as she began furiously putting on arm above the other. Her light died as she made it out into the hallway, plunging her into partial darkness from below. It was okay though, because the light from above was far closer now. The axe had luckily gone through the hallway and into the opposite room.

She stopped cold. Something had just passed in front of the light above. Her fingers went rigid as they gripped the rope. She quickly glanced around. She was hanging in the middle of the hallway. Had some of the trolls somehow survived the crash?

As her eyes adjusted to the darkness, her breath froze in her lungs. There was someone tall, easily the height of a troll leaning against the wall down the hallway.

No, she realized with a dawning horror as it became more visible. It wasn’t leaning against the wall. It was on the wall.

It was a spider.

As her eyes further adjusted, she could see more of them. They were everywhere. They must have turned the tower into a nest after the evacuation.

Something passed in front of the light above her again. Against every instinct in her body, she forced herself to look up. A giant spider’s leg partially blocked the light now, one which must have belonged to a spider easily big enough to occupy the room on her own.
It was the mother she realized. She had to go through the mother, through a room likely filled with eggs, to get out.

She hung there, vulnerable, frozen in terror and hoping none of them noticed her. There were so many, so horribly many. She couldn’t lower herself back into the room below. If she did, she’d be in complete darkness again, and they’d just be able to lower themselves from the ceiling onto her the way they did to Caelynn.

Images of the poor girl’s body flashed through her mind. Her head missing, likely eaten facefirst while she was still conscious, her hands grey-blue and lifeless, her body suspended in the trees, smothered in webbing.

She could only hold onto the rope for dear life with both hands and do her very best not to make a sound. Her breaths felt shallow and empty and tears began to stream down her face, and she had to bite the inside of her mouth to stay silent.

A shadow darkened the corner of her eye. She turned and had to force back a shriek. One of the spiders was inches from her face, on the wall next to her.

Her eyes only moved to look at it for a fraction of a second before looking away in terror again as they caught eight black spheres staring back, getting closer and closer to her face.

She silently cried and begged the light for protection.

‘Please kill them all please kill them all please kill them all I’ll never ask for anything again just please don’t make me die like this…’

Just when the spider’s face was mere inches from her own, it let out a hiss and dove for her face. Its mandibles stopped mere millimeters from her skin as her dagger found its skull, driven by a shaky hand while an even shakier arm kept her from falling back into the darkness.

All at once, the spider’s body disengaged from the wall, falling into the room below her and hitting the bottom with a resounding thud.

‘Please no…’

A thousand hisses echoed out from all directions as the entire nest took notice. She looked around frantically to see them skittering towards her now from both ends of the hallway, on all four surfaces.

“NO! FUCK YOU FUCK YOU FUCK YOU FUCK YOU GET AWAY!” She shrieked in terror as she chucked her daggers into the encroaching arachnids, before quickly running out of them and finding herself forced to jump down into the webbed hallway as she drew her swords.

She immediately regretted the short length of the blades as the spiders borderline dog piled on her in a horrid thrashing mix of sharp limbs and mandibles that said swords and her cloak only narrowly kept at bay as she stabbed and slashed maniacally. She didn’t dare open her mouth to scream at this point, she didn’t even want to think of the idea of one of those limbs going down her throat.

After several terrifying minutes, the last spider went limp on her blade as, not even bothering to pull it out, she was now buried under a pile of spider corpses.

She let go of both blades before curling up into a ball in the hell that had been made for her, fingers buried in her hair as she whimpered quietly and resumed sobbing, this time far more softly.

She could kill herself, she thought. All she needed to do was grab a blade and cut her throat and this
nightmare would be over before anything could eat her face off.

She couldn’t think of anything after that, she realized. She could feel her mind shutting down as she began retreating inside of herself. Good. She’d earned the rest.

Before she could disappear completely, she stopped herself. No, she couldn’t. Not yet. She had to find safety before the sun went down. Once that happened, the light from above would be gone, and she’d be plunged into pitch darkness. She had to keep fighting, just a little longer. She could go catatonic once she’d made it somewhere safe.

Forcing herself to close her mouth again, she reached a trembling hand for where she remembered leaving her blades, quickly yanking it back when she felt spider hair instead.

It took another minute for her to work up the courage to reach for her blade again. This time she was eternally relieved to feel her hand grasping the leather wrapped hilt of her sword. Her heart pounded in her chest as she slowly, horribly extricated herself from the mess of limbs and venomous mandibles until finally she was out.

She looked up. The light was dimmer now. It was getting dark. She needed light in case there were more of the things, something she knew had to be true. She started thinking of things she could burn. The webbing might provides a short source of light for a few seconds. She gripped her travelling cloak tightly, causing the garment came to her attention. It was enchanted to be waterproof, but not fireproof. It would do, she decided.

Her hands were still shaking uncontrollably as she removed the heavy piece of fabric and began cutting it into strips, each of which she rolled up and speared on an arrow as a makeshift torch. It wasn’t ideal, but it would suffice. Applying her small flame to the first one, she was relieved again to see it light successfully.

She’d already decided she wasn’t going to even try the spider queen or whatever it was called. It could have that exit, she’d find another. Considering one side of the hallway was now blocked by spider bodies, that only left her one way to go.

Cautiously, she approached the gap. It was only a doorway, but it was a long way down with a curled up spider corpse at the bottom. Just as she got close enough to make the leap, she found herself suddenly falling backwards in shock and horror as one of the mother’s absolutely massive limbs jabbed down out its doorway and through the one Kalina had been about to jump, before retracting itself upwards just as quickly.

It was hunting her, she realized. She covered her mouth with one hand to stifle a scream. After a minute or so of panicked breathing and shaking, she got to her feet, this time keeping her sword in front of her. Much more carefully, she approached the doorway. The moment she came into view from the other one, the limb shot through again, this time waving around in some attempt to grab at her.

“FUCK YOU TOO!” Kalina found herself shrieking as she drove the blade into the appendage, before dropping the torch behind her in favor of grabbing her other blade from where it lay in a nearby arachnid. The spider’s leg thrashed and struggled above the sword, before Kalina was yanked upwards all at once as the limb retracted, using her other blade to sever it just in time to keep her head from being crushed against the ceiling.

The leg fell off her sword and into the room below as she hit the ground, her head and chest sticking out over the edge of the pit. She realized her position and scrambled backwards just in time for the spider’s other foreleg to narrowly pass in front of her face.
She let out something between a yelp and a whimper as she fell back onto a dead spider, before outright bursting into a madened shriek as she rushed forward and hacked the spider’s other foreleg off.

She could feel her sanity being depleted quickly as the walls began to writhe and twist in the darkness, and for a split second, just a split second, she thought she heard whispering.

Things only got worse as the spider disappeared from the hole for a few moments, before its massive head began to emerge through the doorway above, just barely fitting through. It was trying to lower itself enough to catch her with its mouth.

Kalina found she couldn’t stop sobbing as the spider came to occupy the upper half of the hallway before stopping. Its form was impossibly large, enough where it was a wonder it didn’t take up the entire floor; and it stared at her with all eight black eyes as venom dropped from its mandibles. She couldn’t cross the gap now even if she wanted to, even if she dove.

She stood there momentarily, eyes locked with the predator, before letting out another feral shriek and charging at it madly. She hadn’t even realized what she’d done, before she’d driven both blades into its skull.

She stood there, panting. After a few seconds, she sat back down and curled up into a ball, still shaking uncontrollably.

She didn’t know when she passed out, but when she next woke up, daylight was filtering in through the areas where the spider’s head hadn’t obstructed the doorway.

As her senses returned to her, one of the first things she realized was how thirsty she was. That made sense, she supposed. Her throat felt raw and worn out, and an ache coming from her stomach also told her how hungry she was. She needed to find a way out soon, or all of the horror thus far would be for nothing.

She kept herself from looking too directly at the queen spider. She certainly couldn’t get past what was left of her. That meant her only option was to make it through the spider pile.

After lighting another arrow torch, she retrieved her blades from where they lay, before beginning to carve haphazardly at the pile, with little rhyme or method other than to make it go away somehow. The torsos were too strong cut through, but the limbs were weak and easy. Eventually, her blades had dismembered the spiders enough to where the pile lost some stability and a way through opened as it collapsed backwards.

Thankful that the rangers issued armored thigh boots, Kalina sheathed one sword and picked up her torch, before stepping over the bodies. She made a point of not looking down as she pushed forward down the corridor, using her torch to burn away the webbing wherever she found it.

To the girl’s dawning horror, however, the length of hall ended in a shaft, on the other side of which was a door she was sure led to a room with a window.

She looked out over the edge. She could see the bottom, about 20 feet down, covered in rubble. The gap was maybe nine feet across. She could make the jump, but if the door didn’t give way somehow, she’d probably break her leg in the pit below and be stuck there.

Impulsively, she looked behind herself. Still clear. Good.

She barely looked back in time to catch the shadow on the wall of the shaft above her, slowly lowering itself towards her.
Immediately she scrambled backwards just as the arachnid’s forelegs came into view from where she was.

‘Nononononono, you’ve gotta be kidding me please no.’

Another horrible thought occurred to her as she kept her eyes on the spider, which had now stopped lowering itself in favor hanging in place, above the door. If there were still spiders alive, what if the room beyond held more?

What if it held another queen?

Even worse, whereas before falling just meant breaking her leg and starving or something, now the spider would drop on top of her the moment she hit the ground. Then she’d wish she’d gotten to die like Caelynn.

“Okay.” She spoke softly between heavy breaths, staring past the spider so as not to have to look directly at it. “We’re okay… Just please let me go through that door… and I’ll be gone.”

The spider didn’t move. Of course it didn’t. She must really be going insane, trying to reason with it. Even worse, she was out of knives, having been unable - well, unwilling - to recover them from the spider pile, let alone the area behind the dead mother. All she had were her swords and the torch. She supposed she could chuck the fire at the spider to stop it from catching her in the air or something, but if she fell into the pit, it would still take her. Her only hope was that the door gave way. Not likely, considering it was sideways, meaning she’d have to dive headfirst.

Another idea occurred to her. It was a horrible, terrifying one, but it was an idea. She could fake out the spider. But even if she was able to get it down far enough to kill it, its body would just block her path.

Meaning the only way would be up.

Spider silk was supposedly stronger than steel. If she could fake the monster out and kill it, she could catch onto its body and climb the silk to somewhere. She didn’t know where, but it was somewhere. Of course, that involved not only jumping toward its corpse, but wrapping her limbs around it.

She was too dehydrated to cry anymore at this point, and the pain in her stomach was becoming more noticeable. She had to act, or she would either die of thirst or be eaten - probably both.

She edged closer to the ledge. The spider almost seemed to freeze in response.

‘Please just take the bait…’

She made a sudden step forward while leaning in the same direction, as if to take the leap. Sure enough, the spider dropped down immediately. Giving it no time to realize its mistake, Kalina sliced off both its forelegs before ramming the sword into its torso down to the hilt, immediately drawing the other and driving it into its skull.

As its legs curled up towards its abdomen, Kalina found herself lucky that its belly had been facing the opposite wall. She definitely would not keep her sanity if she had to climb into its embrace.

‘Okay Kalina, no pressure, just run and jump and hug it for dear life. Think of all the things you can eat when you get home - like ribs, and honey bread, and Sylvanas.’

She took a few steps back, before taking a deep breath. She only had one shot at this. Her hands trembled.
Forcing herself, she charged forward before leaping across the gap, her arms immediately finding a horrible grip as they wrapped around the hairy corpse for dear life.

She didn’t dare scream. Not only could it attract more, but she didn’t like the idea of opening her mouth with her face pressed against it.

She could hear the shadows whispering to her again, except this time it wasn’t an external sound, it was coming from inside her head. She was going insane, and fast. She had to climb right now.

Biting the inside of her lip, she felt her boot scrape against a mandible as she raised it to find footing on the hilt of her sword.

The whispering was gradually getting louder, to where she could almost make out individual words. Her feet found the sword and she immediately grabbed hold of the spider’s legs and began scrambling upwards, her left hand barely reaching the web, followed by her right as she pulled herself up. Sure enough, the web was thick enough to climb. Kalina looked up. In the distance she could see light, but there was a lot of darkness between her and there. Who knew how many of those things could be hiding there?

‘Abandoned.’

It was the first word she was able to make out from the whispers. She resumed climbing furiously. She was not going to go insane, and not down here of all places.

The darkness writhed around her. She thought she could see the silhouettes of arachnid legs reaching out toward her, only for nothing to be there.

‘Let go.’

She was so tired. She hadn’t eaten or drank anything in at least a couple days. All she really wanted was an end to the terror.

‘She’s already forgotten you.’

She kept climbing. The light was getting closer now. She could see the source in the distance: a balcony.

‘A gentle sleep awaits. Let go.’

She was almost there now. Just a little bit more and she’d be safe and in the sunlight again.

She felt something brush against her leg.

‘They will devour you.’

She kicked back downwards into the darkness with a metal boot, and heard the scrape of a mandible on the steel as her foot found a target.

“No!” She cried out as she passed through the hole and into the light, wasting no time scrambling over the balcony and out onto the rubble. She was unarmed, but that didn’t mean she would die without a fight. She whipped around to face the hole, only for nothing to come out.

She waited. And waited. And waited.

Nothing came out.
Eventually she sank to her knees. The sun was setting by this point. She was unarmed, dehydrated, exhausted, and starved in the middle of a war zone.

But there were no more whispers, she realized. Her mind was silent once more, save for her own cognition.

She let out a shaky breath. It was over. She’d made it. Now she just needed to find a ranger and she’d be safe.

There weren’t any more fireballs in the sky. Either Vor’na was asleep or the rangers had pushed deeper in.

Or they’d pulled out entirely. The fight wasn’t exactly on their side when the tower had come down, after all.

Kalina looked out into the city. The streets were quiet and bare. That wasn’t a good sign. From less than a block over, she saw a trio of hooded rangers exit an alley, arrows nocked and heads low. Very bad sign.

Before she could call out to them, however, the ground fell out from under one, revealing a pit full of steel spikes. From the way the elf’s body blackened and shriveled, they were poisoned.

Before his companion could so much as react, she spontaneously combusted, letting out a shriek as she ran around in a mad panic before falling into the pit with her comrade. A spear coming out of a dark window silenced the third ranger.

Kalina froze, before slowly lowering herself to a prone position. By her estimate, she was about four or five streets deep in the town. She’d come out at the end of the tower.

She stayed low as she watched a pair of trolls emerge from the shadows, before carrying the bodies away and resetting the pit trap. If any of what they’d been told about the green savages was true, the bodies would be eaten - possibly even cooked first.

The streets were trapped and clearly watched, she had no idea where anyone was, and she was unarmed. She’d been in worse situations, and she didn’t need the streets to move. The real question was where was Sylvanas. If she fell back too far, she risked desertion. If she stayed where she was, she risked certain death.

After a moment’s thought, she decided she’d rather die a hero in Sylvanas’ eyes than a deserter. With that in mind, she got up and began sprinting along the tower, leaping between the debris before getting close enough to an adjacent building to make the leap.

Her hands immediately gripped the edge of the roof as toes caught the wall. Pulling herself up, she climbed up onto the roof and began sprinting forward. How she’d missed this. Leaping from tree to tree just wasn’t the same, and on urban deployments she’d made a point of avoiding any sort of rooftop work so as to not draw attention. Despite everything, as the wind whipped through her snow colored hair while she danced across the warzone she was in, she realized she was smiling.

‘Ready or not, here I come.’

She could take the long way home, she figured, wherever home was. Sylvanas wouldn’t mind if she was gone a bit longer, so long as she brought back a few extra troll heads. It wasn’t like she got to be the Canary again every day, after all. Besides, she didn’t even know where Sylvanas was, and risking desertion was not worth it, considering what the convocation would do to the both of them if they found out.
She heard the sudden sound of chatter beneath her. Looking out over the edge of the roof, she found herself staring at a pair of trolls, one with a spear, the other with a pair of axes.

“I be tellin ya, mon, I saw one of dem elves come climbin out da wreckage.” the one with the axes insisted.

His companion looked at him as if to say ‘you’re not serious’. “You be crazy or just stupid? Der be no way anyone be survivin dat wreck, an even if dey did, dey not makin it outta dis city alive.”

Kalina slinked back behind the edge of the roof. Even unarmed, she could take most enemies from above. The forest trolls, however, were not most enemies. If she tried to snap one’s neck, it’d just crush her skull in one hand.

First things first. She needed a weapon. Past that, she needed food and water. Once she got those, then she could sleep. The adrenaline was starting to drain from her. She needed to keep moving.

She looked back out over at the pair again, this time noticing something useful on the spear troll’s hip: a dagger.

‘Bingo.’

The white haired elf smirked before, without so much as a sound from above, leaping from the high roof and, in one practiced motion, catching her arm around the trolls neck from behind, causing his knees to buckle as he fell backwards, thereby slowing her fall and disorienting him. Before he could regain his bearings, Kalina had already snatched the dagger from his hip and jammed it into his neck.

Blood spurted out like a fountain as the axe wielder stood stunned at his friend’s sudden demise while Kalina got out from under him, before he charged at her madly, weapons swinging in a wild fury.

Kalina leapt back, narrowly avoiding the oncoming storm of blades as she chucked the dagger at him. To her dismay, however, it did little more than leave a deep cut in the site of his head.

‘Ugh, troll steel.’

Luckily, it did stun him enough for her to grab the fallen spear, and the blood running down his face gave him a weak side. He swung at her again, half blindly now. Spears were never her forte but they were easy enough to grasp the basics of and they offered tremendous reach. The moment the swing on his blind side over extended, Kalina jabbed the polearmed sharply into his forearm, causing him to cry out and drop the axe in that hand. She didn’t wait for him to adjust his stance as she immediately removed the weapon and drove it into his abdomen, followed by his chest.

The muscled green beast dropped the other axe in his hand as he slowly sank to his knees, before keeling over.

Kalina grinned. She had weapons now. Good. Now the next step was water. The axes were a bit too heavy for her, but the spear would serve well. She took it.

Before she left, she turned back to gaze over the scene she’d left in her wake. What if Sylvanas found it?

Kneeling down in the dirt, she drew a quick stick figure rendering of a bird using her finger. Certain enough for Sylvanas to read it as “Canary”, she hoped, yet deniable enough for her to explain it as “Sunwing” should anyone else figure out that it was her doing all this. That way, if Sylvanas found the bodies before she found her, she’d know she was okay.
Sylvanas paced back and forth in her tent. She hadn’t been able to sleep in days. The town had proven overwhelmingly well fortified with an array of traps, totems, and ambushes, to where they’d have to fight building by building rather than street by street or block by block.

They hadn’t been able to stay there after the tower came down. Their forces had been immediately scattered and quickly picked off by the litany of defenses. They’d had to pull out of the town and regroup in the forest. Runners from the other two battalions had told similar stories, and as of now Fairbreeze was still firmly in Amani hands. Not even half the scouting teams they’d sent had come back.

A failed incursion on all fronts, and all she had to show for it was that Kalina was dead. The ranger-general turned to punch a wall, only for her fist to lamely meet the tent fabric. This only amplified her rage. It was like someone was taunting her. Her hands didn’t uncurl. First her mother, now Kalina. Next thing she knew they’d probably somehow find a way to kill Little Moon.

She mentally hit herself. There’d be time to mourn once the war was over. For now she had to focus, for everyone’s sake. The few scouting teams that did come back had managed to map out safe paths into the city. That was progress. On top of that, the trolls weren’t known for digging in while in enemy territory unless it was firmly theirs. They were mobile fighters first and last. The fact that they’d rigged the entire town from all sides could only mean they were getting desperate. Their siege on Silvermoon had been smashed, the Horde had abandoned them, and their brass had scattered. This was probably just an isolated band trying to survive as the Amani ranks dissolved.

She’d ordered a halt to the barrages immediately once they’d gotten out. They didn’t need any more towers coming down on them. Fairbreeze was an oddity in that unlike most towns outside of Silvermoon, it actually held a fairly large number of towers, floating gardens, and other luxury pieces of architecture one might otherwise only find in rarity outside of Silvermoon. The reason for this was simple. It was the go-to town for any and all people from Silvermoon who needed to ‘get away from it all’ or wanted to ‘summer somewhere off in the countryside’. That was to say, it was a bubble, even by Quel’dorei standards, which was saying quite a lot. Once a bustling trade hub where adventurers, traders, and artisans fresh out of Silvermoon stopped to trade stories, knowledge, and wares, since then much of the town had come to serve as vacation homes for pompous magisters and nobles. They’d even changed their street naming system to reflect how close each street passed to Silvermoon.

The result of this was that repeated magical artillery strikes had the potential to yield catastrophic amounts of collateral damage. One tower was nothing, but if they weren’t careful, half the town could be buried. At first she’d assumed the town could withstand it. It was a few fireballs after all, in a town occupied by magisters. Surely that couldn’t be enough to bring down one of their towers.

But she’d been wrong, hadn’t she? And it had cost her the one ranger under her command that was more than just an arrow in her quiver.

She knew she shouldn’t be surprised. This was how it had always been for them. Every time they’d found happiness in each other, the entire world saw fit to tear them apart. No matter how tightly Sylvanas tried to hold onto her, no matter how careful she was, fate was always one step ahead of her; and now it had beaten her for good - and all because she’d been stupid enough to call in the mages.

‘The mages…’
All at once, her mind lit up with a thousand new ideas and possibilities as she realized the solution to their problem. This whole time she’d been looking at the mages as artillery that could provide support from the rear, when really they were the perfect tool for disabling and destroying any and all traps or totems the trolls might have for them.

She looked over into the corner of her tent, where Nathanos had been sitting quietly. She’d been keeping him much closer since they’d pulled out. It probably wasn’t healthy, all things considered, but it helped her keep focused on what was important and besides, he didn’t seem to mind.

“Nathanos,” she began, her voice tired but confident, “go tell Lor’themar to stop sending scouts and to gather the main force. We’re going in.”

As the Canary, Kalina’s work had only ever been business and only ever a means to keep her life from getting very bad very quickly (the exception of course being the job she’d done for Sylvanas). She’d rarely taken even a modicum of pleasure in what she’d done. That said, there was something wonderfully cathartic about being free and alone in a city that she could just let out her frustrations on, without having to worry about restricting her methods or being too easily identifiable as the Canary.

To that end, the snow haired girl was rather enjoying her newfound freedom as the last troll in the room she was standing in hit the ground. She was far deeper into the city now, having gotten more than enough food, water, and sleep to sustain herself.

She took in her surroundings, having not had time to while taking on multiple trolls at once. It looked to have been a breakfast nook at one point, a place to sit and snack on pastries and tea while looking out over the town below. She sighed as her thoughts drifted back to her former husband. Silvermoon would likely expect some sort of new propaganda piece from her. It wouldn’t be hard to make something up about how personally significant Fairbreeze Village was to her and all the wonderful, romantic memories she would forever cherish of herself and Rhalyf here, away from everything in the countryside together.

Despite it not being hard, however, it was nonetheless infuriating. No, it was enraging. Her entire life would be forever told as that of a devoted housewife who loved Rhalyf Dawnblade like no one else, one who had had a fairytale romance after meeting at a party, hitting it off, and becoming the perfect image of a budding noble romance.

She drove her dagger into one of the bodies again. She should have killed him when she had the chance. It wouldn’t have changed anything in the long run, but at least she’d have gotten to be the one to kill him, instead of being rescued from him like the damsel history would remember her as.

She cleaned off the weapon and stood up. The sun was setting now. It had been over a day since she’d escaped the tower. From where she was standing, high up in what was once likely some noble’s vacation home, she could see out over the village below. Village really didn’t describe it well. It was closer to a small city. Nothing that could compare to Silvermoon, of course, but certainly not small. She supposed that was what happened when Silvermoon’s elite poured so much money into a place.

She remembered the first time Rhalyf had told her they’d be vacationing there, she’d been excited. She’d heard so many tales of it being a town of adventure, with taverns, guilds, and excitement to be found around every corner.

It had been to her immeasurable disappointment, then, that she’d gotten there only to find it to be the parts of Silvermoon she despised most, condensed and refined into their purest form. Though she’d
never dream of saying it out loud, not the least because of the sedition charge it would bring, the trolls couldn’t have picked a better town to destroy.

Perhaps she wasn’t being fair, she thought. After all, she was only judging the place based on her memories of being there with her husband. By that logic, Windrunner Spire was just as bad for her having met him there. Her battalion had been rotated to Fairbreeze at one point before the war, and being that it was still under Ranger-Captain Sylvanas at the time, the pair of them had gotten to spend more than a few occasions just sitting in town at a cafe or going out to dinner together. Those times had been absolutely lovely, she recalled.

Of course, anything anywhere could be lovely with Sylvanas there. Still, she supposed, Fairbreeze wasn’t as bad as she’d considered it. It all depended on the company one was with, and most of the times she’d been here had involved her being with horrible company.

She drew a quick bird on the wall using one of the trolls’ blood, before stepping out onto the windowsill, and descending back down into the city below.

Despite the fact that it took the rangers only minutes to get prepared and assembled, Sylvanas didn’t give such an order for at least 20 hours. The reason was that she wanted the mages to get as much sleep and food as possible before the push. She hadn’t told them they would be going in, just that they were ordered to get a full sleep and a good meal. They were going to need a lot of mana for the plan to work swiftly.

Before even stepping foot into the first alley, every company with a frost mage embedded went ahead and froze the area around their path. Those with fire or generalized mages went after them, ready to provide magical shields and extra firepower in the event that they were engaged.

Frost mages were far less common in Quel’thalas than fire or generalized mages, largely due to the national identity centering around imagery of the sun, phoenixes, summer, and other vaguely fire related things. They were so rare, in fact, that out of the 24 companies in all three of the battalions hitting Fairbreeze, they only had three of them to use.

Thus, the plan was that each battalion would move into the city stacked up in a sort of train of companies, with a frost mage in the lead company. While it was tempting to save mana by taking the paths mapped by the scouts for as far as they’d go, they couldn’t risk the trolls having changed things without their knowledge and thus being able to take the lead company by surprise and kill the frost mage. It was for that reason that they were pushing a much more direct assault.

Sylvanas stepped onto the frozen ground as her rangers made their way quietly into the city. She was in the second company in line, close enough to the front to adapt quickly to the situation at hand, but not so close as to be an easy ambush target once the trolls poked their heads out. What was strange, though, was that, as they began to gain ground, the trolls didn’t even seem to make an appearance.

It was about five streets in when their mage gave out and needed to take a break.

“Hold!” Sylvanas shouted back at the long train of rangers behind them, her command being echoed by individual company leaders. “Form perimeter!”

While the hooded mage, La’is, sat down in the company ahead and snacked on a small provision of honeyed bread and beef jerky, the rangers all took kneeling positions facing outwards. As the ranger force waited tensely for the ambush they knew was coming, Sylvanas realized something:

They were being watched. Looking around, the ranger-general could just barely see a brawny
silhouette far bigger than any elf staring back at them.

The moment Sylvanas’ gaze lingered, it sprang into motion, but she was faster. Before it could even hope to attack, she had already put a pair of arrows into it.

“Contact eleven o’clock!” She called out, causing the two story house to be absolutely lit up with arrows as a hundred rangers all put shots into every window before ceasing as the mage put up a shield.

She waited. All had gone peaceful again. Not even any totems had appeared. Something was wrong.

“You two, with me!” She barked at a pair of rangers positioned to face 90 degrees from the ambush.

The two obeyed as the ranger general advanced across the frozen path, before making a hard left to move along the wall. It was the safest way to get to the door without risking any traps. She waited for the pair to catch up, putting her bow away and drawing her swords while they did so, before kicking the door open and crossing the opening to stand against the opposite side while the pair charged in.

A resounding “Clear!” sounded from inside, and Sylvanas turned and bolted inside in response. One ranger stood guarding the door, the other guarding the curved stairs along the back of the room. The place itself was ransacked but that wasn’t what caught Sylvanas’ interest. What was of interest was the way the troll had died. Sure he was peppered with arrows, but he had been in full view of every window when he died. If he was going to ambush them, why would he put himself in position to be clearly seen from every single window in the building? The only place he wasn’t visible from was the top of the stairs.

“... You two, check upstairs.” She spoke to the pair, the rangers obeying without hesitation as they rushed up the stairs, swords drawn.

All went quiet for a few seconds too long. Had they been killed somehow?

A hesitant “Clear!” answered that question for her.

Upon reaching the top of the stairs, Sylvanas immediately saw why. The site in the room above was a massacre scene. Four trolls lay dead, each sliced to pieces in various horrific, almost deliberately cruel seeming ways. More importantly, however, was the fact that they appeared to have been killed with troll weapons, and their own weapons appeared to be covered in their blood.

“You think they killed each other, ma’am?” One of the rangers, a girl with dirty blonde hair, asked.

Sylvanas nodded slowly. That seemed to be the case. It would explain why the fifth one was hiding downstairs. If it were an attacking group of trolls, they would have to have come back down the stairs and found him, but he was still alive down there, meaning all combatants had been neutralized upstairs.

She was about to order the rangers to return to the formation, when her eyes caught the drawing of a little bird on the wall in troll blood. Her heart missed a beat.

“Impossible…” she barely breathed.

“Ma’am?”

Sylvanas shook herself out of her sudden sense of shock. “Return to formation.”
By the time they had made it back to the main force, the frost mage was ready to move again. As they resumed their push forward, a cacophony of thoughts filled Sylvanas’ head. Surely she was misinterpreting the bird drawing. She herself had watched the girl die, there was no way someone could survive something like that. And yet, it would fit her profile. She certainly knew how to set up a killing so it looked like someone other than her, and she wouldn’t need to use the stairs if she could climb out a window.

The question was why make it look like they killed each other then? More importantly, why leave the bird drawing if she didn’t want people to suspect something? Could it have been a signal to her, somehow? Could Kalina have just made it look like the trolls killed each other so that she could leave the bird signal without drawing suspicion from anyone other than Sylvanas?

The blonde stopped herself. She was being ridiculous. Her girlfriend that she had very much watched die had somehow come back and instead of trying to link up somehow or make contact, decided to kill a random group of trolls and make it look like they killed each other, leaving only a bird drawn in blood for anyone to suspect anything was amiss, and then having somehow magically planned it so that Sylvanas would somehow enter that house in particular out of every building in Fairbreeze, and find that drawing, and somehow automatically figure out it was her work, so she could know… what, that she wasn’t dead? It was absolutely absurd. The fact that she was even thinking up such a far fetched story told her she wasn’t coping nearly as well as she thought.

She had to face facts. Kalina was dead, and she couldn’t waste time obsessing about ways to convince herself otherwise. Down that road laid only madness, and even worse, being relieved of her command. No, she wouldn’t think about Kalina any more at all, she decided. Not until the war was over.

What was clearly happening was the trolls were devolving into anarchy as the outlook became more and more bleak for them. That was a perfectly logical, reasonable conclusion.

As they moved deeper into the town, more and more similar scenes began to appear, each one easily and visibly explainable as troll infighting, and each one having a stick figure drawing of a bird. One troll they’d captured had even begun rambling madly about a white haired elf girl that appeared out of nowhere and slaughtered everything, before disappearing again. Sylvanas had executed him on the spot mid sentence.

One useful piece of info he had revealed was that the majority of the troll’s forces had pulled back toward the city center, having decided to seek strength in numbers, rather than “bein’ picked off one group at a time”. That at least explained the sudden lack of resistance they’d encountered. Cowardly mongrels, abandoning their posts over made up stories.

They were about 13 streets from the city center now, about to cross over to 12th street. The moment the first ranger stepped out of the alley and into the street, Sylvanas heard about a hundred cries of “Contact!” Come from the front. So that was where the line was.

“Pull back!” Sylvanas shouted to the front. “We’ll hold this street! Elsia’s company,” she called out to the company she was currently traveling with “move into the buildings to make room!”

The rangers quickly sprang into action, filing down the street along the walls of the buildings, arrows nocked and heads on a swivel. As the lines of rangers began kicking doors and clearing houses, Sylvanas saw the first company in the line rushing backwards, dragging wounded with them. Maybe half the unit was coming back in fighting condition, by the looks of it, with the majority of those not in fighting condition either dead or near dead. That was from maybe a minute out there.

Meanwhile an arcane mage rushed forward from Elsia’s company, immediately putting up a shield to
cover the retreat.

Sylvanas turned to one of the runners in said company. “Take the order back, we’re making camp on this street for the time being. Use the buildings, stay out of the street without La’is with you.”

The scout nodded and was gone in an instant. Sylvanas turned back to watch the wounded continue to be dragged through to where a pair of healers were working furiously to try and stabilize as many as possible.

Among them, she saw La’is’ frost blue robes stained with blood, as their wearer was carried back to safety behind cover. That wasn’t good. Even if they could push forward now, the traps would eat them alive.

She stepped toward the bloodied form of the mage. “How is she?”

A male healer with short orange hair didn’t look up at her as he focused on his patient. “Not good.” Before pulling the girl’s hood down to examine her head.

Something inside Sylvanas shifted out of place. The mage had long, slightly curly, snow colored hair - the same as Kalina’s.

Her free hand curled into a fist as she closed her eyes.

“Carry on. I’ll be setting up a command center in the tower down the street if you need me.” She spoke briskly, before turning and starting off at a fast walk. “Lor’themar, Nathanos, with me!”

A couple hours later, they’d finished converting the large tower into a base of operations. Getting everything set up and organized had proven a productive distraction from the unpleasantness of the day. It hasn’t been easy moving supplies and materials into the building, considering their inability to use the roads, but they could work on that. If they were going to be dug in here, they’d have to clear the traps out sooner or later.

“Lor’themar, you have command. I’ll be upstairs.” She said to the blond ranger, before turning and starting up the stairs to the bedroom floor of the tower. It was a nice enough setup. One half of the floor was dedicated to the bedroom itself with a balcony, the other was dedicated to a large bathroom with an expansive marble bath, the kind that was closer to a small pool.

Sylvanas decided she could probably use a clean up. Entering the bathroom, she stripped off her armor, letting it fall to the ground where she stood. Strolling over to bath proper, she turned the faucet, causing the sound of hot water beating against the marble to fill the room as the naked ranger went to assess herself in the mirror while the bath filled.

She looked exhausted, like she hadn’t slept in days, which she hadn’t. Her hair was greasy and matted in the back from extended contact with her hood, her eyeliner was smeared, blurred, and running, and her mascara had dried to the point of being brittle enough that she felt it. Her lips were just as bad, they just weren’t as noticeable because she’d always used a more natural shade for them.

The blonde looked around for something to clean her hair, quickly finding a bottle of shampoo. A shiver ran through her as she recognized the scent: green apples, the same as Kalina’s. Now she was sure she was being taunted - or, more likely, going insane.

She gently placed it down before turning back to the sink, letting out a shaky breath as the last few days came rushing back to her. It wasn’t like her to let her appearance falter so badly, even during an offensive.
It wasn’t even the fact that Kalina had died that was getting to her. This was war, after all, and they were soldiers. Coping with loss was part of the job.

No, what was getting to her was that for all her effort to keep the girl safe and close to both her and a good healer at all times, all it had earned her in the end was a front row seat. That was what really hit her in a way she wasn’t good at handling - the futility of her efforts. She was Sylvanas Windrunner, Ranger-General of Quel’thalas, one of the greatest military leaders and rangers the world had ever seen or would see, and her efforts had been futile. She had been powerless to stop what had happened, despite everything. She hadn’t been paralyzed or unaware or anything that might reasonably impair her ability to act, she had simply failed - no, worse than that, it was her own order that ultimately brought that tower down. She had killed Kalina.

A tear fell into the sink below as her hands gripped the basin. She turned back to look at the bath. It was close to overflowing. She sighed, before going over and turning off the faucet. What was done was done. There was no going back now. She had to accept that.

She took a deep breath, before getting into the water and setting about cleaning herself up.

By the time she’d finished, she was in a much better state, emotionally. She wasn’t happy by any means, on the contrary, she was miserable, but she could wait to mourn now. More importantly, she could command without distractions now.

As she got out of the bath, she grabbed a folded towel from a nearby stack and used it to dry herself, before setting it down somewhere where it would not be mistaken for a clean towel, picking up her arms and armor, and carrying them out into the hall to where she found herself facing the door to the bedroom. Opening it, she stepped inside. She could immediately see from the balcony that it was firmly night time now.

She stepped over to said balcony, which held a view over the troll held part of the city. At this point, the outcome of the battle was decided. So long as no one did anything stupid, such as rush headlong into the meat grinder in front of them, victory would be theirs.

Sylvanas debated calling in the artillery again. Her bow was already gone, all she had now were arrows. What did she have to lose? If the reports were accurate, everything past the line they’d established was absolutely packed with trolls, totems, and traps.

Friendly destruction of property always looked particularly bad, politically, she supposed. That was one reason not to immediately level the place with magic.

Her ears pricked up as she heard someone strolling up behind her. One of her rangers, by the sound of it. A ranger who clearly had no regard for the fact that this was the ranger-general’s private quarters, or that said ranger-general was wearing only a towel.

“Tell me, ranger.” She spoke without turning around. “Exactly how many pieces would you prefer your body sent home in?”

The sound of footsteps stopped, but their source did not reply.

This time Sylvanas spoke over her shoulder. “I asked you a question.”

No response. She turned around to see that whoever it was was gone. She hadn’t heard the door, which meant they were still in the room. Her bow was leaning against the door back in, along with her quiver. She dropped her towel, grabbing both instead and nocking an arrow.
Quickly, she darted back inside, checking her corners and drawing back as her eyes scanned the room.

“If you come out now, I’ll only shoot to wound.”

No response again. She noticed the door to the wardrobe was ajar.

“Fine. Be that way.” She finished, before loosing her arrow, causing it to go completely through the door to the wardrobe.

She nocked another one, before slowly approaching the piece of furniture and nudging each door open with her foot, only to find it devoid of anything but clothes and a single arrow.

It was then that she heard it, whispered in her ear:

“Behind you.”
Chapter 26

The expression on Sylvanas’ face was definitely not what Kalina had been expecting. Excitement, relief, comfort, all reactions she’d imagined. What she had not expected was fear, and certainly not terror.

“... Are you real?” The older elf finally spoke, looking so frozen she might shatter.

Kalina raised an eyebrow. “Um… yes? I’m pretty sure I’m real.”

“Prove it.”

The snow haired elf smiled. “You’re joking, right?”

Sylvanas’ tone hardened. “Prove. It.”

Kalina’s smile fell as she stared blankly at the blonde. What had happened while she’d been gone?

“O...kay... I’ll be right back.” She spoke politely, before turning around and darting out the bedroom door. She didn’t have any trouble navigating the building. It was a vacation house owned by House Dawnblade after all. Kalina had spent plenty of horrible romantic vacations here before, a fact she was sure Silvermoon would capitalize on once they found out.

As she descended the steps to the floor below, she was at least pleased to see the Ranger Corps had made themselves at home.

She needed to find someone to attest to her realness. She couldn’t simply grab any old ranger, the last thing Sylvanas needed were rumors that her mental state might be deteriorating. No, Kalina needed someone she trusted. More importantly, she needed someone Sylvanas trusted.

“Hi! Quick question.” She chirped, bothering one of the rangers guarding the bottom of the stares. The woman turned to face her, only for Kalina’s unease to increase tenfold as she saw the ever serious face of Nyana Springweaver staring back at her.

“You’re alive.” Her tone was one of passive surprise. “How did you get upstairs? Or, in here at all without anyone seeing?”

Kalina’s stomach dropped out from under her. “I was sent to scout the area in advance. The balcony was going to be used for observation, but the main force arrived too quickly. I was upstairs while everyone else was setting up down here.”

Nyana blinked. “I cleared the upstairs floors myself. No one was there.”

The girl gave a bashful smile. “I mayyyyy have been sleeping in one of the closets at the time. Scouting work is exhausting, and I’d rather not be sleeping somewhere I could be found if the trolls decided to come after me.” It was a lie of course, but she knew Nyana wouldn’t be in a position to refute it. Her room clearing was never completely thorough.

Nyana blinked. “I cleared the upstairs floors myself. No one was there.”

The dark blonde ranger seemed to consider her for a moment, before nodding slowly. “Alright then.”

Seeing that she was safe for now, Kalina’s smile widened. “Anyway, I was hoping you could help point me towards Priestess Liadrin.”

“There’s a field hospital set up in the foyer downstairs. She’s probably there.” Nyana turned away
from her as she spoke to resume her normal guard position.

“Thanks.”

Sure enough, the foyer was packed with wounded and healers. Kalina wasn’t surprised. Even she hadn’t been able to penetrate the trolls’ newly defended line. After a moment of looking around, her eyes fell on the brunette that had saved her life.

The healer had just finished working on another patient, when Kalina approached her. She looked exhausted, like she’d spent the last few days without sleep, subsisting on energy potions alone.

“Liadrin! I need you to come quick.”

Liadrin looked up at her, her eyes going wide amidst their tired, unfocused haze. “Aren’t you d-“

“Yes, yes, a building fell on me, happens to everyone, now quick, come with me.” She took Liadrin’s hand, before setting off at a jog. “Come on, this is important!”

“Where are we going?” The healer tried to ask as she was yanked along.

“Just quick, it’s important.”

A short while later, Kalina found herself on the top floor of the tower again, outside the bedroom door. She turned to Liadrin.

“Okay, I need you to trust me here. What you’re about to see and hear, you cannot breathe a word of to anyone, okay?”

Liadrin gave her a blank look. “I’m a healer. Don’t worry, I’m good at keeping secrets.”

Kalina nodded. “Good. This’ll only take a sec, then.” She raised her hand to the door and knocked out a quick rhythm.

Sylvanas’ voice came back, sounding tired and hoarse. “Come in.”

Kalina opened the door and stepped inside. Looking to her left, her eyes fell on Sylvanas, who was now sitting on the bed in full uniform. Her eyes were red and puffy. Had she been crying?

“You’re back.” She spoke quietly, looking at her with a mix of rage and sorrow. “Tormenting me once wasn’t enough?”

Kalina sighed, before turning to the robed elf. “Liadrin, I need you to tell Sylvanas that I am real.”

The room went silent as the brunette looked between the pair, as if assessing whether or not they were genuinely insane. “... You pulled me away... from my duties... for this.”

“Just please?”

Liadrin gave a heavy sigh. “You know what? Fuck it. Fine. I don’t have time to argue.” She turned to Sylvanas. “Sylvanas, yes. Kalina is real. She is really standing here. She really dragged me away in the middle of everything to tell you that; and she is a real pain in the ass.” She turned her head back to face Kalina. “Now can I go?”

The girl gave a quick nod. Liadrin was gone fast enough to have teleported.

Sylvanas’ was quiet as all the feelings that were clearly displayed just a moment ago seemed to
disappear, leaving shock and a tired disbelief in their place. “... You’re actually here.” She finally spoke.

Kalina grinned. “Duh.”

All at once, the blonde rushed forward and wrapped her arms around her. “I thought I’d lost you again.”

The shorter elf returned the hug. “It’ll take a lot more than a building collapsing on top of me to stop me.”

Sylvanas broke the hug with a look of amusement on her face. “Like a caltrop?”

The assassin giggled. “In my defense, that was me falling on it, not the other way around. Completely different dynamic.”

“Mhm. Sure.”

Kalina went to lie down on the bed. “So what’d I miss?” She asked as she flopped backwards onto the soft feather mattress.

Sylvanas sat down next to her. “We had to pull out of the city after the initial assault, but we’ve slowly managed to push back in. We haven’t been able to get further than we are now, though. That’s why we’ve set up here for the time being.”

She nodded. “Mm. I haven’t been able to get further in either. Even worse, they know to expect me now. One of their shamans almost captured me when I tried.”

“I was thinking of just having the mages go in and wipe everything, collateral be damned. I wasn’t sure how bad the political backlash would be though, so I’ve held off for the time being. The current plan is to cut them off and let them eat each other, same as they tried to do to us.”

Kalina sat up and shook her head. “What Silvermoon wants more than anything right now is a swift and decisive victory as proof of their ability to lead. They’ll probably be furious that their villas and wine cellars are destroyed, but not enough to turn it into a thing. Starving them out is the exact opposite of what they want.”

Sylvanas looked at her with a renewed smile. “So, just to be absolutely clear, what you’re saying is...”

“Burn the mother down.”

The sun was rising as Kalina sat on the balcony, her legs going under the railing and hanging over the edge. Sylvanas had sent runners to the other two battalions ordering them to make the necessary preparations to burn the trolls. That meant giving them a good night’s rest and lots of food to restore their energy. The plan was to wait a full 24 hours while everything else was set in order, before beginning the barrage.

The fire and generalized mages would rain hell down on the area proper, while the frost mages would be going in with the main force to neutralize any traps. The barrage mages weren’t going to hit 13th street for fear of bringing the command center down. They were going to hit about three streets away, about nine streets from the very center of town, and slowly move inward.

The rangers had already barricaded most of the alleys and other paths through, leaving a few main
roads to the center of town unblocked and covered with troops. While the mages were hitting the central area, they would use the chaos to try and push in to hit 12th street and gain a foothold.

Despite Kalina’s insistence that she’d be far more effective working as a solo infiltrator during all this, Sylvanas had insisted she go in as normal both for political reasons and to avoid suspicion. The last thing the ranger-general needed was to be summoned for a hearing on the employment of dishonorable methods. Silvermoon couldn’t go after her for destroying their personal property, but they could absolutely go after her for dishonor, far below what’s expected of a Highborne general.

For now, however, Kalina’s job was mostly to wait. She’d already reported in to Halduron, but was surprised to find out she’d been assigned to guarding the general’s quarters during the interim period. If she thought Sylvanas was holding onto her tightly before, it was nothing compared to now.

She’d been pleased to find out, however, that - purely in the interest of saving space, considering their precarious situation with the streets still being trapped - she’d been bunked in the same room as her good platonic friend the ranger-general. Officially that meant she’d be sleeping in a sleeping bag on the floor at the opposite end of the room. Officially.

A chilling shriek of agony split the night. Kalina sighed and lay back. She was almost glad to be sitting where she was, that at least she didn’t have to see what was going on down below. The magisters had offered their services in clearing out the traps. Rather than this meaning more frost mages like one would think, they had instead sent a more direct method of finding and dealing with the major issue that had plagued their logistics: test subjects.

Most crimes in Quel’thalas were punished by public humiliation, banishment, or execution. If one ticked off a magister enough, though, the organization could pull some strings and have them be punished by “community service”. The unlucky prisoner was then stripped of their name, title, rights, and assets, and instead given a simple number. From there, the magisters could use them for anything they wanted. Most died as magical or alchemical test subjects. It was the really unlucky ones that got to live.

Rhalyf had had more than a few people dragged away in the night for such purposes, including anyone Kalina had gotten too close to during the first 11 years of their marriage. Any girl she was seen talking to for too long who wasn’t powerful or well connected enough magically disappeared. He’d even made Kalina watch what was done to them, a few times. It was just another reason she’d been unable to even try leaving him.

She got up and went inside, before flopping down on the bed and burying her head under the pillows. She didn’t need to hear what was going on down there.

Without realizing it, she passed out at some point. When she next awoke, the light coming in through the balcony was dimmer. It was probably around late afternoon.

“Sleep well?”

She looked over to see Sylvanas sitting there on the bed with a smirk.

“How long have you been there?”

The blonde shrugged. “A few minutes. I figured you might be getting bored.”

Kalina sat up, her hair falling into her face. “Sorry. I just have trouble with some of the magisters’ methods so I tried covering my ears with the pillows.”

Sylvanas nodded, before reaching over with a finger and pushing the hair out of the girl’s face. “I
don’t like it either, but we can’t do much about it. You know that better than I do.”

The younger elf nodded. “How long til we’re going in?”

“About eight hours. You should go get something to eat while you can.”

Kalina lay back down. “I’m not that hungry.”

“Kali.” Sylvanas placed a hand on her. “Eat something. You’ll feel much better. That’s an order.”

She couldn’t help but smile as she sat up again. “Yes ma’am.”

Sylanas leaned down and kissed her on the forehead. “Good. I love you.”

Kalina giggled. “I love you too.” She replied, before exiting the room.

The tower’s underground kitchens had proven more than sufficient for some of the more skilled cooks in the Ranger Corps to begin preparing meals from the provisions that’d been brought in with them.

It only took a short while of waiting in line for Kalina to get her food - hot and spicy stew with a side of warm naan. The size of the meal was a lot more than she was used to seeing in the rangers, not including her cooking for Sylvanas. That and the presence of flatbread struck her as odd, since the materials for baking wouldn’t normally be available during an offensive. She figured one of two things probably happened. Either the cooks found the necessary ingredients in the kitchens, or the magisters brought them in from Silvermoon. She was betting on the latter, considering how much food was on her plate. A lifetime of awesome food had made military provisions harder to get used to when she’d first joined. She could only imagine how hard of a time Silvermoon’s self superior magic wielders were having adjusting.

Because she knew every nook and cranny of the house, it wasn’t hard for her to find a secluded spot where she could eat in peace, on a small terrace normally used for tea. It was to her surprise then that less than a minute into her meal Nyana approached her, carrying her own plate of food.

“May I sit?” She asked, already putting her plate down.

Kalina blinked. The girl was as blunt as ever, it seemed. “Go for it.”

She did so. They ate in silence for a few minutes, before the blonde elf broke it.

“This place is owned by House Dawnblade, correct?”

Kalina nodded and swallowed. “Uh yeah, it’s a vacation home mostly.”

“Then I assume you and your husband used to spend a lot of time here.”

Something felt off. Nyana had never shown even the slightest interest in idle chit-chat before. In Silvermoon, social interactions almost always had an ulterior agenda; nothing was an accident - and Nyana was born and raised in Silvermoon.

Kalina closed her eyes, feigning a gentle sorrow. “We did.” She replied, her voice barely above a whisper.

Nyana took another bite of naan before nodding. “You have my condolences. I too know what it’s like to have the Canary take a loved one.”
Kalina’s hands tightened into fists as her lips curled into a scowl at the mention of the name. It was a reflex she’d trained herself on a long time ago, one that had served her well.

Nyana continued, taking clear notice of her reaction. “I feel the same. She took my father from me, Major Renarus Springweaver of the Silvermoon guard.”

Kalina nodded solemnly, before taking another bite of stew. “I’m sorry.” She wasn’t.

“I found it particularly odd that she chose a caged bird as her pseudonym. It seemed to imply a sense of how she viewed herself.”

Kalina’s tone was sharp. “You’ll forgive me if I’m not keen on discussing my husband’s murderer.” She stood up, picking up her plate.

Nyana likewise stood up, and put a hand on her arm. “You have my apologies. I simply found it intriguing that she disappeared around the same time your husband was killed.”

Kalina’s blood went cold as she herself went still as a statue. Whereas a moment ago, Nyana’s face was as calm and serious as it had always been, now Kalina saw her doing something she’d never done once in the 25 years they’d been comrades.

She was smirking.

The snow haired elf sat back down slowly, before gesturing for the other ranger to do the same. Nyana complied, now folding one leg over the other.

“I found it even more interesting that-“

Kalina cut her off. “Just say what you mean to. We’re not in Silvermoon and I don’t have time to play politics.”

The girl’s grin widened. “No, you certainly don’t.” She dropped the smile immediately in favor of a cold, piercing gaze. “Why?”

The assassin dipped her naan in her stew, before taking a bite. “Why in general or why your dad?”

“Both.”

“The answer is the same, and I told him as much. It was for a good cause.”

She snorted. “Bloodthistle’s a good cause now?”

“In this case, yes.”

Nyana went silent. She moved to take another bite of food, before clearly stopping herself. “...Perhaps you don’t understand the situation at hand. I’m giving you a chance to explain your actions. This is your one and only opportunity to persuade me to not turn you in.”

Kalina raised an eyebrow. “You don’t wanna kill me yourself?”

The woman chuckled coldly. “My father was a guard officer. He stood for law and order, as foreign as those concepts must be to you. Turning you in would do his memory far greater justice than simply killing you.”

She sighed. “Fine. You’re not gonna like what you hear, though.”
“Try me.”

Kalina opened her mouth to speak, before closing it again. She couldn’t. It had been hard enough
telling the council exactly what had happened, she couldn’t bear the thought of telling Nyana of all
people.

She wondered if she could kill the girl then and there. No. Nyana wasn’t stupid enough to make this
sort of confrontation without an ace in the hole.

“Who’s your backup?” The assassin finally asked

She looked incredulous. “My backup?”

“You didn’t sit down to talk to me without knowing that it could go sideways. You have a backup,
someone with orders for if you suddenly die or go missing.”

“Even if I did, why would I tell you that?”

“Because I want you to understand how bad of an idea it would be for them to try anything.”

Nyana went quiet as she sat back in her chair, her eyes now seeming to analyze the girl across from
her. “I’m listening.”

“For starters, the council already knows everything. The king himself is aware. All seven major
houses have contracted my services on multiple occasions; and knowing this, they’ve just invested a
substantial amount of political capital into making me their poster girl for loyalty and service to the
kingdom. That’s an investment that, if I were to be revealed, would destroy them, politically.”

Nyana’s face dropped.

Kalina continued. “So what I’m saying is, the more people know you know, the more at risk you are,
especially if they decide to go ahead and tell someone of their own initiative. All I want now is to
serve my king.” She leaned forward, placing a hand on Nyana’s and squeezing it. “You’ve been a
good comrade in arms, and are an excellent ranger, so I can protect you from them, but I need you to
tell me who else knows so that I can make sure you’re safe.”

Nyana gaped. “I… you can’t just… at least…” she swallowed as her hands began to tremble.
“N…Nathanos. He was the only one who I knew wouldn’t have a stake in it.”

Kalina’s eyes widened. “And the only one you knew I couldn’t touch.”

She nodded slowly.

The girl went quiet, before taking another bite of her food as she contemplated the severity of the
situation. She noticed Nyana still wasn’t eating.

“Oh for light’s sake, it’s not poisoned. I told you, we’re on the same side.”

The girl stared down at her food again, clearly famished, before hesitantly picking up a piece of naan
and putting it in her mouth.

“Good. You’ll need your strength for tonight.”

She quickly nodded as her eyes began to water at the realization that after over a century of
preparation, she’d never get her revenge.
‘Too easy.’

“You keep eating, enjoy yourself. I’m going to go see what I can do about the loose end.”

Nyana nodded again, tears now rolling down her cheeks as she pulled her hand away and began practically shoving the food into her mouth.

Kalina got up and took a few steps before stopping. “And for what it’s worth, I am genuinely sorry for what happened.” She still wasn’t.

Without another word, she walked off, not bothering to look back at the carnage she’d left in her wake.
12th street was downright bustling as Sylvanas stepped through it. Everywhere she looked, she could see patrols, wagons of supplies being carried in, and fortifications being set up. She had to admit, as macabre as the magisters’ methods were, she couldn’t deny they were swift and effective. Not that she’d ever let Kalina hear her say that.

With the street and their path into the town clear, they were actually able to organize and coordinate on a substantial scale again. It was refreshing.

In one hand she carried a plate of food with her, expertly balanced. While it wasn’t as much as she was used to Kalina making for her, it was more than they normally got as rangers. It would hold her over for the time being.

“Ranger-general.” Came a gruff voice. Sylvanas turned to see Nathanos standing there, clearly trying to suppress a grin.

“Marris.” She addressed him. While in Quel’thalas it was normal to address people by their first names primarily, even in official titles, the humans made a habit of using the last name instead. Officially he was Nathanos, as any elf would be, but privately she liked to address him in the human custom.

“Can we speak alone?”

She blinked. “Of course.” Before turning and strolling into the nearest available building. It looked to have been a magical supplies store before the trolls ransacked it. She kept walking until they were safely in a back room, away from any prying eyes or ears. She set down her plate on a nearby crate, before hopping up to sit next to it.

“Now, what was it you wished to discuss?” She asked as she dipped her naan in her stew.

Nathanos looked positively giddy now, even as he was clearly trying to hide it. “I’ve received some disturbing news about your friend, Kalina, milady.”

Sylvanas stopped as she was about to take a bite, before putting her food down on her plate and folding one leg over the other. “What kind of news?”

“You’re… not gonna like this, ma’am.” He said before reaching under his armor and pulling out a thick envelope, which he handed to her.

Sylvanas took it in her other hand. “And what’s this?”

“Evidence.” He said, causing her to pause in the middle of opening it as her blood ran just a touch colder.

“… evidence of what?”

“Apparently Kalina isn’t as sweet and innocent as she lets on. She’s a high profile assassin, known here as the Canary, responsible for thousands of high elf deaths.”

Sylvanas went still for a second, before the ripping the envelope open. If Nathanos knew, then this was not a small situation. Luckily, she had a few tricks up her sleeve that could buy them some time. They weren’t much, she never did have Kalina’s talent for cloak and dagger work, but they would
“Impossible…” she mumbled as she read over the evidence. While it wasn’t conclusive, it was certainly substantial. What was worse, it clearly hadn’t been gathered by him. Much of it was far older than him. Then again, the envelope was sealed when she’d received it, which meant he might not know that. “And you discovered this all on your own?”

He nodded, almost glowing now. “Yes milady.”

She set the envelope down. “Very well. Thank you for bringing this to my attention, Marris. I shall see to it post haste.”

“And you discovered this all on your own?”

She nodded, almost glowing now. “Yes milady.”

She set the envelope down. “Very well. Thank you for bringing this to my attention, Marris. I shall see to it post haste.”

“Anytime, milady.”

Sylvanas smiled warmly as she now locked eyes with him. “You’ve always been one of my most astute rangers.” She got down from her crate and stepped close to him, her body now practically pressed against his. “It’s just one of the many reasons I’ve always kept you so close.” She took his hand gently. “I hope you feel the same way.”

‘Kali I’m so sorry for this.’

As she gently placed his hand on her ass, she reached up with her other hand and cupped Nathanos’s chin between her finger tips, before all at once diving in, her tongue invading his mouth like it was the Legion as her fangs nashed against the human’s lips in a downright ferocious act, equal parts love and lust.

The human ranger didn’t need much convincing, the hand on her ass immediately undoing her pants while the other worked its way up her body before taking a firm hold of one of her breasts.

Sylvanas had to force herself to keep from screaming at that moment, as her skin crawled and her every fiber seemed to shriek out against what she was doing. It was all for Kalina, she told herself as her own hand ripped his lower garments to shreds. She could do this. She had to.

Thankfully, Nathanos only lasted a few seconds, something Sylvanas made no attempt to stop from happening. Regardless, her performance was convincing enough that he didn’t seem to notice.

As her panting slowly winded down from where she lay on the floor, she could feel the human pulling out of her, a self satisfied smirk on his face. Maybe she’d been too convincing, she thought.

As her performance came to a close, Nathanos rolled over to lie next to her, arms folded under his head.

Sylvanas closed her eyes for a moment, before opening them again as she turned over to rest her head on his chest, with her arm draped over him.

“I need to ask a favor of you.” She spoke softly as she looked up at him.

He looked back down at her with a quizzical expression “Anything.”

“Don’t tell anyone about Kali. I’ll deal with her myself, just… if this gets out, it could destroy me, politically.”

Nathanos seemed to take a second to consider the request. “… Of course, milady.”

She climbed up his chest to give him a brief kiss on the lips. “Thank you.” Before rolling back off
him to pull up her pants and slowly getting to her feet. “Anyway, I should get back before anyone misses me. We’ll speak soon.”

She couldn’t stay there a second longer. Without another word, she was gone. The moment she was out she half walked, half ran to make it back to her quarters. She needed to wash herself off, more than anything. They had maybe six hours until the operation was a go. Plenty of time to wash away what had just happened. After that she needed to find Kalina and coordinate with her.

As she was about to ascend the steps to her floor, she was stopped by Lor’themar. “Ranger-General, if I might have a moment.”

Sylvanas turned to face him, composed as ever despite the horrible maelstrom of negative emotions circling inside her. “Of course, Lor’themar. What is it you need?”

“I just thought you should know Kalina Dawnblade has been looking for you. It seemed quite urgent.”

She nodded. “Thank you. I’ll go look for her shortly. Was there anything else?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Then allow me to take my leave.”

She made it the rest of the way without further distraction. The moment the bathroom door was closed, she grabbed a nearby towel and buried her face in it. Even now, she could feel him inside her. Why did she go so far?

It was all because Kalina had gotten careless. So much of the evidence in that folder was circumstantial or avoidable. Had she actually focused on not arousing suspicion, instead of dancing with her knives and her poison, drawing birds in blood wherever she pleased, this never would have happened.

No. Sylvanas stopped herself. She couldn’t think like that. She’d chosen to fuck Nathanos. No one had made that choice for her. That was something she had to live with. Besides, Kalina had done the same for her as the Canary.

She just needed to breathe and assess the situation calmly. She still hadn’t gotten anything to eat, since she’d completely forgotten her meal back there. Add that to the stress she was under trying to take back this light-forsaken town that the trolls had somehow turned into their own personal jungle, and things were at a boiling point. She couldn’t start lashing out or placing blame now. That would help no one and hurt everyone.

She set the towel down. She didn’t have time to spiral. She had too much to focus on. Getting up from where she was sitting, she walked over to the bathtub and turned on the faucet.

As the sound of water hitting marble rang out through the floor, Kalina breathed a sigh of relief as she made it to the top of the stairs outside. Sylvanas was here. That was good. It meant she’d made it to her before Nathanos did. All she had to do now was wait for her to come out.

She leaned back against the wall, before sliding down to sit on the floor. She wondered how long Nyana would stay domesticated for. On paper, Kalina could keep her in line for the foreseeable future, but unless she solidified their relationship, she’d eventually develop a spine and break loose. Killing her was always an option, but she knew the council was watching, and if she gave them any reason to suspect she was still active, that would be enough.
She could always just hand her over to them. They’d surely have no problem coming up with a false charge to either have the guards drag her off in public or have the magisters drag her off in private. The question was, though, whether they would, and more importantly, whether it would make them reevaluate their investment in her image. So far said investment had been going well for them. She’d pretty much come back from the dead in the eyes of her comrades, something that was sure to do wonders. Add that to the fact that Quel’dorei forward command was located where it was, and Silvermoon had more than enough fresh ammo to bolster their PR campaign.

But if her continued presence on the battlefield meant more and more information breaches, there would come a point where they deemed her too much trouble to cover for, and would arrange for her to die valiantly in battle somehow.

And then there was the question of her relationship with Sylvanas. Sure, in the midst of a war, posing simply as friends allowed plenty of leeway to spend time in private together, or in close proximity to each other. But what about outside the military? The past few decades they’d spent every Winter’s Veil together the same way they had before she’d been married off to Rhalyf. They’d been inseparable. What sort of scrutiny would they come under now?

Her worries were interrupted by the bathroom door opening. Sylvanas stepped out, dripping wet and completely naked this time, rather than wrapped in anything.

Kalina stood up. “Sylvanas there’s a pr-”

“I know, Kali.” Sylvanas spoke, turning to face her. She looked… less happy than Kalina had ever seen her, like it had all been taken out of her. “Nathanos is taken care of but he had help. Did you find out who?”

The snow haired girl paused as she took in the older elf’s expression, before nodding. “It was Nyana. She won’t be a problem for the immediate future.”

Sylvanas nodded slowly as if to take in the news, before going back into the bathroom and returning a few seconds later with a thick envelope. “This is everything they have on you. I trust you can cover your tracks?”

Kalina nodded as her eyes widened at the sheer bulk of it. “I’ll get it done.”

Something in Sylvanas seemed to melt away as she gave a tired smile. “Good.” She started towards the bedroom before stopping again. “Kali, there’s… something you should know.” She turned back to face the girl. “In order to get ahold of that envelope, and to get Nathanos’ silence, I had to…” her lips pressed together as she looked away, seeming to try avoiding to avoid Kalina’s gaze.

Her stomach dropped. “What did you have to do?” Her voice was barely above a whisper.

“I… he…” She saw Sylvanas’ hands were shaking now as a tear hit the floor.

Immediately the girl rushed forward, her arms wrapping around Sylvanas. “It’s okay. It’ll be okay. I’m here. I’ll kill him.”

She felt the blonde grip her like a vice while shaking her head. “No, I… I made the first move.”

Kalina froze, before relaxing again. “It’s okay. You did it to protect me.”

Sylvanas only nodded.

Silence fell. They stayed there for a while, neither saying anything. Finally, Kalina spoke again.
“I’ll talk to Nathanos before we go into battle.”

“Don’t kill him.”

“I won’t. He’s your friend.” She replied calmly.

Sylvanas broke the hug and nodded again. “Good. Anyway, we should probably get ready. We have only a couple of hours left. Go get new weapons and gear from the quartermaster and check in with Halduron once you’re finished with Nathanos.” She said, before leaning in and pressing her lips to Kalina’s.

At first the girl thought it was just a normal kiss on the lips. The feeling of Sylvanas’ tongue wrestling with hers banished such beliefs as she eagerly returned the dance. After maybe a minute of putting their tongues in each other’s mouths, Sylvanas pulled away with a smirk.

“Just in case things don’t go well down there.”

Kalina giggled. “Love you, Sylvanas.”

“Love you too.” She replied as she turned and went into their bedroom.

It hadn’t taken long to get new weapons and gear from the quartermaster, though Kalina hadn’t particularly enjoyed the look of ‘are you fucking serious’ she’d gotten when she explained to them that all of her weapons were gone.

All around her, she could see units beginning to assemble and brief on their objectives. While they hadn’t been given a take no prisoners order, it was definitely discouraged. The trolls were far bigger and stronger than them, and capturing one in the midst of battle would take far too long and leave one far too vulnerable. Thus, kills were strongly encouraged, though the sentiment was that if they did have the opportunity to make a capture, no strings attached, the lucky savage could be put to use clearing out the traps they’d dug.

As she reached her companies assembly point, she saw Nathanos sitting on a supplies crate, looking thoroughly annoyed, while Nyana sat practically at the opposite end of the group, staring at the dirt in a look of shame, like she was about to start crying again at any moment.

As Kalina approached the human, he turned to face her, only for his eyes to widen.

“Surprised to see me?” She asked as she approached him, before gesturing for him to follow. “We need to talk.”
“Kalina!” The girl heard Halduron calling out as she exited the house. She turned to see him jogging over to her. “Could I talk to you for a minute?”

Kalina’s blood froze yet again. Did he know also? She supposed if he had intended any action against her, it would have happened already. That meant that he was on her side, meaning another officer helping her cover up and strengthening the web. Excellent.

“Sure thing, sir, what do you need?”

“I have to ask a favor of you.” He said as he reached her.

Kalina raised an eyebrow. Okay, so he didn’t know, but it was still odd for him to be asking a favor given he was her commanding officer. “Of course.”

“Right, you see that ranger standing way behind m- No! Don’t look! Just look without looking.”

Luckily for Kalina, her time in Silvermoon had trained her well in the art of looking without looking. “The blonde one with her head down?” She asked as she carefully gazed at the girl. She had long, pale blonde hair, a much warmer, lighter shade than Sylvanas’. She seemed to be hiding her face under her hood, while gripping one arm tightly in the other.

“That’s her. We only just got her in, fresh out of training. Her name’s Velonara. I was hoping you could let her follow you around in the battle ahead, sort of a training run. She seemed like she was rushed out of training to meet demand, so if you could offer her any tips, I’d greatly appreciate it.”

Kalina blinked. Was this girl sent to spy on her or something? “I’d be happy to.”

“Great! She’s, uh, sort of shy, so just keep that in mind.”

‘Not exactly winning her any confidence.’

Of all the fake personalities to adopt for spying on someone, the shy girl was by far the easiest to pull off. It allowed one to be disregarded and discounted as a threat fairly early into any interaction, while really listening in the entire time.

“Will do, sir.” She replied as Halduron clapped her on the shoulder, before turning and strolling off.

Once Halduron was gone, Kalina pretended to be checking her nails for a few moments, before turning and approaching the possible spy.

“Velonara?” She asked as she got close, causing the girl to look up in surprise. She was certainly pretty, even by elf standards, something that did help in infiltration though was a double edged sword if one was trying to play the shy act.

“Oh! Um, yes. That’s me.” Her grip on her arm tightened.

“My name’s Kalina. Halduron said we were to stay together tonight?”

Her eyes widened in surprise as she sucked in a sharp breath. “You’re the woman from the posters…”

‘Now I feel old.’
Velonara sputtered. “I mean! I thought it was you, except, um…” she saw the girl’s eyes dart down to her chest for a split second.

‘Oh for light’s sake they’re not that small!’

They were absolutely that small.

Kalina smiled nonetheless. “It’s fine, happens all the time. Just stay close to me, do what I say, and you’ll do great. Cool?”

She nodded.

“Great.”

The first fireball to light up the night sky signalled the start of the operation, and caused the mages of all three battalions to act in kind. Before long the sky was full of fire and arcane missiles that rose brilliantly into the darkness above, before hovering there for the barest instant, and then falling back down, hitting their targets with the sound of thunderous explosions.

After about a minute of waiting for chaos to set in, it was their turn. The sound of a horn blowing from Sylvanas atop the tower signalled as much.

“Rangers!” Kalina heard Lor’themar’s voice call out in response to the signal. “Forward!”

As one single formation, the company rushed forward. The streets turned to ice below them as La’is stood at the front under heavy guard, freezing every inch of their path she could get her hands in range of.

The moment they made it onto 13th street, the formation broke as spears, axes, darts, and magic all came flying at them, and likewise each window and doorway was peppered with arrows. In areas where the ground was frozen over, the green giants rushed out of the buildings, weapons drawn as they engaged the rangers.

The first troll Kalina saw emerge from a building was a relatively lean one, carrying some sort of two handed axe. Her answer was swift and precise as the arrow went into his mouth and out the back of his brainstem. He dropped to the ground immediately, the sight of his death keeping his compatriots pinned while Kalina turned to focus on other trolls.

While the green brutes were greatly slowed by their need to maintain balance on the ice, the elves’ boots were enchanted specifically for traction on all surfaces, meaning they had no issue whatsoever.

She turned and put two more arrows into another of the charging cannibals before they finally reached her, causing her to put away her bow in favor of her swords. Brute strength was on their side but that was all they had now. In the confined street, the rangers had them outmatched in every other way.

One of them swung a heavy club at her in a horizontal arc, which she dodged by dropping to the ground while simultaneously driving one of her blades into the monster’s calf, causing him to immediately collapse onto the ice as what little footing he had completely gave way, sending him sprawling backwards, his club going wide. Kalina wasted no time, darting up onto his chest and driving her blade under his jaw before he could get his bearings.

She turned her head to see Velonara fighting one with several arrows in its chest, using her bow as a melee weapon. It was a practice that was fairly widely taught in the rangers, but one which Kalina had never personally employed except around evaluation time.
At the moment the young ranger was learning exactly why it wasn’t something Kalina practiced as the troll bore down on her, knocking her to the ground with a single parried strike.

Kalina immediately withdrew her blade from her troll’s jaw before rushing towards the pair, diving and sliding on the ice feet first as she used to momentum to draw her blades across the back of the troll’s knees before he could get another strike in, causing him to collapse like his companion.

“Swords! Now!” She barked at the newbie, before she could even think of reaching for an arrow.

The girl obeyed, stowing her bow, swiftly drawing her blades, and plunging them both into the troll’s skull.

Kalina got to her feet. “They’re not Quel’dorei. Don’t go for torso shots, and don’t try to match them in brute force. Neither will work.”

She looked up just in time to see a pair of handaxes coming town on her, causing her to roll out of the way and do something she never thought she’d be able to do to a troll:

Kick his legs out from under him.

Drawing her own leg in a tight hook, she brought him down hard, causing him to fall face first onto his comrade, at which point Kalina was already waiting to drive her sword through his neck.

She looked back at the younger ranger. “Okay, that was an exception, cus we’re standing on ice, but in general, do not try to brute force a troll.”

The blonde nodded slowly. Kalina noticed she was still staring at the troll she’d finished. Her eyes were wide and her mouth slightly agape.

“First kill?” Kalina asked as she looked around to see the trolls slowly being pushed back.

She nodded again.

“You’ll get used to it. Now come on, fight’s not over yet.”

As more and more ground was gained, the rangers began clearing houses door to door. This was where things got more hazardous. “Kalina, with me!” She heard someone call as they ran past, tapping her on the shoulder. She recognized the voice as belonging to Cyndia Hawkspear.

“Right behind you!” She called with a nod as she got up and signalled for Velonara to follow, before she raced after Cyndia, towards one of the buildings along with one other ranger she recognized as Alerin Feathershield, from Elsia’s company.

They stacked up against the wall, Cyndia first, Alerin second, her in third, and Velonara in fourth. Cyndia held up three fingers, using them to count down silently before, at zero, turning and kicking in the door before leaning against the other side of the frame as Alerin immediately rushed the breach.

Kalina had to stop herself at the very last moment from crossing the threshold as she watched Alerin burst into flame with a shriek to agony.

“Back back back!” She yelled as Velonara bumped into her. There was a second of delay before the girl responded to the sudden shock, allowing Kalina the room to retreat.

Finding cover on the edge of the doorway, she turned to Cyndia, who gave her a questioning look.
from the opposite side as if to ask ‘totem?’, to which Kalina responded verbally so her charge could understand.

“Totem, my side.” She said as she withdrew her bow and nocked an arrow.

Standard policy for taking out a totem from afar was for one person to disrupt the delicate magic with an arrow long enough for the other to rush in and destroy it up close. Multiple arrows also did the trick over time.

Drawing her shot back, she stepped just enough into the doorway to get a view of the totem, before releasing her arrow just as she saw it about to light her up. Her heart skipped a beat as the projectile struck its target, disrupting the magic and giving a clean window.

“Go!”

Cyndia’s reaction was immediate as she dove into the fray, while Kalina nocked another arrow and followed after. By the time she and Velonara got in, the brunette had already cut the totem in half. Kalina breathed a sigh of relief. The three cleared the next few rooms in short order, most of them either empty or filled with arrows and corpses.

As they finished clearing the last room, Kalina gently kicked one of the bodies to see if it was still breathing, before she heard Cyndia’s voice behind her.

“We check upstairs yet?”

She turned around and shook her head. “Not yet. You wanna take point or should I?”

Cyndia smirked. “Oh, no question, I’m taking point. Can’t let you hog all the glory, now can I?”

Kalina smiled. “By all means.”

Whereas Kalina’s background was as an assassin, something where glory was only really an acceptable outcome in the form of notoriety, Cyndia, like Sylvanas, had come from a family with heavy investment in the Ranger Corps. As the baby of said family, she was always incredibly competitive in every aspect of her duties, due in large part to the fact that her older brother, Renthar, was a respected officer and she wasn’t.

As the trio slowly ascended the staircase, all three of them kept arrows nocked, with Velonara hanging down towards the bottom of the rotating ascent, covering the entrance to the next floor, while Kalina stood midway up the stairs, and Cyndia pushed the entrance itself.

As the brunette neared the top of the staircase, she suddenly cursed loudly and ducked as, where her head had just been a moment ago, a spear had embedded itself in the wall.

“Fucking contact!” She called out, before charging in as the other rushed up the stairs to catch up.

Upon reaching the room above, Kalina was met with a tense sight. On one side of the room stood Cyndia, bow drawn back and aimed at the troll’s head. On the other, said troll stood with a speak drawn back in one hand.

The room held three corpses in it, two of them peppered with arrows, and the third appearing to have bled out from a glancing hit to neck.

“Just drop it, kid.” Cyndia spoke, eyes locked with his. “You’re outnumbered. Even if you got me, my friends here would rip you to shreds. Isn’t that right?”
Kalina looked at Cyndia. “By the snow, let me do the talking.” Before turning back to face the troll. “Listen, we’ve been authorized to take prisoners. Just put the spear down and relax, okay? None of us have to die today.”

The troll couldn’t have been far past maturity. His face was young and his arms trembled as they held the spear. “You be killin all me friends! Why should I be doin different?”

“They tried to fight and they died for it. You don’t have to. Your life doesn’t have to end here. Just put down the spear, and you can go home when this is all over.”

His eyes darted back and forth. “And what’s ta stop me from killin da tree of ya right here and now?” There was a tremble in his voice. He didn’t believe his own words.

Kalina sighed. “Let me tell you a story. Just a story, that’s all I want, okay?”

He gave a slow nod, now looking at her.

‘Perfect.’

“Once upon a time, there was a young girl, and her favorite time of the year was Winter’s Veil. There was nothing she loved more in the world than the feeling of playing in the snow and-“

The second Kalina said ‘snow’, Cyndia loosed her arrow, taking the troll by surprise and driving the projective through his eye and out the back of his head.

“Nice.” Kalina said, turning to the brunette. It was a trick rangers were taught for when dealing with hostage situations. They’d have a code word to take the shot, and then distract the hostage taker while lining it up. No one ever expected their enemy to attack mid sentence, and they’d almost always be most wary of the speaker, so that left the marksman an excellent chance to take them out. If the situation arose too suddenly, the code word could be communicated by placing it in an obvious part of a sentence, like ‘by the snow’.

Kalina turned to see Velonara staring at the body. “You okay?”

Nodding, she slowly replied. “He was an enemy of Quel’thalas.” She swallowed. “I feel no sympathy for him.”

The older elf nodded. “You wanna take point for the next room?”

“Sure.”

They cleared the rest of the building in short order. By the time they got back outside, the fighting had moved further on, and healers were tending to the wounded. Most of the combat able rangers still this far back were clearing buildings. The sounds of fighting a block over told them the rangers had crossed into 13th street.

“Cmon, let’s go!” Cyndia called out to the pair. “We’re missing the action!”

The moment they stepped onto 13th street, like flicking a switch the environment shifted from relatively peaceful to the thick of the combat. Kalina rushed in, immediately catching a troll by surprise as she drew a blade across his arm, causing his guard to come open and allowing her to drive the other into his stomach.

She yanked the sword out to see Velonara engaging another one, this time dancing around it with her blades. Good. The girl learned quickly.
She turned to look for another, and saw one wielding a staff wandering onto the battlefield. Before he could take notice of her, she had already drawn her bow and nocked an arrow.

‘Not this time, prick.’

The shot when straight through his temple, causing him to hit the ground like a hammer had smashed him there.

As the trolls started to lose ground again, Kalina called out to the pair. “Cyndia, Velonara, with me!”

They lined up along a nearby wall again, this time with Kalina on point. As she kicked in the door, the other two darted inside, swords drawn, only to be met with immediately resistance as the trolls inside proved to be very much not dead. She rushed in after them, only to lose her bearings as she was slammed against the wall, the brute’s thumb quickly finding her neck and beginning to squeeze. He could’ve just snapped it there, Kalina knew, but no, he wanted to take his time.

She kicked and struggled, flailing her arms at him weakly, as her blades had fallen when she’d first been hit. The pressure slowly grew worse and worse, until the girl could hear her head pounding as darkness began to close in on her. Just as she was about to let go, she was suddenly released, dropping to the ground on all fours and gasping for air as the troll hit the ground next to her.

She collapsed to lay on her stomach, her head turning to see Velonara standing there, hilt deep in the cannibal’s spine. Whatever kill-shyness she’d had at the start of the battle was clearly gone now as she ripped the blade out.

“Hey! Kalina! You alive?” She realized Cyndia was shaking her. Giving a weak nod, she tried to get up, only for her arms to collapse under her like jelly.

“No time for sleeping, we have people to kill.” the brunette said with a slight smirk as she put her hands on the girl’s arm. “Ready? On three. One, two, three.”

Kalina got to her feet with the ranger’s assistance, immediately going to lean against the wall, before doubling over and throwing up. The sound of heavy footfalls signalled any break time they might have had was over as a pair of the beasts rushed into the room, only for the first one to fall to one knee as an arrow from Cyndia grazed its temple, and the second one to collapse as Velonara tore her blades across its legs, followed by one up through its jaw.

Kalina staggered back to a standing position, her head pounding like someone was hitting it with a sledgehammer. “Thanks. I’ll be fine.”

The rest of the room clearing went in a better manner, the trio outmaneuvering the trolls in close quarters while slicing them to pieces. As the last one hit the ground in the second to last room, the three lined up again, Velonara breaching this time with Kalina second in line. As the girl kicked in the door, Kalina charged in only to stop cold at the sight of the room filled to the top with red barrels and a single goblin standing there, hands on a det switch. It was then that Kalina realized that she hadn’t seen a fireball bring down that tower on her head.

She’d heard an explosion.

“Don’t do it…” She spoke slowly, as behind her the other two poked their heads in to see what was going on, only for their eyes to widen before they ducked back behind the wall.

Time seemed to stretch out before them as the pair of them stared at each other.

He shrugged. “A deal’s a deal, toots.” He replied as she slammed down the det switch.
“Run!” Kalina shouted as she turned and dove out of the room. For all La’is’ ice had done neutralizing the traps, it couldn’t compare to the explosive might of goblin technology as one moment the street outside was full of Quel’dorei rangers beating back the trolls, and the next it was replaced by a cloud of dust as a thundering shockwave ran out, sending debris, weapons, and body parts flying in every direction. As the trio sprinted as far as they could get, Kalina dove out the back window as the first blast sounded off, the shockwave hitting the room she was just in less than a second later, triggering the explosives there and turning the entire house to mist in a blast that sent the girl slamming into the wall of the next house over, before she dropped two stories to the ground as more blasts sounded, only knowing they were taking place by the feeling of the shockwaves. This was bad. She was on 14th street now, which was still firmly in troll hands, and right at the edge of the artillery barrage.

She could feel darkness slowly closing in as she rolled over to look up at the night sky. The mages’ barrage had stopped, she saw. Command must’ve been hit. She coughed. It was getting really hard to breathe. She needed to get back. She tried to get up, only to find that she couldn’t even begin to. Something must’ve been wrong with her legs.

She tried to move her arms. They still worked, more or less. Rolling over onto her belly, she began dragging herself forward, toward the rubble that was formally that house and the surrounding houses. She had to find Cyndia and Velonara. Every movement caused her body to scream out at her. Moving was so painful, and all she really wanted to do was sleep. Debris was raining down around her like hail.

She stopped as what was barely recognizable as a leg landed in front of her. No, she couldn’t stop moving now. If she could just make it back onto 13th street, there’d be healers and other rangers there. Then she could sleep.

As she reached the rubble in front of her, she suddenly felt herself being hoisted up. Her first feeling was relief. Someone had found her. She was going to be okay.

That feeling was quickly replaced by terror as she took in the pair of green hands around her torso. ‘No…’ she tried to say, only to find herself unable to find enough breath to speak. ‘Just let me die.’

She thought she heard it shouting something as it took hold of her. She couldn’t tell, in all honesty. Any noise in general was drowned out at that moment, as if she was hearing it underwater.

She passed out.
Chapter 29

Kalina’s head pounded as she drifted back into consciousness. The first thing her eyes noticed was a bright light. A bonfire, she registered it as. She was in a box of some sort. A cage. Outside of it, she could see a lean, white haired troll with a purple scarf pacing back and forth; or maybe that was his tongue and he was wearing it like a scarf. Didn’t she know him from somewhere?

Her head hit the floor again.

When next she awoke, she was in a much clearer state of mind. She looked around. She was in a cage of some sort, too small to stand up or lie down in. Outside of that, they were in a camp, surrounded by rubble, some of it charred, other parts glowing a mix of pink and purple.

They were inside the barrage zone, she realized. The city around them was absolutely decimated. Dust would be only a small exaggeration. There was absolutely nothing salvageable left.

It took her a moment to discover, as she tried to move around in her prison, that she’d been stripped completely naked. Her breathing quickened. What had they done to her? What were they going to do?

She tried to look around further. At the very edges of her vision, she could see what looked like other cages. She wasn’t alone.

“Gen’ral!” She heard a voice call out from behind her. “Dis one be awake!”

She saw a silhouette on the other side of the bonfire, diagonal from her, turn around and start towards her. She immediately recognized him as Zul’jin.

“So,” He began as he got near. “Dis be da little bird dat put da fear o’ da loa in Zul’jin’s men.”

Kalina smirked. Even despite her situation, she wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of seeing anything less. “I aim to please.”

He kicked the cage. “We be losin everytin cus o’ ya!”

“You kept your flesh. That’s more than can be said of any of us you’ve killed.”

The cannibal laughed. “Is dat so? Well den, I tink ya be findin we don’ need ta kill ya ta take your flesh.” He looked up and nodded to someone the girl couldn’t see.

Immediately she felt the cage being opened behind her.

“No…” She barely whispered as her arms gripped the bars and she felt someone grabbing her by the ankles, eliciting an immediate pain as the broken fragments of her legs were yanked on. “No!”

In one swift motion, the troll that had hold of her ripped her away from the safety of her cage. She tried to struggle, only for it to prove useless given the state of her legs as she was dragged around and towards the fire, where Zul’jin stood, waiting.

Glancing around, Kalina could see numerous other elves. Some were in cages of their own, others were suspended in horrific positions, still others were being slowly flayed alive in the background as
their friends were being rotated over a fire.

Where only a moment ago she’d kept a confident smirk, tears now began to flow down her cheeks as Zul’jin pinned her head to the ground with one hand while lifting her hips up with the other. In a nearby cage, Kalina could just barely make out the curled up form of Velonara facing her, her hands in her hair and her eyes squeezed shut.

She wasn’t watching. None of them were watching, Kalina realized as she looked at the other cages faced towards her. Words couldn’t express how thankful she was at that moment.

A second later, any thoughts she might’ve had were drowned out by a splitting pain as the troll deprived her of her honor.

Sylvanas looked out over the wreckage around her as ranger and magister alike scrambled to search for wounded. She’d narrowly managed to escape the command center before it was brought down, but otherwise, everything from 17th street through 13th street was absolutely annihilated.

At least their territory had only been partially rigged. There were plenty of areas where the damage was more minimal, meaning more survivors and more area to regroup. The battlefield itself, on the other hand, was almost gone. Even worse, before they could even move in for survivors, the trolls had already gotten there first. Instead of going for their own, though, they’d taken her rangers almost exclusively.

“Ma’am, she’s awake.” Came the voice of one of her rangers. She turned around. “Thank you, Nyana.” She addressed the woman as she started off towards one of the field hospitals amidst the now wildly uneven wreckage.

The field hospital in question was situated atop a section of street that’d been largely spared from the blasts. The ranger-general arrived there to find what few healers they had left rushing around frantically to tend to the overwhelming number of grievously wounded as mages held portals open to Silvermoon for the more critical or otherwise severe cases, meaning most of them.

Among those not being evacuated lay a brunette ranger, stripped to her underwear to reveal a webwork of shrapnel wounds raking their way across her body, only having recently been healed shut. One of the girl’s legs was broken, Sylvanas had been told, along with one arm - the other having suffered severe lacerations from shielding her face.

Cyndia Hawkspear coughed as she saw Sylvanas approaching her. “General.” She croaked. “I would salute, but… um…”

Sylvanas knelt down next to the badly wounded but otherwise stable ranger. “At ease, ranger. I’m told you were at ground zero of the blast.”

She nodded.

“Tell me everything that happened.”

She coughed a few times, before giving another quick nod. “There were three of us. We were clearing one of the buildings on 13th that was infested by the trolls. The initial entry went bad, but we recovered and pushed deeper in. It was fucked every way but we still managed to clear the place out.” She descended into another coughing fit. A ranger ran over with water. After the girl had wet her throat, she continued. “We cleared everything for the last room in the house. Kalina took point.”

Sylvanas cut her off. “Kalina Dawnblade was with you?” Before scolding herself. This was possibly
the worst time to be showing any form of preference amongst her rangers. She was lucky she’d used
the last name.

Of course their relationship for the past few decades was no secret to anyone who spent more than
five seconds in the pair’s company, but even so, she couldn’t appear unprofessional during a time of
crisis.

Luckily, Kalina was, at the moment, Silvermoon’s darling, so that allowed her to show at least some
extra interest in the girl.

If Cyndia noticed anything out of line, she didn’t show it. “Yeah. Her and some rookie chick.
Veloronda or something. Anyway, Kalina was the first one into the room, and normally we were to
follow her in after, but the moment she got into the doorway she just, froze.” Cyndia took a deep
breath. “So I poked my head around the corner to see why, and she’s just standing there, and
opposite her there’s this little goblin prick with his hands on a det switch, and she’s trying to fucking
talk him down.”

Of course she was. For an assassin, Kalina had always put far too much stock in diplomacy.

“So of course that goes to shit and we bolt and, like, we can’t get to safety in time of course, so we
just jump out the fucking windows. Next thing I know I’m on the floor of some other fucking
building and before I can even get up, the place collapses. Entire thing stops” she coughed a few
more times before continuing “... entire thing stops inches from my skull. Catches my leg, though.”

Sylvanas went silent. “...And the rest of your unit?” She finally asked, keeping her voice at a slow
and even pace.

“The trolls were instantly on site. If you didn’t find them, they probably did.”

She bit her lip as she mulled over the information. “Thank you, ranger. Get some rest, you’ve earned
it.”

She stood up, before starting off. The situation was wrecked from every angle. Her forces had
suffered outstanding losses trying to reclaim Fairbreeze alone, let alone the rest of Quel’thalas; her
career would likely be annihilated by this battle, a battle which was only even able to take place
thanks to support from the magisters, and to top it all off, Kalina was likely dead. They’d probably
eaten her the same way they had the rangers at the Farstrider Retreat.

Her hands balled into fists. How had a couple of trolls and goblins managed to ruin so much? If
Fairbreeze was this bad, she could only imagine how bad Tranquillien would be. The city was easily
four times the size of Fairbreeze, and was pretty much the de facto hub for all of southern
Quel’thalas. If the trolls had it under their control, based on how things had been going so far, it
would stay that way, meaning the most they could possibly hope for would be to besiege the city,
something that would now be exponentially more difficult with the goblins in play, as so clearly
displayed by the current state of their line.

If Tranquillien stayed in troll hands, it would likely mean of all southern Quel’thalas would,
including Windrunner Village.

Lirath was there.

No, she couldn’t let that happen. If they didn’t break Fairbreeze soon, Quel’thalas would stand to be
cut in half and all her family back home would be slaughtered and eaten - just like her mother, and
just like Kalina. The trolls and goblins had engineered the city into a meat grinder in a matter of days.
She could only think what they’d be able to do to Tranquillien or anywhere else if she was delayed here for much longer.

“Milady.”

She turned to see Nathanos limping towards her, his head and entire right side wrapped in bandages. She didn’t want to talk to him right now. Thankful as she was that he’d survived and made it out, the previous day’s encounter was still raw in her mind.

She swallowed and steeled herself, before giving him a nod of acknowledgement. “Marris.”

“There’s something you need to see.”

The feeling of being shaken suddenly woke Kalina. The first thing she noticed was that she was back in her cage. Thank the light. Her entire body was, well, sore was an understatement. It felt like she’d pulled every muscle she had. At least she was back in her cage, though. So long as she was in her cage, she was safe.

She had a better view from the way her head was angled this time. Looking around, she could see a troll going around to various cages like hers, rocking them back and forth to wake their occupants.

Before she could wonder why she was being woken, the question was answered by the plate of food placed in front of her face. Her eyes adjusted to the closed distance. It was an extremely simple meal, a pile of cooked beef.

It was only then that she realized how hungry she was. She reached for the meat, before stopping. What if it was poisoned? No, they wouldn’t kill her. The trolls weren’t nearly that merciful. But if it was poisoned, it could certainly make her life much more difficult.

A growing pain in her stomach told her she didn’t have much choice, considering her situation. Resigning herself to her chances, she reached out and put a piece in her mouth.

It was… excellent. It tasted like a long, savory pork cooked by a master chef, but with an almost crackling aftertaste. Swallowing, she reached for more, shoving it into her mouth hungrily.

“Kalina!”

She was about halfway through her plate when she stopped. Had someone whispered her name?

“Kalina!” The voice hissed again.

Her eyes swept what they could see.

“Over here!” The voice suddenly went silent.

She looked to where it sounded like it was coming from. The woman was suspended by all four limbs, wrists and ankles hogtied together and hanging from a hook. Kalina could only imagine how much pain she was probably in. Her brunette hair hung around her face as she clearly struggled to keep her head up, to the point where Kalina could see the woman’s entire body shaking uncontrollably.

‘Liadrin?’ She mouthed. From where she was, she just barely had a view of the woman’s face, which was bruised and bloodied.

The woman smiled between ragged breaths, before giving a quick nod, her upper to mid-body
muscles twisting and tightening to accommodate the movement.

Kalina saw the woman’s lips faintly move. Two syllables. Liadrin was clearly straining herself to convey the message. Whatever it was, it must be important.

‘What?’ She mouthed back.

The brunette mouthed the same two syllables again. Kalina caught the first one this time: ‘Don’t’.

‘Don’t what?’ She reached for another piece of meat, only for the woman to start shaking her head and mouthing the word ‘no’ over and over, before stopping suddenly as a troll looked over at her.

Kalina realized what she was trying to say.

‘Don’t eat.’

Her eyes went for the half empty plate in front of her. What had they done to the food that Liadrin was trying so hard to warn her?

She looked back at Liadrin, whose head was hanging again as the troll watched her.

She glanced down at the food again. Slowly, her eyes widened to her growing dread as their stop at the Farstrider Retreat came back to her.

‘No… please no…’

She’d already eaten half of it. Worse, she’d loved the taste.

She began to hyper-ventillate as she suddenly felt nauseous. It couldn’t be.

A flicker of movement drew her gaze away from the food. Liadrin had raised her head again.

Shaking, Kalina slowly mouthed to her ‘Don’t eat. Why not?’

Liadrin smiled again as she saw the girl understood the message, before mouthing three syllables. Kalina’s stomach dropped as she recognized the word immediately. There were only a couple three syllable words in Thalassian that began with Q and ended with a vowel.

‘Quel’dorei…’

As the girl’s face dropped into a look of unadulterated horror, Liadrin let her head fall again.

She repeated the word in her head over and over again. She’d eaten Quel’dorei. She’d loved the taste of Quel’dorei. She’d eagerly devoured Quel’dorei.

Who had she eaten?

She clutched her head in her hands. This couldn’t be happening. This had to be some sort of horrific nightmare. If she ever escaped, would she be executed? What would Sylvanas say? There was no excuse for what she’d just done, she’d just started eating without even considering.

She couldn’t go back. She didn’t deserve to. She had to die here. It was the only option left for her. She began looking around for something - anything - she could use to kill herself. Surely there was something amidst the rubble.

There was nothing. The ground around her had been swept bare of anything that could be used to
wake up from the nightmare she was in. She was trapped there. Horribly, inescapably trapped.

Sylvanas looked down at the bound enemy before her. Even on its knees, it was still not low to the ground by any means. Her rangers had caught it approaching the line unarmed, hands held high, and carrying a patchwork white flag made from burnt scraps of fabric, loosely stitched together. It must’ve taken a significant amount of effort to create.

“You may speak.”

“I be bringin’ a message from Zul’jin himself.” The troll began, causing Sylvanas’ eyes to widen. Zul’jin was here? “He be sayin dat we got your rangers, but we only be givin dem back if we allowed to leave da city.”

Sylvanas’ lips curled into a scowl as she looked at the savage in utter contempt. “And if I refuse?”

He shrugged. “We be gettin’ hungry. Da longer you wait, da less o’ dem dere be.”

Her fist struck the side of his face. On an elf, it probably would have been a shattering blow, but on the verdant monstrosity, it barely seemed to register. “How. Many.” She asked through gritted teeth, fangs bared.

He grinned. Sylvanas wanted to cut his throat then and there. “More dan you be havin here.”

That was quite possibly true. Counting wounded, they had less than a quarter of the rangers they’d had yesterday. If whatever trolls were left wanted to stage a counterassault, they likely wouldn’t be able to hold the line.

All the same, Zul’jin being here meant salvation for her career. If she let him escape in exchange for captured rangers, Silvermoon could easily hold it against her.

She looked around the room they were in. Four rangers stood guard, eyes locked on the enemy in the center.

“Leave us.”

The rangers obeyed, filing through the door one by one, until the lock clicked shut behind the last one.

Sylvanas looked back down at the messenger. “Who do you have, specifically?” She had to ask what she wanted to know in a way where he wouldn’t just tell her what she wanted to hear.

The troll face became puzzled. He clearly hadn’t been expecting this line of questioning. “We got lots o’ elves. Da magic ones, da ‘ealin ones, da leaders, da bird, da-”

“Stop.” Sylvanas cut him off. “The bird?”

“Da one you sent dat keep killin everyone and drawin da birds everywhere.” He gave her a toothy grin. “We be ‘avin lots o’ fun with her. Zul’jin heself be gettin first dibs on dat a-”

He was cut off by Sylvanas’ blade to his throat. “Finish that sentence. I dare you.”

The messenger looked down at her. “So den, we be havin a deal?”

Sylvanas looked at him with pure contempt as she sheathed her blade, before standing up and reluctantly stepping over to a nearby table with a quill, ink, and paper on it, before beginning to
write.

If nothing else, it was a victory. Their enemy was surrendering, and they were getting a major strategic location back. They’d just have to grab Zul’jin later down the road.

Chapter End Notes

I know human meat is more of a muted pork flavor, but I figured being immortal and magical, elves would taste a bit better.
The next time Kalina drifted into consciousness, it was sunrise again. She wasn’t in her cage anymore. After the previous night’s game of passing her around, they’d decided to keep her outside where she could be used throughout the whole day. To that end, she now found herself bound to a post in view of all the other cages. That meant, among other things, that her comrades would have to look at some point, if they hadn’t already.

She could feel… *them* leaking out of her. She looked around. Even if she could find something to kill herself from her new position, her hands were bound above her head at all times. To make things worse, among the captured rangers, she could make out most of her company. Even Halduron was there.

To top it all off, everyone in earshot now knew it was her that had wiped out the trolls in such a memorable fashion. Everyone knew she was the one the trolls kept calling ‘da bird’.

Plenty of them had to have made the connection by this point.

This couldn’t be happening. This was never supposed to happen. She’d contained the situation. Nyana and Nathanos were non-threats. She thought she hadn’t left any troll witnesses, either. Apparently she was wrong, and now her punishment was to be the encampment’s entertainment.

It didn’t matter, she reminded herself. Somehow, she’d find a way to kill herself, and that way it didn’t matter how many people knew, it would be okay. It had to be.

She felt a thick green hand grab her ass from behind on one side, while on the other, the other hand held a bowl of ranger meat in front of her face.

She knew what they wanted. She was meant to eat out of it with only her mouth. They’d begun force feeding her when she wouldn’t eat it. They weren’t force feeding everyone who refused, no, it was her in particular they were making eat it.

Reluctantly, she began slowly eating the meat as it was held to her lips.

“All a good girl.” She heard Zul’jin’s voice in her ear as his hand continued to squeeze her behind.

She broke down into tears.

“Zul’jin!” She heard one of the guards standing amidst the wreckage call. “Vaasaagi be back!”

All at once the bowl of meat was removed and Zul’jin let go of her. She turned her head and spit out what meat she hadn’t swallowed yet.

She looked around. So many eyes were boring into her now. She’d heard stories of this sort of thing happening in human lands - when someone was convicted of a crime, either by the church or by the actual government, they’d be bound in the town square for all to see their guilt and humiliated relentlessly. Was that what this was? Was this her being punished somehow for all the cruel things she did once upon a time?

What she wouldn’t give to see Sylvanas one last time. But she couldn’t. Not after eating her fellow rangers, and certainly not after being discovered. It was better that the general just forgot about her and found someone who wasn’t so…
Irredeemable.

That was the only word for it. She was irredeemable. The king had been right. Not once did her life justify a single drop of the blood she’d spilled. She deserved this. She deserved this hell she was trapped in. She needed to suffer. Finally, she could be at peace with that knowledge.

As soon as she realized that, it was like a great weight was being lifted from both her mind and soul. She was free. From what, she had no idea, all she knew was that tied there, to that post, being tormented relentlessly, she was free. This was true free…

No. Even after everything, she couldn’t convince herself fully that she deserved this. Sure, the psychological horror was easy enough to shrug off that way, but nothing could alleviate the feeling of her skin crawling, or the feeling of wanting to scream every time they so much as brushed up against her, or the feeling of wanting to drive a knife through her own skull rather than be forced to face the reality of what they were doing to her, or the feeling of wanting to rip her own flesh to shreds with her teeth every time she looked down at it and saw it covered with their essence.

Her weeping turned into sobs now as she accepted that there was no escape, not even inside her own mind. She almost missed Rhalyf. At least he’d had the courtesy to break her so she didn’t have to be there for most of it.

The sound of heavy footsteps suddenly rumbled behind her as the camp sprung to life. All around her she could see trolls who only a moment ago had been standing guard now rushing around, barking orders and grabbing things. They were packing up, she realized. Why were they packing up? What would happen to her then?

Her question was answered momentarily as Zul’jin stepped into view again, gesturing to her with one arm. “Ey boys! Come getcha fill while ya can!”

Kalina’s face contorted in a look of pure terror as from all sides they converged on her. She struggled against her bonds, to little avail.

‘I deserve this.’ She told herself, over and over, silently begging that before long she’d start to believe it.

It was sunset when they began to move in. Per their agreement, the rangers would surround the troll line from all sides, except for one, where they would provide a corridor for the trolls to exit the town.

The rangers had spent the entire day coordinating, setting up, and securing the perimeter. The trolls would be leaving right about now, and making it out of the city by nightfall. That was when they were clear to move in.

Sylvanas stood just inside the Quel’dorei line, a hastily assembled company of rangers in formation behind her. She wanted - no, she needed - to be the first on scene. The methods for debriefing captives and assessing potential risks were long, thorough, and ironclad from a political standpoint. Once someone was there, they were - among other things - kept in heavy isolation while the process was completed. Kalina had been broken once before, and as much as Sylvanas loved her, she couldn’t justify not doing a psych eval to make sure. But at the same time, she refused to let her be taken before she could personally see her and make sure she was okay.

“Ranger-General Sylvanas?”

Sylvanas turned to see an elf with short, jet black hair standing there in cobalt armor, a double sided sword slung across her back. On either side of her stood a pair of similarly armored elves, though
each wore a helmet and carried a long shield with them.

The woman introduced herself. “Lieutenant Avina Darkflight, Royal Guard.”

A knot turned in Sylvanas’ stomach. As the name suggested, the Royal Guard was charged strictly with protecting the crown from any direct threat. Despite this relatively confined mission, however, the guard wielded at its disposal one of the most far reaching political intelligence apparati to ever grace Quel’thalas, with the resources to match. The result was that while they generally never ventured further south than the Court of the Sun, it wasn’t unheard of for them to make a surprise appearance anywhere there was a direct threat to King Anasterian himself, including abroad.

So why were they here?

“A pleasure to meet you, Lieutenant.” She spoke, extending a hand. “To what do I owe this visit?”

The officer ignored the attempt at a handshake. “I was hoping we might be able to speak in private. Follow me, please.”

Sylvanas withdrew her hand. “Of course.” She replied stiffly as she obeyed. Ranger-General though she was, absolutely no one, save for the king himself, was special in the eyes of the Royal Guard.

She was led to a secluded office in a still relatively intact building two streets back from the frontline.

“Please, sit.” The lieutenant said as they entered. It wasn’t lost on Sylvanas that she was being offered a seat in her own base, however she obeyed nonetheless. Once Sylvanas sat, the woman spoke.

“We currently have reason to believe a valuable asset to the king and the guard is being held behind Amani lines.”

Sylvanas raised an eyebrow as she gestured for the woman to continue. “…And I don’t suppose I might be allowed to know who exactly this asset is?”

Avina leveled a cool gaze at her. “No. Anyway, your second in command has already briefed us on your plan of entry. You’re to pull back your rangers and instead allow my forces to go in and retrieve the prisoners.”

Sylvanas stiffened. The Royal Guard acted, for all intents and purposes, with the king’s direct authority. It was one thing when it was Prince Kael’thas ordering her against Nathanos’ enlistment. He wasn’t actually there breathing down her neck, and certainly not with a pair of guards standing behind her. And he wasn’t the king. She took a deep breath. “I’m going in there too.”

The dark haired woman raised an eyebrow. “Is there some problem with the current plan that I’m not aware of, Ranger-General?”

“A close friend of mine is being held there. I need to make sure she’s okay.” Sylvanas knew exactly how flimsy that sounded, but she didn’t have much other choice.

“Is this some sort of joke?” Avina leaned forward. “Ranger-General, if you don’t wish to take the crown’s orders seriously, I’ve been more than authorized to appoint a commander who will in your stead, while your position - in its entirety - is reconsidered.”

Something in Sylvanas snapped. There it was again, the threat against her family’s status. Ever since she’d become an officer, everyone in Silvermoon and beyond with even a modicum of power loved to hold that over her head like they owned her. No more. She would not be whipped again into
standing by while either her rangers or Kalina were in harm's way.

‘Kalina…’

The sapphire-eyed girl’s words came back to her as she sat there, eyes locked with Avina Darkflight.

“Lieutenant, what the crown wants more than anything is a swift and decisive victory. This battle has already been stretched out for long enough, as I’m sure you’d agree. I’m also sure you’d agree that things would go far, far smoother and therefore far less drawn out, if everyone cooperated without issue. I’m happy to pull my rangers back while your guards go in, but I’m going in with them. Do that, and Fairbreeze falls by sundown. Or, you can remove me from my position, this operation can be delayed indefinitely while the Ranger Corps falls into disorder, and the king will have you to ask why such an immediate victory was snatched away at the last moment, all while your agent continues to languish in captivity. It’s your choice, Lieutenant.”

The guard stared at her, frozen in a mix of rage and shock. Her lips began to move. “...Very well, Ranger-General. We depart in half an hour. I’ve already had my men dismiss yours. Don’t be late. You’re excused.”

The glow of magic lit up the darkness, followed by torchlight, as a battlemage supplied by the Royal Guard frozen the path ahead of them as the company pushed forward. Sylvanas wasn’t too keen on being reliant on the guard for safe passage across the battlefield, but La’is had been killed in the blasts and even if she hadn’t, she doubted the Royal Guard would let her come.

It was to that end that the ranger-general found herself walking alongside Lieutenant Avina, watched closely by the soldiers both beside and behind her.

As they approached the ranger-held outer perimeter, a pair of the agile troops parted ways to allow them through. That put them only a couple hundred meters from the camp - a couple hundred meters from Kalina.

Sylvanas’ grip on her torch tightened. What if they got there and she was mutilated, or dead, or flayed, or eaten, or all four? Her eyes scanned around in the darkness. Couldn’t they move any faster?

The troll encampment was, on all sides, surrounded by a large pile of rubble that served as a basic cover from projectile attacks. Without resistance at the top, it was relatively easy for them to scale at a brisk walk. Had they tried assaulting it, on the other hand, they would’ve literally found themselves both on unstable footing and in an uphill battle. Certainly not the most sophisticated design as far as fortifications went, but considering the circumstances, it was better than nothing - at least until the rangers took the ridge.

As they crested said ridge, Sylvanas gained a view down into the camp below. It was mostly obscured by the darkness. The trolls had left torches, per her demands, but they had burned low and now only cast the area around them in a faint, orange light.

Avina raised her arm, causing the formation to come to a halt. “Secure the perimeter, get a portal to Silvermoon ready.” She threw her hand forward, causing the company to break formation and spread out as they descended on the camp.

Sylvanas took that as her opportunity to move in, immediately starting down the slope alongside several guards, torch held high. The first thing the light fell on was a dead campfire. She was about to try relighting it when her eyes picked up the charred silhouette suspended over it. Male. Not her.
She moved on further in around the edge to find several more culinary setups, before deciding she wouldn’t find anything alive there. Meanwhile the guards had begun lighting the previously dead torches as they moved through, casting the entire camp into a bright firelight.

The scene before her was horrific. After the campfires stood rows upon rows of… the only term for it was meat preparation. Pieces of her rangers hung skinned and marinated, awaiting cooking. Everything from individual fingers to entire skinned rangers hung in gruesome positions, alongside spices and vegetables of all kinds.

‘Not her. Please not her.’

Sylvanas slowly stepped forward, not daring to look at the meat for fear of what she might see as she passed through the area into the next part of the camp. There, rows upon rows of tiny cages that barely reached her knees in height sat in concentric, staggered circles. As she approached them, she could see the naked figures crammed into them, many of them misses pieces of flesh or skin.

She looked around. No one was letting them out. Why weren’t they being let out?

Turning her gaze onwards, she saw what the cages were all angled towards. In the center of the camp stood a variety of simple wooden setups, attached to which were a number of still living rangers suspended in a variety of agonizing and humiliating positions.

None of them were male, she noticed.

She started forward, first at a brisk walk, before breaking into a run. As she got closer to the center, Sylvanas saw, tied by her wrists above her head to what seemed from a distance to be an unused post, a girl with long, white hair matted and tangled, her body covered in cuts and bruises, her head slumped forward, and her legs... mangled.

“Kali…” Sylvanas barely breathed as she dropped her torch and rushed forward, kneeling down next to the girl. She put two fingers against her jugular to be sure.

Still alive.

An immense feeling of relief washed over her. She withdrew her fingers, to find them covered in-

‘By the Sunwell…’

Kalina began to stir, her cobalt eyes opening just enough to reflect the torchlight in them.

“Well?” Her voice was faint and hoarse.

The ranger general placed a hand on the girl’s cheek. “I’m here, Kali. It’ll be okay.”

From behind her, she heard the voice of a guard calling out. “She’s over here!”

It dawned on Sylvanas that Kalina was the captive they were after, specifically. Of course she was. She belonged directly to Silvermoon now. They were just letting Sylvanas borrow her.

Kalina seemed to look through her, almost. “Sylvanas…” She barely breathed “I’m sorry…”. Her head went limp again as she lost consciousness.

Sylvanas went for her blade, unsheathing it in an instant and raising it to the ropes binding Kalina’s hands, only to stop as she felt another blade pressed to the side of her neck.

“Don’t.” Avina spoke from behind.
Sylvanas froze. “She needs a healer. I’m just untying her.”

“What she needs is irrelevant, Ranger-General. I’d advise you not to interfere in royal affairs.”

Her eyes widened as the memory of the troll messenger calling Kalina ‘the bird’ came back to her. This wasn’t a rescue mission. This was containment.

Reluctantly, she lowered her blade, before resheathing it entirely. She felt Avina’s being removed from her neck a moment later.

She looked back at the array of cages to see pairs of guards now picking them up with the occupants still inside, before carrying them through a portal.

She had to do something. She couldn’t look back at Avina, they’d notice that and adjust accordingly.

She stood up.

Avina spoke again. “Take her.”

Before Sylvanas could even think of trying something, she felt her knee being kicked out from under her as she was forced to the ground.

“You have nothing to fear, Ranger-General.” The lieutenant spoke as Sylvanas struggled. “We just need to ask you some questions.”

When Kalina next awoke, she found herself in a warm room of Quel’dorei design, lying in a small bed with her hands cuffed to either side.

Sylvanas had been with her back in Fairbreeze. Where was she now? Had she just dreamed that? She looked around. It didn’t look like she was in Fairbreeze - too much of the city was demolished or covered in blood at this point, but looks could be deceiving. She could be in an underground cellar somewhere.

“Hello?” She called out weakly, remembering how thirsty she was as her throat felt like sandpaper.

No one answered. A few minutes passed before the door to the room opened, revealing a stoic looking elf with short black hair.

“Kalina Dawnblade? Lieutenant Avina Darkflight, Royal Guard.”

The Royal Guard. That alone was enough to make the girl’s blood freeze. They were the reason no one in court or amidst the nobility in general even tried to make a go for the throne or anything else related to the crown. For all intents and purposes, they were politically off limits in every respect. Most nobles understood that well enough, but occasionally someone would step out of line or try something stupid, and then the nobility would be reminded exactly why they feared the Royal Guard.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, ma’am…” Kalina barely managed to reply. If she was here, it meant things were very, very bad for her.

“I trust you know why you’re here?” Avina asked as she took a seat in a chair next to her.

Kalina shook her head.

“You are here because in the last 12 hours, we’ve had to neutralize no less than 47 rangers, and
swear another eight to secrecy on penalty of community service, all because you couldn’t keep who you are quiet.”

They knew about the breach.

“My job” Avina continued “is to contain the situation however necessary. As such, consider this your one and only chance to convince me why I shouldn’t have you disposed of so the crown can wipe its hands of this matter entirely.”

Kalina looked at her. “I’m sorry, you said your last name was Darkflight?”

The woman looked incensed. “Yes.”

“Would you happen to know Elarae Darkflight?”

Something in the lieutenant stiffened. “You know my sister.”

The snow haired elf’s face all but lit up. “She and I are good friends! We hung out a lot in Silvermoon while our battalions were both there!”

She knew this could go wrong very, very easily, but Elarae had seemed pretty excited to meet her, so there was a chance the girl would go along with the idea of them officially being friends.

“Family connections will get you nowhere, Lady Kalina. You would do well to remember who you’re dealing with.”

Kalina froze the expression on her face, before blinking. “Very well. In that case, allow me to present you with hard results. Yes, I caused an information breach, but I also single handedly cleared the majority of the city where previously the rangers couldn’t even get a foothold. I understand that I screwed up here, but my results are indisputable.”

The woman sighed, before leveling her gaze at Kalina. “As of this moment, you are officially declared missing in action.” The girl’s stomach dropped. “You will not report in to Sylvanas or anyone affiliated with the Ranger Corps. You will make no contact with them or any members of the general public whatsoever. You work for me now.”

Kalina allowed herself a moment of relief as her entire body let go of a tenseness she hadn’t realized was there. She wasn’t going to be killed or sentenced to community service or anything like that. Looking back up at Avina, she closed her eyes and nodded. She’d been planning on dying anyway. At least this way she wouldn’t have to face Sylvanas.

‘Wait.’

“... You don’t care that I ate Quel’dorei?” She asked, confused.

Avina gave her a look as though she was stupid. “We have multiple accounts of you being forcefed the meat in question. As far as the crown, the council, the Ranger Corps, and Quel’thalas in general are concerned, you had no choice.”

Kalina blinked. Did that mean Sylvanas didn’t hate her?

“... Will I at least be home in time for Winter’s Veil, then?”

“That depends entirely on your performance and your cooperation. Should you serve your king well, it wouldn’t be out of the question for you to be allowed to return to your unit after a certain point.”
Kalina couldn’t tell whether the woman was telling the truth or stringing her along. It didn’t matter. Her situation was static. At least the officer sitting across from her was being kind enough to give her hope.

“Understood, ma’am.”

“Good.” She stood up. “I’ll have your mission within a day. Until then, you’ll continue to be treated for your injuries to a sufficient level to regain field effectiveness. You’ll be provided with a quill and paper to compose a list of tools you might require in the performance of your duties.” She turned to leave, before stopping. “Before I forget, is there anyone else who might know who you really are or otherwise pose a possible intelligence threat?”

Kalina locked eyes with the woman. “No ma’am.”
Kalina felt like she was going to go insane. For the past… she didn’t even know how long, it wasn’t like she had any way of telling time - she’d been stuck staring at the same four cobblestone walls of her cell, with absolutely nothing to pass the time or otherwise occupy her mind, except of course for memorizing the exact shape of each individual stone. They hadn’t even unchained her from her bed until her legs had been fully healed, and even then it was only so they wouldn’t atrophy more than they already had.

Lieutenant Avina had been the only interaction she’d had since her incarceration. She supposed it was probably some psychological tactic to build a sense of dependence, which would then lead to gratefulness for any interaction she was lucky enough to receive from the woman, and thus, in turn, loyalty. If so, then the Royal Guard had severely underestimated just how adept she was at being alone.

Her primary method of passing the time had been, unsurprisingly, the only method one really had of passing the time when left alone with idle hands. It was to that end that she now lay in bed, eyes closed, fantasizing about Sylvanas, only for such thoughts to be so rudely interrupted by a resounding knock at the door. The girl’s ears twitched fractionally towards said door, where she could hear the sound of a small metal slot at eye level being opened, followed by Avina’s voice.

“Back against the wall! We’re coming in!”

Kalina huffed as she opened her eyes, before dismissing the lovely daydream she’d been having in favor of getting out of bed and obediently standing with her back against the wall, just as she’d done so many times before.

The heavy metal door swung open a moment later. Into the cell stepped the short haired form of Lieutenant Avina, flanked by a pair of guards in heavy armor. One of them was carrying a small chest, the girl noticed.

The officer looked at her with the self-confident smirk anyone who got to play jailer might have. “I hope you’re fully awake,” Kalina still had no idea what time it was. “because you’re being deployed.”

The snow haired elf couldn’t help but smile at the news. Anything that involved getting out of this cell was an improvement over her current situation, just on that merit alone. “Does that mean you’re finally going to tell me what my mission is?”

When she’d first been brought in by the Royal Guard, she’d had to argue for her right, as an asset of the crown, not to just be immediately disposed of. Once that had been settled, Avina had told her she’d have a mission for her within a day. As Kalina had since come to realize, however, the woman never said she’d share it with her.

“Obviously.”
The guard beside her set the chest down, before nonchalantly pushing it towards her with his foot.

“Inside that box is the gear you requested, in full.”

Kalina’s eyes widened as she looked from the chest, to back up at the woman. Surely she couldn’t actually mean that. When she’d given them a list of gear she’d need for whatever mission she was to be assigned, she’d written it with the most ideal scenario imaginable in mind, meaning if she was given unlimited money, and no rules. In truth, she hadn't expected to receive even half the things on her list. A quarter, at the absolute most. Her gaze returned to the chest.

The dark haired elf continued. “The parameters of your mission are in an envelope inside said box. Once you’ve finished reading, slide it back through the door, and a portal will be opened for you to begin. Any questions?”

The girl shook her head.

“Good. I expect you ready in 15 minutes.”

She still had no way of telling time.

Without another word, however, the Lieutenant turned and exited the room, her accompaniment immediately filing out after her. The sound of the door being locked soon followed.

Kalina looked down at the chest again. Had they actually gotten it? When Avina had said “Sure” to the list, the assassin had thought she was being sarcastic. She’d certainly sounded it.

‘Right. 15 minutes. Should probably open it about now.’

Unfastening the latch, she flipped the lid it open to reveal, as promised, a bundle of leather armor with an envelope on top. She immediately swept the mission details aside as she began digging through the assortment of gear, a sudden sense of glee welling up inside her. It was like Winter’s Veil morning from when she was a kid.

‘By the Sunwell, they actually got it.’ She thought as, to her immeasurable joy, she removed the piece in question from the rest of the pile. In her hand sat a leather hood, seemingly mundane enough, but enchanted so that only darkness was shown under it.

“How I’ve missed you so.” She caught herself speaking aloud as the caressed the iconic piece of gear. Perhaps this place really was getting to her.

It didn’t matter, now. She could worry about going insane later. What mattered at the moment was that she finally had a mission ahead of her.

The moonlight filtered through the tree canopy as the ranger squad advanced silently like wraiths through the darkness in a tight formation, arrows nocked. While battling the trolls in the cities has been difficult, battling them in the forests, especially at night, was the rangers’ specialty. Any of them that dared show their face would be dropped as quickly as they appeared.

The lead, a man by the name of Aeris, looked on ahead. The edge of the city stood only 200 meters ahead of them. Once they hit it, they’d be able to take the nearest building and turn it into a foothold for the rest of their incursion. The Ranger Corps had been on a nigh unstoppable warpath since the Battle of Fairbreeze, meaning the moment they set foot on the cobblestone streets ahead of them, it’d only be a matter of time until the city fell.
And he was the tip of the spear. The songs they’d sing of his courage and valor would be passed down for a thousand generations. He’d only been in the Rangers a short while, and yet he’d already been made a squad leader. It was only natural, he supposed. If some prissy noble girl like Kalina Dawnblade could become a hero, then he himself could easily make Ranger Lord. Who knew? Sylvanas Windrunner herself might even ask for his hand in marriage someday, if he proved himself valiant enough.

His heroic musings were interrupted by the sudden sound of a sharp, terrified breath being sucked in.

“Sir…” Came the shrill voice of one of his subordinates. He held up a fist to signal a stop, before turning around to see the girl standing frozen there, a look of absolute terror just barely discernible.

For a moment, Aeris didn’t notice what was wrong as he looked her over, until the wind rustling through the trees shifted the canopy above just enough to cast her into the moonlight for a split second, revealing the thick root wrapped around her leg, slowly working its way up.

Before he even had time to react, a bolt of water drove itself through the back of his hood and across his throat, lacerating his jugular in an instant. As a torrent of blood burst forth from the sudden wound, he could see the root continuing to curl its way up his comrade to where it was now wrapped around her abdomen area.

“By the light… by the light… by the light please please please please please…” She quietly begged as she remained perfectly still, her breath quickening as she began to visibly panic.

Aeris’ legs collapsed under him, causing his head hit a nearby tree a second later. In the edge of his vision, he could see the other two rangers under his command each turn and dart for some form of cover, only for the first to vanish as he was suddenly swallowed up by a rolling spike trap dug into the ground, his entire body being methodically perforated in less than a second as the rollers in said trap drove spike after spike into and out of him, until finally one caught him through the mouth, allowing him the comparative mercy of suffocating on his own blood.

The last one didn't have time to take in the sight as a large tusked feline landed on him from the canopy above, forcing him to the ground and immediately ripping out his throat.

“Please please please please please…” The entangled ranger continued to beg as the root wrapped under her arm, up around her neck, and around her head, before her pleas were silenced for good as all at once its grip closed, pulverizing every bone in her body and splitting her head into pieces like a watermelon under a Dwarven hammer.

The earth swallowed all four of them.

Sylvanas sighed as he watched the spectacle from afar. She knew Tranquillien would be bad, but even she hadn’t imagined it being quite this horrible. They hadn’t even been able to set up a line outside the city proper, instead being forced to stage at least 300 meters back because unlike Fairbreeze, the trolls here had actually had time and a lot more magic at their disposal, to the point where between their druids, their shamans, and the goblins they’d hired, the relatively tranquil seeming forest in front of them had become the most dangerous stretch of land in all of Quel’thallas.

She turned around and started off towards her tent. It wasn’t like it even mattered if southern Quel’thallas fell anymore. Apart from herself, Lady Sun, and Little Moon, most of her family, both immediate and extended, had been wiped out by the Horde on their way out of the country. She herself had been the one to find Lirath, cleaved in two horizontally through the diaphragm.

‘At least it was the orcs and not the trolls.’ She thought grimly for the thousandth time. It was the
only silver lining she could console herself with, thin as it was. Had it been the trolls that had taken Lirath from her instead of the orcs, there wouldn’t have even been anything left of him to find.

Even with her sisters alive, Alleria was off down south in Lordaeron, gallivanting around with her new love interest, while Vereesa was still in Silvermoon - a posting that Sylvanas had become more keen than ever on continuing, leaving her baby sister safe but as for Sylvanas herself, it meant she was alone.

So horribly alone.

Kalina had been declared missing in action ever since the Royal Guard had taken her, with that designation being upgraded to presumed killed in action after about two weeks. Sylvanas found it peculiar that they had chosen to say missing in action instead of killed. After all, the blasts back in Fairbreeze had certainly given them plenty of cover to not produce a body. It wasn’t like any of the rangers they’d brought back from the Troll encampment would say anything, after all. No one was stupid enough to make themselves a target like that.

She supposed the designation could’ve been for propaganda purposes. After all, declaring her KIA would make her mortal in the eyes of the public, it would be counterproductive to inspiring morale. Declaring her MIA, on the other hand, had turned her into a legend.

All the same, it could easily have actually meant that she was still alive somewhere. Silvermoon had clearly wanted to make her disappear, but if she was still alive - such as in community service - then by not declaring her KIA, they weren’t making any promises to the general public that could later end up broken. The girl was, technically speaking, a hostile entity, after all.

Either way, even if she was still alive, she was gone for the foreseeable future; ripped from Sylvanas’ life yet again. The Royal Guard’s questions has been relatively straightforward. What was her relationship to Kalina, how long had they known each other, that sort of thing. Honestly Sylvanas was fairly sure them taking her in had been a move to intimidate her more than anything else.

Pushing aside the flap to her tent, she returned her thoughts to the matter at hand. While it wouldn’t be an issue to move some of her rangers through the trees to cross the area in front of them, moving more heavily armored forces, along with logistics, and even just large enough numbers to actually make a real push into the city, was a more challenging affair. If she could get a team of mages close enough, she could probably just level the street or so where the trolls’ magic wielders were keeping watch, thereby neutralizing most of the forest and allowing them to at least rush in before the trolls recovered, thereby gaining them a foothold in the city. Of course, that was assuming they weren’t just instantly annihilated like they had been on 13th street back in Fairbreeze. In fairness though, most of the Amani forces had been concentrated there, whereas Tranquillien was four times Fairbreeze’s size and the trolls had yet to lose any ground. The rangers might need to either push up or dig in on the first street they hit, but they’d still be able to gain a foothold.

All that was predicated, of course, on them actually getting the mages that close. Working with the magisters had proven… difficult was the polite word for it. For major pushes or other events which were sure to be a source of glory, sure, they were happy to rush in. What they weren’t as good at were more risky, day to day operations. Things like the suicide push the last squad of rangers had just made, she would never be able to get a mage to do with nearly the same level of bravery.

It all came down to the fact that, at their core, they weren’t soldiers. That was probably the greatest difference between a civilian and a ranger. It was that if a ranger was safe where they were, but saw a chance to gain ground at the risk of their life, they’d take it. Sure, they might die, they might be maimed, all sorts of horrible things could happen, but who dares wins. A civilian wouldn’t think like that. They’d think ‘I’m safe where I’m standing right now, I’ll wait for the enemy to come to me so
that I’ll have the advantage’, and every time, without fail, that way of thinking would get them outmaneuvered and annihilated.

So of course ordering a group of mages to charge into no man’s land wouldn’t work out.

She turned to the human sitting on a soft, silken cushion on the rug inside her tent, muscles relaxed but only just. “Nathanos. Any word on the cliffs?”

Tranquillien was surrounded by forest on three sides. On the fourth side were cliffs, something rangers were explicitly trained to scale under hostile circumstances. To that end, an operation had been authorized for a large team of rangers from Ranger-Captain Thalessa’s battalion to try and sneak in on that side, where the tree canopy protected them from view of the city above, and try and scale the cliff face to establish a foothold there and have an accompanying mage use a portal to bring in reinforcements so as to immediately consolidate ground.

Nathanos nodded his head. “I’m sorry, milady, it was...” he paused "...a failure.”

The ranger-general raised an eyebrow. “You hesitated.” She hadn’t known Nathanos to be the type who was afraid to bring bad news. “How did it fail?”

He grimaced. “The cliffs pulled them in, like a rock crusher.”

Sylvanas’ eyes widened. Skilled at direct engagements as the rangers were, the trolls’ command of both nature and the elements made them a fearsome enemy. While druidic magic was practiced to a basic extent by her rangers, at least enough to augment their other abilities, it was overall looked down upon as a school of magic in Quel’thalas. The reason was obvious: the Kaldorei. For the Highborne to lower themselves from their arcane perch to practicing druidic magic was seen as akin to stripping one’s clothes off and rolling around in the mud with the pigs, except that those pigs had driven them from their home specifically for their refusal to accept druidism as being morally superior to the arcane.

Elemental magic, meanwhile, they as a people hadn’t even begun to consider tapping into.

The result of this sentiment was that a city whose reclamation was critical to winning the war stood untouchable as the forces of nature and the elements themselves rose to defend it.

Sylvanas sat down on a cushion opposite the human. “Nathanos, would be so kind as to go get a mage?”

Nathanos looked at her. Or more accurately, his gaze at her focused, since in all honesty he hadn’t taken his eyes off her since she’d walked in. Though she’d never admit it, Sylvanas loved getting that reaction from people. “Which magister, ma’am?”

She sighed and rubbed her temples. “Literally any of them will do.”

“Yes, milady.”

With that, he was gone. Working with the magisters was difficult, but if they were going to reclaim the remaining half of their country, they needed to explore all options.

Kalina closed her eyes as she watched the squad of rangers be annihilated through a window on the outskirts of the city. It was a conflicting sight to behold - while their failure was technically good for her mission, she definitely wasn’t happy to see rangers being wiped out.
Said mission was simple. She was to go in before the Ranger Corps penetrated the city’s defenses, and weaken any resistance she might find inside. She’d been encouraged to avoid touching the external defenses, so as to prolong both the time and space she had to operate. That said, it wasn’t a hard order. Given her past effectiveness, both to the benefit and lack thereof of the kingdom, she’d been given fairly wide discretion over how she chose to weaken the city, with the understanding that a better performance meant a greater chance of going home and, more importantly, of not just being disposed of.

To that end, she’d been deployed for the last six hours. While dropping a substantial force into the city by portal wasn’t a viable option, one expendable agent had easily been enough to not draw attention. Being a native of the city gave her an advantage in terms of navigation, but she hadn’t been there in well over a century. As a result, while plenty of things were the same, there was a good deal that wasn’t.

She turned to head back into the city. It wasn’t good to hang around this long. She didn’t have time to waste, and she hated fighting casters, especially shamans. If she never saw another bolt of lightning again, it’d be too soon. With that in mind, she looked down one more time to check that the body at her feet was still dead before, satisfied with the answer, starting back in.
“... You can do what?” Sylvanas gaped.

The girl sitting across from her, a cornsilk blonde in blue and gold robes, nodded. “We can blink pretty far forward if we need to.”

The ranger-general stared at her. There had to be a catch, or something. “Why have I never seen this used in battle?” The theoretical benefits of being able to just teleport around the battlefield instantaneously were incalculable. No, they were revolutionary.

The girl seemed to tighten up a bit as nervousness overtook her. “Well, uh, it’s not something you can really just do in battle, or even really as a day to day thing. It’s really easy to accidentally blink into something if you’re not really careful, and once you do it gets fused with you. It’s only really good for, like, moving across the room, and even then you have to be really careful not to accidentally blink into the wall or a cushion on the floor or something.”

“But you can do it, in theory.” Sylvanas pressed, an intense, forceful sort of excitement rising in her voice.

This only seemed to increase the poor mage’s visible anxiety, as her body language closed up. “I guess… It’d just have a really, really high chance of going badly.”

“Can you take others with you?”

At this, the mage shook her head stiffly. “Some people have tried that… it gets, um… messy…”

Sylvanas saw Nathanos’ eyes widen behind the girl. She could only imagine how surreal being exposed to so much magic everywhere was for a human, for whom outside of the light, the only magic really seen was practiced by an exclusive few who kept such practice extremely limited and discreet so as not to bring the church down on them. For him to see it as a way of life, like in Quel’thalas, where both sides depended on it for creative and altogether horrifying ways to annihilate each other, must’ve been jarring at the very least.

She chastised herself. He’d served Quel’thalas faithfully for years, now. While that was very little time by Quel’dorei standards, by human standards it was quite a while, and they tended to adjust to change accordingly. He was probably more than used to magic by now. Perhaps it was simply the gruesome implication of the mage’s words that was troubling to him.

“And how quickly can you repeat this spell?” She asked, her tone becoming more calm.

“Not instantaneously, ma’am. Like, we can do it again after a little bit, but we can’t, uh” She snapped her fingers in the air in rapid succession to illustrate her point.

Sylvanas nodded. “Very well. That’s everything I need. You’re dismissed, mage.”

Once the girl was gone, Sylvanas turned to look at Nathanos. “What are your thoughts?”

“I think it presents a clear path forward.”

“And the magisters?”

“What about them?”
Sylvanas closed her eyes. As a tactician, Nathanos was quite knowledgeable. He’d probably never live long enough to see a promotion open up, though. Most elves in the Ranger Corps, and in Quel’dorei society in general, held their positions for decades on end. It was fairly hard to advance when no one aged. And even if one did open up, making him an officer would be a challenge all its own. For one thing, it meant the elves under his command would actually have to be willing to follow him, something that his being a human made improbable. On pure martial skill alone, though, he was good at what he did. It made him a valuable friend and advisor.

One thing he was absolutely incompetent at, however, was playing politics. Sylvanas loathed the exercise. The very idea of factionalism was, to her, an affront to all things effective and efficient. But whereas she was at least willing to recognize threats as they appeared, and play the game however was necessary to handle them, Nathanos was different in that he utterly refused to even dignify such hindrances by addressing them. To him, the magisters would follow because they’d been ordered to. To do otherwise was treason against their kingdom. It was that simple.

It was times like these she found herself thinking about Kalina a lot. The girl had never really meshed well with the ranger way of life. That wasn’t to say she’d been bad at it. On the contrary, she’d performed her duties quite well, but she’d never really come across to Sylvanas as truly a ranger so much as an assassin playing the part of a ranger. She’d always preferred her throwing knives and poisons over the bow, had gravitated heavily toward operating alone as opposed to the as part of the teams ranger units were meant to be, and though she knew the sapphire eyed girl had worked hard to keep it hidden, Sylvanas could see in the way she fought that she had rarely held any real sense of personal investment in the duties she was performing. It had been a job to her, carried out with a cold, detached sense of calm just like any other contract she’d taken. Her recent reactions to the war at hand had made Sylvanas think she was starting to come around, but for the majority of her career as a ranger, it had been painfully clear to Sylvanas that Kalina hadn’t even been remotely there for Quel’thallas, the Quel’dorei, or any other such noble reason. She'd been there for her.

But while ranger life had never really suited Kalina particularly well, her knack for politics had been second to none. It had gone leaps and bounds towards reducing the level of friction the rangers had had to deal with in any endeavor they undertook. If she were here now, Sylvanas was certain, getting the magisters to cooperate wouldn’t have even been an issue.

“Go.” She spoke simply, nodding towards the tent flap.

“As you wish, milady.” Nathanos replied with a bow of his head, before turning and making his exit.

Once she was sure she was alone, Sylvanas flopped back on the rug beneath her. Why could nothing ever be easy?

The room stood silent as Kalina sat on the floor of it, her mind full of regrets. This had been a terrible idea. She’d made the detour here on the pretext that there must have been at least a few trolls in her childhood home; and as it so happened, there were plenty, and so the trip had been worth it in that regard, but as she now sat in her former bedroom, all she could do was judge herself. What would her childhood self say if she could see her now? Hell, even her teenage self would probably be appalled at how wrong her life had gone.

“I’m sorry.” She spoke allowed. She wasn’t sure to whom, she just felt like she needed to apologize.

She knew she shouldn’t be moping around. She had a job to do, her performance in which could determine her ability to keep breathing, which very much meant she didn’t have time to sit around feeling sorry for herself. At the same time, though, she wasn't ready to go yet. Just another hour, she told herself. Then she'd get back to work.
Her attention turned to the crib in the corner. She wondered if things would go as wrong for Valya as they had for her. No. They’d go worse. All things considered, the key mistake her parents had made in trying to keep her domesticated was giving her too long a leash. Sylvanas had made sure she’d had both the skills and the resolve she needed to thrive out there, with or without a husband. They wouldn’t make the same mistake with Valya.

Her thoughts were cut short by the sudden sound of an explosion coming from outside, causing her to immediately get to her feet and rushed over to the balcony, looking out over the edge. For a moment, she couldn’t see where the blast had come from. That problem was quickly rectified as another ball of fire hit a building on the edge of the city, the sound of the ensuing explosion reaching her a moment later.

They were pushing up. Once they wiped that first line of defense at the edge, anything left wouldn’t be able to stop the rangers from getting a foothold - which meant Kalina was suddenly running out of time.

Turning to bolt back down the stairs, she kicked herself mentally. She’d expected the rangers to waste months fighting for ground inch by inch until they finally got in range, at which point the trolls would have already set up an invincible second line. And that was before even taking into account goblin offensive demolition capabilities. She’d gone over this projection again and again in her head, worst and best case scenario, from every angle and point of view, and she was dead certain she had far, far more time at her disposal. As she rushed out into the street and found herself immediately sprinting, however, she realized her one, fatal error.

She’d forgotten to factor in Sylvanas.

She reached the opposite side, immediately slipping into a nearby alley where she’d be concealed, before starting up the wall of the building next to her while going over targets in her head. The average troll brute wasn’t of particular incidence. Her primary targets were magic users and goblins.

Before, she’d been avoiding magic users for their ability to hold the rangers back and give her more time to work, as well as her own bad experiences fighting them, since once the rangers were on top of her and recognized the hood they’d shoot on sight. Now, however, said rangers were about to be officially in the city, meaning Kalina’s mission had become making sure they didn’t stay pinned in one place for long - and that meant hitting as close to their lines as she could safely get.

Climbing atop the roof, she turned and leapt across to the adjacent one before beginning a sprint for the northern edge of the city, needing to fully capitalize on what little time she had left by hollowing out as much of the troll defenses as she could.

Sylvanas smirked as she watched her forces advance through the woods link an unstoppable flood. The methodology she had ordered was swift, simple, and decisive. One mage would blink up and immediately make a portal which around 40 rangers would rush through, followed by more mages. While the rangers themselves were being eaten alive, the next mage would blink up and create another portal while the others began suppressing the city with a heavy barrage of fire. Through said portal more rangers and mages would come while the remaining mages blinked up, leaving the rangers already stuck in the forest to serve as a distraction while pushing up manually on their own.

She knew she’d never have been able to get the mages to try leapfrogging up without a sizable escort, let alone successfully. With an unlimited supply of rangers involved, however, it became a much more large scale operation, meaning they couldn’t refuse if they wanted to.

‘Like arrows in my quiver.’
That was the difference between her and her mother. Sylvanas was far more ruthless than Lireesa ever was. Whereas the latter would’ve spent months behind that line carefully trying to wear away at the trolls’ defenses, laying siege to the city, or some other long term means of attrition, Sylvanas had no qualms about simply throwing bodies at a problem. She was the type of leader who, in chess, had no issue making that one move that set off a hundred others on either side, so long as she came out on top by even a single pawn.

Discovering her home and family torn to shreds had only served to amplify this side of her.

It was because of that that as she watched nature and the elements themselves ripping her rangers to pieces, she felt only satisfaction at the fact that her forces were gaining ground, and soon they would land upon the cobblestone streets of Tranquillian. So focused was she on her inevitable victory, that she failed to notice the briefest sight of a silhouette sprinting across the rooftops near the edge of the city.

There were two of them in the room when Kalina swung in through the window by grappling hook. One was standing far back at the opposite window, facing outwards in clear anticipation of the incoming assault. The other was asleep on the floor. Before the former could realize she was there, she’d buried a poisoned throwing knife in his back, causing him to begin to turn back to face her only to stop and fall to the floor with a loud thud as every muscle in his body seized up, before he began spasming uncontrollably, which in turn only caused more noise.

By the time his companion had sat up however, the girl’s blade was already at his throat.

“Go back to sleep.” She whispered as she drew it across without hesitation, causing the shaman’s blood to come spraying out and cover her from head to toe.

She turned back to look at the poisoned one. Blood was trickling from his orifices now. She smirked. The poison coating her blades had always been a personal favorite of hers. She wondered if Nyana would recognize the symptoms.

There were more trolls downstairs, she knew, but to her knowledge none of them were magic users. That was good. Her job was to soften up Tranquillian, not wipe it completely. They’d buy her time while she focused on more important targets.

After retrieving and resheathing her blades, she stepped back out onto the windowsill and grabbed hold of the rope. Seconds mattered here, meaning she didn’t have time to climb back up it to the roof. No, she’d have to slide down and continue from street level. The chances of getting bogged down by non-magic users were higher, but even then, that’d just mean less resistance for the rangers to worry about.

As her leather boots hit the ground with barely a sound, she immediately started off down the street at a sprint, staying near the walls so she wouldn’t be visible from the upper floor windows. The sounds of fighting were much closer now. She didn’t have long. Once that was done, she’d have no choice but to retreat to four streets in and keep working there.

The one saving grace of this mission was that Tranquillian was massive. Not as big as Silvermoon, and certainly not as grand, but big enough to where it absolutely dominated southern Quel’thalas. If the city was anywhere near as well defended as Fairbreeze had been, the Quel’dorei would be looking at Pyrrhic victory at most.

Ducking into a nearby building, she found herself met with no less than four trolls, all evidently not magic users. That was their doctrine as she’d seen it so far. The melee trolls guarded those who were
good with magic, which in a Quel’dorei city, meant the former on the bottom floors and the latter on the top floor.

She barely had time to duck as a heavy blade cut through the air where her neck had just been. Her reply was immediate as she unsheathed one of her main daggers and drew it across the troll’s abdomen in one fluid motion, before darting out of the way just in time to avoid the spear that had been thrust at her torso.

Twirling around to face the remaining hostiles, she dropped her current blade in favor of using each hand to swiftly withdraw a weighted dagger, which she buried in a pair of trolls, causing them to both quickly descend into horrible spasms while their sole remaining companion looked on in horror.

By the time he looked back up at the masked assassin, she was already in front of him. He barely had time to breathe as she drove the blade into his stomach, before even that became difficult as the poison took hold. As he devolved into blood soaked twitching, Kalina quickly set about retrieving and resheathing her blades. Once that was done, she moved on throughout the rest of the bottom floor, finding it empty apart from a few sleeping trolls, whom she was kind enough to help stay that way, before moving on upstairs.

This was the part she’d been dreading. Taking a magic user by surprise was one thing, but in here she could easily end up facing them head on, and when that happened all that stood between her and being tied to a post again was a quick jolt of lightning. It was for that reason that she now stepped very lightly, even by her usual standards, through the rooms, a weighted dagger in each hand.

‘Come on you sons of bitches, where are you?’

Her question was answered by the sound of electricity crackling behind her, causing her to whirl around and chuck the blade in her right hand into the shaman at the opposite end of the hall, before being hit by the ground as the bolt of lightning surged through her. Thankfully, the punishment only lasted a moment, before the shaman lost all control of it from the poison, unable to stop casting as the elements he had channeled turned on him. Panting heavily, Kalina barely managed to drag herself in horrific, jerky movements, over to behind a nearby corner as the troll in the hallway was slowly cooked alive by his own lightning.

The sound of heavy footsteps followed by the squelch of flesh being pierced silenced all noise in the hallway. The assassin had to force herself to keep from panting.

A low voice carried through the floor. “Where be you, lil elf?”

Kalina turned her head to face the hallway. She’d dropped the weighted dagger in her left hand when she’d been shocked. It wasn’t a problem for lack of daggers - she had four left - but her legs and hands were still jelly, and the blade on the floor gave her pursuer a pretty clear idea of where she was, or at least which direction she’d gone in.

She could hear him getting closer as with a sudden whoosh, the halls were filled with a bright, flickering, orange light.

‘Nonononono…’

As he rounded the corner to find Kalina slumped there, the girl lunged forward in a last show of strength, grabbing one of his ankles with her hands as if to beg for mercy, causing him to burst into cruel laughter.

He didn’t even notice the needle in her glove pricking into his skin.
Immediately his laughing was cut short as he doubled over and began retching profusely as his body went into convulsions. The amount of poison in such a small needle wasn’t nearly enough to take him down then and there, but for the purposes of making him violently ill, it was plenty.

Luckily for both of them, this shaman was at least disciplined enough to dispel his flames rather than lose control of them as he fell to his knees, his torso suspended just over the elf below him.

As Kalina felt more and more fine motor control returning to her fingers, it didn’t take her long to reach her arm across her body, before drawing and driving a dagger up into the troll’s stomach, causing him to collapse on top of her. Before he could completely go limp, however, the assassin had already extricated herself from under him.

Leaving her kill to his own devices, she turned and quickly descended the staircase once more, before exiting the building out onto the street moments later.

She cleared the bottom floor of the next occupied building in quick succession. This time, however, instead of going hunting for the shamans with her knives, she instead switched to the bow slung across her back as she drew a single poison tipped arrow from her quiver, before the ascending the stairs to the upper floor. Unlike her blades, the arrows were only tipped with her standard paralytic, being that they were intended for use on any rangers that got too close. Not the most safely non-lethal route, but one that has served her well against Sylvanas.

Still, she was sure they wouldn’t mind a few lost arrows in exchange for a few more dead shamans. The building’s layout gave her a decent idea of where the pair was. All she needed to do was let them come to her.

Silently, she took a kneeling position, before drawing back the shot.

“Hello?” She called out, as though she was some confused civilian poking through the empty city. She didn’t have to hold her arrow for more than a minute as one of the trolls came into view to investigate. Before the massive cannibal could register what he was seeing, the girl had already loosed her shot, the laced projectile striking him in the abdomen with barely a sound. Not waiting to see if the poison on it was enough, she swiftly put another in him for good measure, causing his muscles to quickly and quietly freeze into place.

Stowing her bow again with a smirk, she drew one of her weighted daggers and stepped forward. It’d be easy enough to slit his throat, but the whole point of this plan was silence until both trolls were dealt with. Then she could kill him.

Stepping under his arm silently, she moved on to find his companion. The sound of pacing through an ajar door as she approached one room told her he was in there.

She allowed herself a moment’s pause. The second she was in view, it would be a race as to who could hit first.

Tensing up, she swiftly darted into the room. The troll noticed her almost immediately, his hands crackling with electricity as she turned to face her. Before her could let it loose, however, Kalina’s knife had already buried itself in his stomach. As the poison took effect, the elf turned around to go deal with the still paralyzed one. One slit later, she collected her knives and arrows, and left the building.

The next few buildings she cleared without much issue, using the same luring method as she had for the last one to draw them out and pick them off.
The fighting had hit the city now, meaning had no choice but to pull back. She hadn’t exactly wiped out the trolls’ second line, but she’d punched a big enough hole in it where the rangers would have no problem doing the rest of the work. As she prepared to make her egress, she allowed herself a moment's pause, withdrawing a small bottle from a pouch on her armor to replenish the poison in her sheaths.

Once that was done, she turned into a nearby alley to vacate the street, only to dive back behind cover less than a second later. There was a totem there. She didn’t have a sword. Why didn’t she bring a sword? Because she was an idiot, that’s why. It was fine. She just needed a few arrows and that’d do the job no problem.

Drawing an arrow from her quiver, she nocked it before hesitating.

‘Okay. No problem, Kalina. You’ve done this before. Just poke out, shoot it, and hope you don’t spontaneously burst into flames.’

The fighting was getting closer. She didn’t have time to hesitate. Her breath just a touch shaky, she forced herself to step out from the safety of her cover. The moment she caught sight of the totem, she swiftly drew and loosed her shot into it, before diving back behind the corner with a panicked breath.

‘Idiot! It’s disrupted, kill it now!’

Leaping back out from her cover again, she put another arrow into the now momentarily stunned trap, before following it with a third, a fourth, and a fifth for good measure. As the glowing symbols on the piece of wood finally died, the girl sank to her knees, her breaths heavy. She hated totems so much.

Getting up again and stepping through the alley, she started her way deeper back into the city. The one advantage to fighting in Tranquillien over Fairbreeze was that because the city was paved in cemented cobblestones, it made it impossible for the trolls to dig traps. It also made it far more difficult for their druids to operate effectively, hence why they were all in the forest or likely in the greener areas of the city. The shamans, meanwhile, were more than comfortable operating in an area filled with rocks and water, and even without either, they still had more than enough magic on their own, which presented a new problem for Kalina:

Crossing the street.

She could just scale one of the buildings and sprint back to a point where it was easy enough to make the jump across, but that presented two problems of its own. The first was the time it would take, time that she was finding she had increasingly less and less of. The second was the possibility of one of the rangers seeing her up there, which would mean Sylvanas finding out, and if Sylvanas found out, it would only end in more pain for the both of them; not to mention what could happen if the Royal Guard found out she’d been spotted.

Which meant she had to cross the street. Looking out across the way, she could see there was nothing in the alley opposite her. That gave her a clear shot. Biting the inside of her lip, she dashed forward into the open. She made it about halfway across the street before the cobblestone itself seemed to break into pieces and rise into the air around her, causing her to stop where she was as she found herself surrounded by levitating chunks of rock.

It was only when a pair of glowing eyes ignited amidst the rubble that Kalina realized what was happening. She’d been taught about elementals during training, but she’d never really imagined herself actually encountering one. Certainly not in Quel’thalas.
Okay, don’t panic, remember your training. Disrupt the magic, same as a totem.’

One thing she remembered learning in particular was that fire and earth elementals were glass cannons. They could cause a staggering amount of carnage in a very short time, but the magic holding them together was incredibly vulnerable. Water and air elementals were the opposite. They couldn’t do nearly as much damage, but they were far harder to deal with.

As a large chunk of stone she assumed was one of the elemental’s hands suddenly came soaring at her head she leapt backwards, out of the reach of the towering assortment of floating rocks and magical energy.

She couldn’t jam her dagger into one of the monster’s lower vulnerable points. That’d just bring the rocks crashing down on her. She could try climbing it somehow, but it’d probably make her an easy kill considering the monster in question didn’t appear to have any shape or joint limitations.

She grabbed her bow with one arm while drawing an arrow from her quiver with the other. It wasn’t a particularly efficient method, especially considering the size of the elemental, but the magic holding it together shouldn’t have any trouble catching arrows.

She smiled. To think, she’d once scoffed at the idea of trading her knives for a bow. One more thing to thank Sylvanas for the next time they saw each other.

The mass of floating rocks surged forward, pieces of road now swinging at her from both sides. She narrowly dodged them by diving and rolling forward, wasting no time in drawing her shot back and letting it go.

It flew through the air like a falcon, before stopping cold in midair. It seemed to vibrate for a few moments, while it’s new host immediately recoiled with every fiber of its being, as though it were feeling the electroshocks its summoners loved employing. The arrow began twitching inside the elemental’s magical field, Kalina wasted no time, sending an arrow at another gap where she was sure there was a magical field, only for it to miss spectacularly. Damn. She had to be more careful where she was estimating.

The elemental recovered from the blow, its various parts now moving slightly more disjointedly, which only made them harder for the girl to dodge. Lunging backwards out of the way of another swing, she nocked another arrow. Her first shot had gone for what one could call its core. The second had gone for a limb and missed. Better to stick with the core, then.

She drew back her shot, before releasing it instantly. It embedded itself in the elemental’s magical field again, causing the loose construct to all but freak out, its “arms” swing wildly now in jerky, erratic movements as the girl darted backwards again.

As she reached back to grab another arrow, however, the monstrosity surged forward faster than she’d thought possible of it. She only has a moment to draw and fire, her shot going wide as a chunk of rock slammed into her centermass, sending her soaring through the air as the wind was knocked out of her. She only vaguely had time to register the window shattering as she went through it, along with the doorway of the next room over that she flew through, before she hit the back wall, feeling something cushioning her impact. As she regained her bearings, she noticed the shocked looking goblin staring at her from across the room.

There were goblins here.

It was at that point that she was reminded of the mass between her and the wall as it began to move. All at once, Kalina scrambled to her feet as if a spider had crawled onto her, immediately clicking a button inside her boot with her toe to produce a small blade from the tip of the sole. It was a device she’d once seen Jayla using a long time ago, likely of gnomish design. Once the prospect of facing
goblins had appeared, she’d kindly asked the Royal Guard to let her include it in her gear list. She did not envy the guards that must’ve been sent to dig it up.

The one across the room sprang into motion, charging at her with a heavy morningstar easily his height. The thing that made goblins so difficult to fight was that they were smaller than elves, faster than elves, and more savage than elves, meaning they could usually appear out of nowhere and break one’s legs before one even realized they were down there.

Kalina wasted no time driving the small blade into the downed goblin as he slowly staggered to his feet, before whirling back around to drive the tip of her boot up through the charging one’s jaw as he opened his guard to swing his mace at her.

The bruizer flew maybe a foot into the air, before crumpling on the ground. The assassin looked around. There were two of them, which suggested that they’d been guarding something. Her eyes came to rest on the stairs leading into the basement, before they widened in horror at the realization of what they could be doing down there.

She let the blade retract into her boot, before breaking into a run as she darted for the stares, not bothering to slow down but instead using her arms to catch herself she went into the wall, immediately pushing off again as she went sprinting down the stairs.

Her dagger was already drawn as she reached the bottom, immediately finding her worst fears confirmed.

The basement was definitely not a small complex, from what Kalina could see. She was standing in a large room. Scattered around it were a number of pillows and rugs, the color of which was completely indiscernible due to the obscene layer of dust that covered everything. As her eyes adjusted to the dim magical lighting of the chamber she was in, however, she began to make out shapes laying amidst the dust - shapes that began to stir.

Wasting no time, she deployed the blade in her shoe again before darting over to each one and kicking it into the small, presumably green workers. She turned just in time to notice the miner lunging at her with a pickaxe the size of his body. Before he could make contact, she raised her boot and drove the blade into his skull, sending him flying backwards and causing the pick to narrowly miss her leg.

As another goblin lunged at her with an appropriately sized excuse for a dagger, Kalina saw yet another one rush in from another room, the female shortstack's hands instantly igniting with the blue glow of arcane magic. Kicking her blade into the dagger goblin offhandedly, she turned and thrust her foot into the air with him still on it, causing him to go flying just as the mage let loose a magic missile, his body catching the hit in midair and exploding in a shower of arcane energy.

Before the mage could cast again, the assassin had already closed the gap and driven her blade into her, sending her soaring through the doorway as the girl followed, finding a number of miners in the next room, each one clutching an improvised weapon in terror.

A few moments later, the room was cleared. As the last goblin hit the floor, Kalina turned to face the far wall of the room. There was a hole in it, well supported but poorly lit, and going deeper than she could see. ‘Hole’ was the best word, as it was far too small for any man or elf to venture into. Only the goblins would be tall enough to fit - which meant from her perspective, any inside were completely untouchable.

The sound of pained groans came from behind her. She turned around to see one of the goblins slumped against the wall but stirring as blood leaked from the wound in his gut. She hadn't poisoned
the blade in her shoe. There was too much that could go wrong with its positioning, it would’ve been a pain to replenish, and in all honesty it was a waste of poison. She stormed over toward him, causing a look of horror to appear on his face as he reached for his weapon lying on the ground near him. Before he could get the chance, however, she’d already grabbed him by the neck in her offhand, lifting him up off the ground and pinning him against the wall while her other hand pressed down on his wound.

“Which areas are rigged?”

His response was to spit blood at her. “Get fucked.”

“Oh look, you’ve gotten blood on my armor.” Said armor already being covered in it. “Guess I’ll have to wipe it off.” With that, she let go of his abdomen, letting him bleed as his intestines came ever closer to falling out of the comparatively large wound.

The goblin let out a cry of agony before catching his breath, causing him to begin panting. “You… think I’m scared toots? This ain’t nothin… compared to… bein’ blacklisted!”

She pretended to examine her nails, despite the fact that she was wearing gloves. “Can’t work when you’re dead, either.”

The goblin began to shake. Whether from the idea of death or simply from blood loss, the assassin couldn’t tell.

“I’ll take… my chances.”

Kalina sighed, before finally placing a hand back over the wound. “I don’t see any witnesses here, do you? I’ve got a nice healing potion in my bag if the answer is no.”

He stared at her for a moment, his breaths slowly getting shallower. “… fine. The foreman’s… got a map, see? He comes out every few hours… for some hooch.”

She stuck her index finger in the wound. “Not good enough.”

He let out another agonized cry. “Th-that’s all I know, honest!”

The assassin gave another sigh. It was better than nothing, she supposed, and she certainly had far more uses for an alive goblin than a dead one. Deciding she could still get some use out of him yet, she dropped him to the ground. “Don’t make me regret this.”

With that, she reached into one of the pouches slung across her chest, before retrieving a healing potion, which she gently placed on the ground within the goblin’s reach.

“Now, you’re gonna help me.”
Chapter 33

The sound of bustling activity filled the street as the rangers rushed into the edge of the city, working as quickly as possible to move their camp from hundreds of meters into the forest to the infrastructure they now held. After an intense night of pushing forward and suffering significant losses, they'd finally captured this foothold maybe two hours ago, and while it was only that - a foothold - it was still more progress than anyone had expected to happen for months.

For that, Sylvanas wore a proud smirk as she stepped across the cobblestone, the metal soles of her boots clicking upon the hard surface beneath her.

“One of the Aeriel’s teams were the ones that first found it.” Nathanos spoke as he walked alongside her. “Several other scenes like it have turned up since we took this section of Gardensong.”

Gardensong Avenue. It was the name of the street they upon which currently tread. Sylvanas hadn’t bothered to learn the history of why it was called that. Why would she? It could be called anything imaginable, it wouldn’t make a difference.

“You still have yet to tell me exactly what ‘it’ is, Nathanos.” The ranger-general replied as they neared the building surrounded by rangers, both heavily and lightly armored.

“I know, milady. I thought it best you see for yourself first.”

As they reached the entrance, one of the rangers guarding the door reached over and opened it for them, allowing them to pass through uninhibited. Stepping into the abandoned building, Sylvanas immediately saw what her protege had meant. Spread upon the floor lay a number of trolls, all having died in a very recognizable manner, blood trailing from their every orifice as their faces stood frozen in an expression of utter suffering.

The woman's smirk turned into a grin as she gave a tired sigh of relief. “She’s here.” She finally spoke after a moment of pause.

Nathanos nodded. “It would seem so.”

She turned to the human. “Thank you, Nathanos. This is the best news I’ve received in months.”

She didn’t notice the briefest flash of outrage across his face. “Of course, milady.”

Without another word, Sylvanas turned and exited the building. Kalina was alive. That was now confirmed. Even better, she was in Tranquillien, and not far from her judging by how fresh the corpses were. She wasn't alone anymore. Everything would be a thousand times easier from here on out.

She stopped. Kalina hadn’t made contact yet, which meant she was likely under orders not to. Would going looking for her put the girl in danger?

She knew the answer already. It most likely would. It'd probably put them both in danger, the more she thought about it.

Sylvanas thought back to the last time she'd seen her - broken, mangled, face gaunt, and body so bruised her skin was more purple than her characteristic pale. And the Royal Guard had dragged her away. They'd held Sylvanas down while she watched them drag Kalina through the portal to possibly never be seen again. While they'd taken her away from her.
Her hands curled into fists. No. Not again. She would not see Kalina taken from her again while there was still something she could do. She needed to go after her. She couldn’t bring her back to camp, that was obvious, but she’d be damned if she didn’t at least go find her and make sure she was okay.

She looked around. The street was still bustling with activity. Spotting a nearby ranger, she swiftly sprinted over to him and grabbed his shoulder, immediately getting his attention.

“I’m going on a scouting mission. Tell Lor’themar he’s in charge.”

The poor boy looked terrified. For that, he couldn't he blamed. The ranger-general had just appeared out of nowhere, grabbed hold of him, and given him a set of orders. “Uh, y-yes ma’am!” He gave a salute.

Without another word, the woman turned and broke into a run across the cobblestone ground. Every second she took was one second the trail grew colder. She didn’t have time to waste.

The foreman never saw the blade coming as it was kicked into the side of his neck. He fell to the ground, blood gushing from the wound like a fountain as he stared in a mix of horror and betrayal at the miner who had lured him out there, while the light in his eyes slowly faded, until he was gone.

“Grab the map.” Kalina spoke indifferently as she watched the scene unfold.

In an instant, her prisoner was upon the corpse, rifling through its pockets until he pulled out a folded piece of parchment.

“Here! I got it!” He held it up eagerly. No, eager wasn’t the right word. Hopeful was a better one.

She knelt down to accept the document, before standing back up and summarily unfolding it. It wasn’t a map of the whole city, but it gave plenty of details on the operation being performed where she was currently standing. Even better, it provided maps of surrounding operations as well, likely to avoid stepping on each other’s toes.

“Hey, uh, so I can go now, right?”

She folded up the map. “You’ve done well.” Without another word, she kicked her blade back into the goblin’s abdomen again. “You can go.”

Her target gave a short gasp, before crumbling to the ground, hands clutching weakly at his stomach. The snow haired assassin wasted little time. It wouldn’t be long before someone came looking for the foreman, and once they found him dead, along with everyone else she'd killed, there was a good chance they’d panic and blow the charges.

Originally she’d been planning on lighting a fire to try and suffocate the mine, but according to the map in her hands, they’d thought of that and had set up multiple ventilation points. That meant her only option was to get the map to Sylvanas as fast as possible in the hopes that she could evacuate in time. She opened it up again. If she hadn’t been a Tranquillien native, memorizing the locations of the adjacent goblin operations might’ve proven impossible, but as it stood, it wasn’t hard.

With that done a moment later, she stowed the map away and retracted her blade before starting up the stairs. The earth elemental was still probably roaming around outside. She’d have to get by it somehow.

That thought was interrupted, however, by the sound of pieces of rock crashing to the ground
coming through the window as she reached the top of the stairs. She froze. Someone was here. Were
the rangers pushing up? No. There’d be more noise. A scouting party then.

Turning to face the source of the noise, she looked through the nearby doorway at the broken
window a room away from her through which light shone. Her eyes then went to the pair of dead
goblins in the same room as her, followed by the footprints of dirt mixed with blood she has left.

She couldn’t hide from them if they came in here. She could run, but would they pursue? She’d
certainly left plenty of bodies for the rangers to clean up, they’d likely know it was her.

She reached for her bow, only to find it gone. Damn. She must’ve dropped it when the elemental had
hit her. At least it was dark in the house. That alone would give her a decent amount of concealment
from anyone looking in from the outside.

A moment later, a hooded ranger came into view, causing Kalina to clap a hand over her mouth
silently as she recognized the woman, before darting to the side of the doorway, where she was
hidden from view.

Sylvanas had come looking for her. The one woman in Quel’thalas with an unmatched skill in
tracking her specifically, had come looking for her.

‘Okay, don’t panic, this is good. You can’t let her see you, you certainly can’t talk to her, but you
can at least make sure she gets the map now.’ She reassured herself, even as her heart pounded.

Slowly, she pulled an arrow from her quiver with the goal to make as little noise as possible, before
retrieving the map from where she had stowed it, and placing it gently against the wall. She could
hear Sylvanas climbing in. Once she did this, her love would know exactly where she was.

She didn’t have time to hesitate. With one hard thrust, she drove the arrow through the map and into
the wall, pinning it there, before letting go and bolting for the back window off to the left. The
sudden hard sound of metal boots on the floor told her Sylvanas was sprinting after her.

Before the ranger could make it into the room, however, Kalina had already dove through the
window, immediately flattening herself against the ground as she landed. She heard Sylvanas’
footsteps likewise stop inside the room she’d just left.

The assassin let herself relax for a moment. The worst was over. The map would force Sylvanas to
return to the ranger line to mitigate potential damage, meaning as long as the blonde didn’t find her
within the next minute or so, she was clear. A part of her felt guilty for avoiding the woman she
loved like this, but she had to assume the Royal Guard was always watching, meaning she couldn’t
be seen having any interaction with Sylvanas that would suggest that the ranger-general knew who
she was or otherwise didn’t still desire to kill her with every fiber of her being. Running away was at
least easy enough to explain in the event that she was indeed being watched.

She stood up outside the view of the window, hugging onto the wall and allowing herself a breath
before all at once taking off at a quiet sprint. The streets still weren’t safe, but she at least knew how
to disappear between them without the trolls or Sylvanas immediately figuring out her location.

After eventually reaching an alley that she’d figured - correctly - would be overlooked by the trolls,
she allowed herself to sit down for a moment of breath. As she felt her energy slowly return to her,
she nearly punched herself. A quick thrust with an arrow. That’s all it would’ve taken. She could’ve
gotten the drop on Sylvanas, stabbed her somewhere non-lasting with a poisoned arrow, and that
way they’d have gotten to see each other without the Royal Guard suspecting anything.
So why hadn’t she?

She knew the answer, of course. She couldn’t do it. Not again, anyway. Every time she had hurt Sylvanas in battle as the Canary had driven daggers through her heart. When they’d finally reunited, the realization that she’d never have to do such a thing again had been one of the happiest moments of her adult life.

All that was beside the fact that paralyzing the Ranger-General of Quel’thalas and leaving her for dead in the middle of hostile territory wasn’t a very good idea.

She let her head fall into her hands. This whole time, she’d been working with a light at the end of the tunnel in mind - a time when they Royal Guard would release her and her life could return to the romantic bliss she’d spent so long fighting for. But as her mind returned to that comforting idea, a part of her almost chuckled. Was she really so naive as to think that even if the Royal Guard did release her, that that’d be the end? No. Why would it be? So much of Quel’thalas was a wolf pit, clad in jewels and magic to appear beautiful, but no less brutal or bloody than anywhere else in Azeroth. The only way she would stop being afraid, the only way she had ever been able to stop being afraid, was to become the terror of someone else. It was a wolf pit that many were free from, but she herself was forever trapped in.

She thought back to the last time she’d talked to Nyana. She’d had to become the terror of that girl’s existence in order to survive. She’d killed her father and started her on a quest for revenge and answers that had only led her closer and closer to the edge of the pit.

She sighed. At the very least, she’d managed to spare her from getting dragged over the edge, too. Of all the things she’d done as the Canary, that was one of the few she could genuinely say had been a good deed.

A part of her wondered whether there was even any point distinguishing between her two lives anymore. They’d become so irreparably meshed together now that they certainly couldn’t be separated. But then, she supposed, she still had two separate lives. There was the one Silvermoon had written for her, that her parents had written for her even before then, the story that she’d had to keep up even in ‘death’; and then there was her real life. That was a better way of describing her situation at this point.

She stood up. The rangers would likely either be mobilizing to clear out of the blast zones, or rewriting their plans to account for them. Probably both. Either way, it bought her plenty of time to go after the other dig sites. Once she hit them, she could get more maps, meaning more sites to hit. That was what she should be focusing on.

With that in mind, she grabbed a ledge and began climbing the wall to the roof, her path forward now clear.
Hours later, the last goblin hit the ground with what Kalina liked to imagine was a heavy thud but was in reality far too quiet for that. She’d been lucky the foreman had been outside when she’d hit the place, or things could’ve gotten far more messy, not the least of which because of the amount of time that’d be lost actually getting him.

She retrieved the map from his corpse, before turning around and starting up the stairs. The building she was in appeared to have been a candy shop before the war. It was all cleared out, of course. Judging by the wrappers and lollipop sticks on the ground, it wasn’t hard to guess the reason. Even so, it gave Kalina a sense of nostalgia. It was so long since she’d been a kid, she’d almost forgotten the feeling.

As she passed by the counter toward the back room where the next set of stairs was, she noticed a relatively undisturbed bottle of ink with a quill next to it. Stopping, she pulled out the folded map and grabbed the quill.

‘Love, Your Worst Enemy’ She signed quickly on the blank side, before blowing on the ink, putting away the map, and resuming her stride. Lucky for her, this building actually had an accessible roof.

As she emerged out onto the open surface, she found herself looking out over what remained of what was once clearly a small garden. The sight was minor, but it was enough to give her pause as she let out a happy sigh. Though gardening was never a passion of hers, she’d often consorted with those who enjoyed it in the name of acquiring reagents for her poisons. To her, the hobby always betrayed a soft side in a person. It was good to receive a reminder every now and then that not everyone in Quel’thalas was horrible, even in her hometown.

Moving on from the sight, she turned and broke into a sprint across the rooftop before leaping the gap to the next one, and the next. Being discovered wasn’t a major concern for her. Even at a run, her steps were quiet, and that was before the enchantments placed on her boots. All she really had to worry about was someone actually looking up, and even then, she stayed far enough from the edges when possible to minimize that risk.

It took only a couple of minutes for her to reach the ranger line. Sylvanas didn’t have anyone guarding the rooftops, she noticed as she drew near. She supposed that was for her benefit. A thoughtful gesture if there ever was one. Of course, being seen would mean the ranger-general would be forced to change that policy, so Kalina didn’t dare actually touch the rooftops of their territory, but it wasn’t hard to take a far enough away position to be able to plan effectively while still remaining safe. Even better, the sun was facing her, which in combat was a disadvantage, but when trying to remain hidden in broad daylight, it meant she wasn’t a dark silhouette, which made a tremendous difference.

Even so, she couldn’t stay away forever. She needed a way to get the map to Sylvanas without raising any questions from anyone else, and more importantly, without actually making contact with the woman. Of all the places in Tranquillien where the Royal Guard would have eyes, the Ranger Corps was a guarantee.

She could try breaking into the ranger-general’s quarters and leaving it there, though that would require identifying her quarters and, more importantly, breaking into them without being seen and
without killing anyone. She wondered if Sylvanas would leave a window open for her. It’d be so romantic if she did.

Kalina nearly slapped herself.

‘Focus.’

This was not the time to get swept up in romantic fantasies. There’d be plenty of time for that once the war was over and she was released. If she was released, that is.

A sudden shouting erupted from down below. Had she been spotted? She stepped back from her perch and prepared to bolt when she noticed what was happening. The ranger encampment had descended into chaos all at once as people Kalina recognized as officers ran around shouting orders and those who received them rushed around in kind, some swiftly grabbing and packing whatever they could while others grabbed their gear and went to report in.

That confirmed to her the assumption that she’d already been working under - that the rangers were inside the det zone. Though notably, despite the officers’ sudden burst of activity, the soldiers themselves seemed relatively calm. That’s not to say they were going slowly by any means, they were far too disciplined for that, but they didn’t seem to display the same sense of urgency as their superiors. The mages were moving slowest, or rather, not at all, seeming to instead stand there in some confusion as their superiors calmly called out orders. Neither they nor the lower ranking rangers had likely been informed they were standing on what, if Fairbreeze was any guide, were enough explosives to annihilate them. That meant Sylvanas wanted to maintain order first and foremost. It wasn’t unusual, of course, but it also meant she had an immediate plan of exfiltration rather than just giving the order to scatter.

As the squads of rangers began to form, Kalina noticed they didn’t wait for any further instruction or signalling, rather instead starting off immediately at a run. It made sense. All they’d had so far in the city was a foothold. If they wanted another piece of ground to occupy, they’d have to take it.

The fact that all the rangers were mobilizing to hit wherever they were going under imminent threat presented an opportunity, however, because amidst all the chaos, no one was going to think it unusual for a single ranger to disappear at the right time. From there, all she had to do was tie them up somewhere their friends would hear them, leave the map with them, and get away. Easy delivery.

Her plan of action set, she stood up from her perch and started off at a run, now doing her best to follow the rangers without getting too close or moving too noticeably.

It wasn’t long before she watched the ranger squads cross over into enemy territory and immediately regret their mistake, as the first one ran out into the open street only for the stone beneath them to fracture into pieces which began moving on their own while the ground underneath gave way, turning into a literal meat grinder that slowly pulled them downwards, crushing each bone individually. It only took seconds for the rangers’ discipline to give way to agonized shrieks.

“Get back!” Another of the squad leaders shouted, her voice coming out sounding young and uncertain. Kalina looked down to catch a glimpse under the girl’s hood of the face of none other than Elarae Darkflight.

‘Oh you’re kidding.’

If Avina found out that she had watched Elarae die without getting involved, she might just brush it off as her fulfilling her orders and thus her duty to the crown. Of course, there was also a solid chance that she wouldn't. All in all, Kalina didn’t like those odds, especially when weighed against
the chances of getting some form of leniency if she did tell Avina she’d managed to directly save her sister’s life.

Which meant she actually had to get involved.

Sighing, she stood up and stepped back from the ledge so as to hide from view, before moving to engage. She knew where the shamans were working from, roughly speaking. While not every building was occupied, it wasn’t hard to figure out which one was, based on which squad had gotten hurt while trying to cross.

It only took a few quick leaps for her to make it to the roof of the building in question. As she reached her destination, Kalina looked down into the street again to see the less magically inclined trolls had now stepped out of the shadows and were pushing a rapid counter offensive, which swiftly clashed against the rangers’ desperate need to advance, leading to a battle in the middle of the street and putting a significant number of Quel’dorei in easy view of the magic wielders above.

In her haste to clear out before the rangers hit the city, she’d left her grappling hook behind on some random building, meaning that now she had no choice but to climb down to the upper floor's back window the old fashioned way. Gripping the edge of the building, Kalina positioned herself crouched on the ledge, facing back in the direction of the building, before stepping off and letting herself hang from the roof by her arms. From there she slowly climbed down the wall until she was in the window which sat there, covered by an almost ethereal curtain that seemed to flow like water in the breeze.

Not wanting to waste any more time in a position where she could very easily fall, she darted inside and under the curtain in one move only to find one of the shamans standing on other side, staring at her in an expression of surprise as the sounds of heavy fighting echoed down below.

They stared at each other, neither seeming to know which of them was in a worse position at the moment. It was Kalina that made the first move, her hand springing into motion and going for a throwing knife as the troll’s hands, meanwhile, ignited in a burst of flame. He was too late, however, as before he could set her ablaze, her knife had already found his skull.

A blood curdling shriek split the air from downstairs.

“Totem!” She heard a female voice shout. They were in the house, which meant she was running out of time. She sprinted forward, leaving the knife embedded in the troll’s head for the time being. She could grab it afterwards - the target came first. That had always been her policy.

Drawing another blade, she burst into the room she suspected the shaman was in, only to have to dive to the side the moment she entered as a jet of flame lunged at her from the troll’s hands. Like with his comrade, her blade dug into his body a second later, this time finding his chest.

As the poison took effect and the shaman’s flames disappeared, Kalina immediately turned and lunged back out the door. The troll had fallen forward, making it far more difficult to get the blade from its head in the time she had. Knowing she couldn't roll his body over, let alone quietly, she instead grabbed the corpse by the hair and pulled its head up to where it now faced out across the floor, allowing her to grab her knife.

“Check upstairs.” She barely heard the command being given as she ripped the blade from its head.

Her gaze turned toward the window. It was at the far end of the room, near the stairs. She’d likely be seen if she went out through it. At the same time, she couldn’t exit through any of the front windows or she’d definitely be seen.
Either way it was moot. She still had another dagger waiting for her in the other room. If the Royal Guard found out she’d left it there for the rangers to find, which they would, it would not help her chances of not being killed. Not to mention how much of a pain to replace throwing knives were in a country that prided itself on not resorting to such implements.

The sound of ranger boots now coming up the steps, Kalina darted back into the room she’d just been in. As she yanked her blade from the shaman’s chest while he continued to jerk and twitch erratically, she frantically turned her attention to finding a place to hide.

Her eyes quickly fell on a disheveled bed placed against the back wall, magically floating above the ground. There was just enough space under it for her to force herself. She didn’t have time to look for something better. It’d have to do.

The sound of footsteps was now on the same floor as her as she flattened herself as she slid under the bed, turning her head sideways so that her ears would fit.

No sooner had she made it than two pairs of blue and gold boots came into view from where she was positioned.

“We got another one in here!” One of the pair called out.

“He’s still twitching. She’s not far.” The other ranger spoke in a much more somber tone as she stepped over towards the troll.

‘She’. They knew it was her. That wasn't unexpected, given that she’d used what could arguably be called her signature poison, but it still wasn't something she liked to hear.

“Right. One of us should st-“

She was cut off as a massive explosion tore through the window and into the room, sending debris flying and the two rangers to the ground. As one of their faces came into view, Kalina recognized it as none other than that belonging to Nyana Springweaver.

‘Oh you’re kidding.’

Not waiting to be seen, she swiftly extricated herself from her otherwise pinned position. It wasn’t hard. She’d folded herself into and gotten herself out of far worse spots before. As she stood up, she could see Nyana getting up onto all fours. Her companion wasn’t moving.

Kalina had her messenger. No, she had something better. An opportunity.

Before the ranger could notice her, much less react, the assassin had already crossed the room and driven her foot up under the girl’s diaphragm, sending her onto her back and gasping for air.

The assassin was on her in an instant, straddling her abdomen with her thighs and pinning her wrists to the floor above her head.

“Long time no see, Nyana. How’ve you been?”

Sylvanas gave a tired exhale, before reaching down and yanking her arrow from the troll it had embedded itself in. The intel Kalina had left for her had meant a sudden scramble to pack up and hit a part of the city that wasn’t rigged before the goblins decided to detonate.

Only the officers had been told of what had happened, though that included the lower ones without
the word ‘ranger’ in the title. The idea was to reduce the chance of panic or recklessness while still making it clear to those in command at the squad level the urgency with which their chosen target, Darkwhisper Street, had to be taken and occupied.

Ultimately they had taken it, but with significant losses, both due to the reckless charge into a close quarters environment with an enemy far physically stronger than them, and the reckless charge into an area watched over by magic wielders. That wasn’t even counting the losses from the explosions that’d taken place behind them.

Her officers were still taking a count to give her a read on exactly how much they’d lost, but the outlook was not pleasant. All around her rangers lay dead or wounded, the causes both wondrous and disturbing. As she replaced the arrow in her quiver, she saw one girl with her body stuck halfway in the road, the stone under her having swallowed - or, masticated was perhaps the better word - her legs.

A group of healers, Liadrin recognizable among them, were doing their best to both keep her alive and try to get her out, but it was a losing battle. Sylvanas could see tears streaming down the ranger’s face as she stood there, or as close to standing as she could really be, hyperventilating in a clear attempt to mitigate the pain.

As the blonde turned and started off again, she noticed the short, mustached form of Nathanos approaching her before falling into step beside her.

“T’ll trust you have news for me.”

“Indeed, milady. We’re still working out exact casualties, but we’re looking at anywhere from ten to twenty percent of our forces lost.”

Her teeth clicked together. “And supplies?”

“We don’t have official numbers yet, but from what I saw it’s not good. At least half of it is gone.”

Her hands curled into fists. “I want a detailed report within an hour from every battalion of both casualties and material losses. Dismissed.”

The human gave a crisp salute, before turning and departing.

“You!” Came a furious shout. Sylvanas turned to see a red faced elf with short blonde hair come storming over to her.

She recognized him as none other than Krasinor Starsong, one of the mages who’d been deployed as part of the war effort. While officially each mage was embedded individually with their respective company, for more complex work like their push into the city, a certain degree of coordination was required. Since the mages weren’t actually under her command outside of the context of each company, that meant dealing with the magisters as an organization. Krasinor Starsong, as the highest ranking magister on such a deployment, thus served as the organization’s de facto representative and field commander.

“Magister Krasinor.” Sylvanas addressed him. “Is there something you require?”

“More than half my mages are dead thanks to your incompetence!”

Sylvanas fought the urge to immediately punch him. The last thing she needed was to tick off the magisters further, especially now that her main instrument of exerting politics was unavailable. “Could you perhaps repeat that, magister? I’m afraid I didn’t quite catch it.”
A thick hand shot out and grabbed her chin, before its owner leaned in so that his face was only inches from hers. “You didn’t tell me we were sitting on a bomb.” He sneered.

Where once such a gesture of control might have elicited an icy sense of terror from the ranger-general, now it only gave way to a mix of disgust and contempt. Her fingers closed around his wrist as he yanked his hand from her chin. “I seem to recall very clearly stating that it was urgent that we move up to Darkwhisper Avenue immediately. If they are your mages, then perhaps you can explain exactly why they dragged their feet?”

She saw his body tense up, not in fear, but in restraint. He was forcing himself to not do something he’d regret. “What” His voice dripped venom “gave you the right to keep that information from us?”

Sylvanas nearly laughed, but instead she gaped. “Besides the fact that you’re embedded with my rangers? How about the fact that ever since we started this campaign, you’ve fought me every step of the way. Anytime I’ve asked your mages to show even the slightest shred of bravery, let alone discipline, you dig your heels in and make it impossible to get anything done!” She could see in her peripheral that people were making a clear effort not to stare now. “Do you have any idea how many rangers we’ve lost because you refused to send mages where they were needed on the grounds that it was dangerous? Wait, what am I saying?” She gestured out across the street, covered in the bodies of her rangers and those who weren’t lucky enough to die. “You can see for yourself. Exactly what assurance did I have that you wouldn’t just portal out and leave us to deal with the aftermath?”

His teeth gritted. “That’s your job. You’re soldiers. Dying for the kingdom is your duty. Not ours. Do I have to make it any simpler or do you understand what being a general means?”

Now Sylvanas did laugh, letting out a cold howl that echoed through the now silent city. “I understand it means obeying royal decrees that state that you’re now a part of this war as much as we are! Or do you not understand what being a Quel’dorei means?”

That seemed to hit a nerve. “How dare- do you have any idea who my family are or do I have to explain to you who runs this kingdom!?”

Before Sylvanas could retort, they were interrupted by a ranger approaching, her hood pulled too far down for her face to be visible. Her armor didn’t seem to fit her well either. Sylvanas would have to send her to the quartermaster later, assuming he was still alive.

“Is there something you need, ranger?”

The woman didn’t reply, instead simple leaning into the magister’s ear and whispering something, before pulling away.

The magister visibly sighed. “It’s best we not fight in front of the children” he gestured to the rangers who were pretending not to watch “don’t you agree?”

Sylvanas looked back at him, as she replied through gritted teeth. “They’re not children, they’re my rangers, and you’re not someone I’d ever marry.”

His gaze hardened again. “If you’ll excuse me then,” he spoke deliberately, “I have to attend to official business.”

“That” she seethed “would be best.”

Without another word, he turned and strod off.
Sylvanas turned back to the ranger at hand. “Was there something you needed?”

The woman stepped forward and took hold of her hand before placing a folded piece of parchment in it and leaning into her ear.

“They’re watching. Don’t come looking for me. I’ll come to you.”

Sylvanas eyes widened as she recognized the voice. She was here. Kalina was here. Whispering in her ear and holding her hand. Before she could even savor the moment, however, the girl had already pulled away and let go.

She forced herself to not show any reaction as she watched her turn around without a word and disappear into the crowd. Only when she was certain the girl was really gone did she look down at the parchment in her hand.

‘Love, Your Worst Enemy’

She couldn’t help but smile. It wasn't a total assurance, but as far as making sure Kalina was okay went, it’d have to do.

Chapter End Notes

Woo! 100k words! Thanks to everyone for reading so far, especially if you're reading this right now. I'm happy to have written something worth reading 100k words of! And I am so glad to be done with this chapter, it took forever.
Chapter 35

Chapter Summary

Sorry I posted this so late in the day! I've been moving and I almost forgot today was Friday! Anyway, hope you enjoy!

It was night by the time Kalina got changed again and cleared the area. It hadn’t been hard convincing Nyana to watch her gear for her while she’d worked, since it just meant channeling her inner Avina and telling the poor girl that if a single piece was missing when she got back, the crown would know who to talk to. Krasinor Starsong has been even easier to handle. All she’d had to do there was tell him that Quel’danas had recalled him effective immediately. It wasn’t wise in most circumstances to deliver such a summons falsely, but it was even less wise for him to refuse one, even when it was delivered by a ranger. Or rather, especially so.

In a way, a ranger was a far more trustworthy bearer of such news than a mage. The reason was that every officially registered magister, from the lowest apprentice to the convocation themselves, had an agenda of one scale or another. To mages, concepts like friendship and love were often simply measured by how willing someone was to stick their neck out for you. Rangers on the other hand were seen as neutral. That wasn’t to say they were left out of politics, but rather it was control over the rangers that was hotly disputed; whereas due to the way Quel'dorei social stratification was, on paper, built largely on the level of magical power one had, members of more noble families were strongly discouraged from pursuing a career with the rangers in favor of either being married off or pursuing magical studies - usually both. The result of this was that the individual rangers themselves, with the exception of the Windrunners, were generally seen as non-players.

Kalina’s priority at the moment was finding a place to sleep and getting something to eat. Sleep deprivation was a given, considering the nature of her mission, but after the days on end of nonstop work she’d been doing, the assassin knew when she was close to crashing. It was a long trek across town to where her supplies were stashed. The Royal Guard hadn’t left her to starve. On her gear list was a sizable supply of jerky and water, both of which they’d portaled in shortly after she’d been deployed. The real challenge though was getting down to street level and making it inside without being seen, unless of course she fancied being killed in her sleep or else ambushed the next time she returned. That wasn't to say her home was being specifically watched, or at least, not by the enemy. Rather, while she’d killed enough trolls in the vicinity to give herself a good bit breathing room, she couldn't risk getting rid of every patrol or stray troll that came near, lest it become increasingly clear that she was based there. It was only really the stationary ones she’d been able to deal with, for the simple reason that it would be easiest for an enemy officer to, upon discovering such carnage, simply write it off as being part of her path of destruction; and even then, she could only sparingly deal with the replacements for those she had killed.

As she reached one of the buildings sitting across from her former home, she paused for a moment, feeling the desperate need for sleep catching up with her, before jolting herself away from the brink and carefully lowering herself from the roof into a nearby alley. It took her a minute of waiting to assure herself that everything was clear - something that would’ve taken far longer had she not been able to feel her limbs turning to jelly - before finally forcing herself to sprint across the street quietly, immediately slipping in through the door of the former home turned base of operations. She could already feel everything beginning to shut down as her movements became more ragdoll until finally,
upon hearing the door click shut behind her, she sank to her knees, consciousness leaving her before she had even hit the ground.

The next few weeks went relatively without friction - at least, relative to being in the middle of a war zone. Kalina would hit a goblin operation, grab whatever intel she could, memorize or otherwise copy down the locations of her next targets, and then get it to Sylvanas. From there the rangers would know how to move forward and would do so while the snow haired assassin worked to eliminate as much resistance in their path as she could while minimizing contact with ranger forces. It was that easy.

Or, not ‘easy’. Truth be told it was terrifying, diving into a room where she was well outnumbered and could likely be killed at any moment and having to, through some miraculous combination of muscle memory and adrenaline, be the only person in there to ever leave that room. It made her heart pound like a hammer every time. And that wasn’t even counting the fact that she had to force herself to minimize contact between herself and Sylvanas even within the very strict parameters of delivering intel, something that wrenched at her heart a little harder every time she did it. Even so, it was a steady rhythm, and one that was easy enough to keep up.

The only real obstacle was the park.

Before the war, Tranquillien had been home to an absolutely gorgeous park near the center of town. Like the rest of Quel’thalas, it was made of a dense, pristine forest, with a stream and a small pond as well. Kalina’s own bedroom growing up had held a fantastic view of the place. The real kicker though was the ecosystem. Unlike the surrounding Eversong Woods, what made the park so special was that it was a completely controlled environment. There we no spiders that would eat one’s face off, or wandering trolls that could inflict any number of horrors upon unsuspecting Quel’dorei, or even lynxes other than those brought along as pets. For that reason alone it was hugely desirable to many of the town’s less nature-oriented citizens.

Now however it was the site of a supposedly massive undertaking. She hadn’t been able to gather much from the maps she’d stolen, they’d all simply marked off the park as being completely off limits for any and all explosives rigging. None of the goblins that had managed to survive the assassin had held useful info either, meaning the entire area was a complete unknown. What she did know, however, was that so far there’d been a relative paucity of druids encountered inside the city. As such, she was almost certain that that’s where they were, meaning that for all intents and purposes, the forest was untouchable. Sylvanas must’ve thought the same thing, because her rangers had been giving the area a wide berth.

The park aside, though, at this point their victory over the town was pretty much inevitable. They’d taken easily 40% of the city so far, and outside of it they had the entire place encircled and under siege with the exception of the cliff side. Even so, they’d stopped advancing recently, despite having the necessary intel to do so. It made sense, in Kalina's eyes. Any further and the park would be within their lines, meaning they’d have to devote a significant amount extra resources to containment, resources which they didn't have.

It was these thoughts that primarily occupied the girl's mind as she stood out on the edge of her balcony one night, gazing out over the natural beauty diagonally below her as it was bathed in the light of the full moon.

“I thought I'd find you here.”

Kalina whipped around to see Sylvanas leaning against the doorway, arms crossed, and wearing a winning smirk.
Her own expression was one of shock and slight horror. She needed to tell her how bad of an idea this was, how many people could be watching her, what could happen to the both of them if they were seen together.

Instead she all but dove into the woman’s arms.

“I missed you.” She whispered as she closed her eyes, buried her face in Sylvanas’ chest, and held onto the woman she loved like she might never be able to again.

A soft chuckle. Kalina could feel her hood being pulled back as her general began stroking her hair gently. “I missed you too.”

They stayed like that for a while, treasuring a moment that might never come again. All Kalina could think about was how much she’d missed this. She didn’t care anymore if the Royal Guard decided to kill her. For this, right here and now, it was worth it.

It was Sylvanas who finally broke the silence. “Lirath’s dead.”

The girl's eyes shot open as she looked up at her lover. “What?”

The woman sniffled as her voice began to quiver. “The Horde hit Windrunner Village on their way out.” A tear landed on Kalina's ear. “Most... of my family is...”

“I’m so sorry.”

Sylvanas broke into quiet sobs, her grip on the girl in her arms only tightening. When it came to handling most things, Sylvanas Windrunner was easily one of the strongest, most invincible people in all of Azeroth. Her family was not one of those things.

Kalina wasn’t sure what to say. Normally consoling people and letting them vent to her was one of the fastest ways she knew of to gain influence over them, but that was all it ever was to the girl, a tactic to gain influence.

Sylvanas deserved better.

She wanted to tell her it’d be okay, but how could it? The woman’s family was gone. Nothing would ever fix that; to say nothing of the vulnerabilities such devastation would leave. Her house, in the political sense, was effectively non-existent now.

“What can I do to help?” Kalina regretted the question as soon as the words left her mouth, but she didn’t know what else to say that was genuine. Either way, she already knew the answer, and it was impossible.

“Don’t…” Sylvanas hiccuped “Don’t disappear again. Please. Everyone else is gone.”

“You can’t say yes you can’t say yes you can’t say-”

“Okay.”

“What have you done.’

Sylvanas gave a small sigh of relief as she immediately seemed to pull herself together. “Thank you. I love you.”

Kalina couldn’t help but smile. It’d been so long since she’d heard Sylvanas say those words to her. “I love you too. Wanna lie down?”
Sylvanas nodded. Kalina broke the embrace, but before she could take one step inside, she found herself being yanked to the ground, suppressing a yelp of surprise as she landed on face down on Sylvanas’ chest.

Looking up at the blonde, she found herself giggling. “You know I meant my bed, right?”

Sylvanas smirked again, despite the black mascara trails drying themselves on her face. “When’s the last time we got to look at the stars together?”

Kalina’s eyes angled upwards toward the twinkling lights above. Oh yeah. It was beautiful tonight, wasn’t it? How had she not noticed?

She smiled softly. “I’d love to.” She agreed as she took the woman’s hand and rolled off to lay beside her, staring up at them.

As she gazed upwards and saw the moon overhead in particular, a question occurred to her. “How long have I been gone?”

Sylvanas’ head snapped to look at her. “What did they do to you.” Her voice held a sudden cold fury. In a way, it actually made Kalina feel safer.

“Nothing, nothing!” She quickly replied in an attempt to correct her mistake. “Well okay not nothing, but like they didn’t torture me or anything. They just kept me shackled to a bed in a really dark cell for a while with nothing to do and no way to tell time.” It sounded a lot worse out loud than it had in her head.

Sylvanas seemed to agree because she sat up and looked at her with a mix of sympathy and rage.

Kalina sat up to match. “I mean, when you think about it, with the way my life’s been going so far, no torture or…” she swallowed “…anything bad is getting off easy.”

The fury in the blonde’s eyes quick melted to sorrow as she gave a soft sigh. “Kali, you know you can’t think like that.”

“I know.” The girl replied casually, trying to steer the conversation away from this topic as quickly as possible.

“I’m serious.” Sylvanas reached up and took Kalina’s chin in her fingers, angling the girl’s head so that their eyes were firmly locked. “You cannot allow yourself to think like that. Promise me you’ll stop.”

Kalina sighed. It’d been so easy to just be thankful that the Royal Guard hadn’t treated her any worse, compared to all the other horrors she’d suffered in one person’s captivity or another’s. But she knew Sylvanas was right; she shouldn’t be okay with anything they were doing to her, or else everything anyone did to her would become okay so long as it wasn’t the worst thing.

“Ohay. I’ll stop thinking like that.”

Sylvanas gave a small exhale of relief. “Thank you.”

She didn’t let go of the girl’s chin. For a moment, Kalina was confused, until she noticed the woman was now staring at her lips.

“... You wanna-“
“Yes.” Sylvanas cut her off as she all but dived in, her lips storming Kalina’s mouth like an invading army as her tongue rammed its way down her throat while her hands went to work undoing the girl’s armor.

Kalina, for her part, absolutely melted upon feeling the warmth of her general’s lips against her own. How she had missed this, had dreamt of it every night and day to keep from going insane, and now it was real again.

The night air was cool against her skin as the leather was peeled off. She instinctively pulled herself closer to Sylvanas, her legs coming to straddle the woman’s thigh as she began grinding against it while her fingers worked their way under the woman’s leggings.

After what could’ve been anything between half an hour and hours on end, they lay there together, panting and staring up at the sky.

“Three months.” Sylvanas finally spoke without looking at her.

Kalina turned her head to face her. “Sorry?”

“You’ve been gone for three months.”

“Oh.” She replied as she looked back up. She didn’t know what else to say. What could she say?

The navy blue of the night sky was beginning to slowly be corrupted by the shades of purple, orange, and red coming over the mountains. Sylvanas let out a sigh. “I know I can’t bring you back with me, both for your sake and for mine.” She said simply. A part of Kalina was amazed at how quick the conversation between them had dissolved.

The girl closed her eyes, only to feel them become wet. “Yeah…”

‘Don’t let her see you cry. Not now. Keep it together for just a bit longer then you can sob into a pillow all you want.’

“We’re hitting the park in a few days’ time.” The woman turned to looked at her again as she sat up. “Promise me you’ll be away from here before then?”

It occurred to the her that she wasn’t seeing the Sylvanas she was used to seeing at this moment. Rather, she was being shown the Sylvanas that everyone else saw - the invincible, immovable ranger-general. She always was so much better at controlling her emotions than Kalina was.

Without opening her eyes, the girl nodded. “I’ll get clear. I promise.”

A moment later, she felt her general’s lips press gently against her own, before pulling away just as quickly. “Thank you. I love you, Kali.”

‘One last look. Open your eyes.’

Against her better judgement, she forced her eyes to open to see Sylvanas’ own steel-toned ones looking into them, their owner now supported by her arms as she leaned over her, legs folded on the ground.

“I…” A single tear shot down the side of her face. “I love you too, Sylvanas.”

The blonde’s hand slid under her head, before pulling her close so that her face was now in the crook of the woman’s neck. “Promise me you’ll stay safe?”
Kalina could only give a short nod as she opened her mouth to find her voice had deserted her in her effort to keep herself together.

“Good.” She heard the relief in Sylvanas’ voice as she held her there for a few more moments, before giving her one last squeeze and standing up. “I’ll... see you around.”

Kalina could only watch her go in silent anguish. The moment she was sure Sylvanas was far enough down the tower to be out of earshot, she got up and sprinted over her bed before all but diving onto the piece of furniture as she grabbed the first pillow she could, shoved her face into it, and screamed.
Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

Sorry if some of these chapters come out a touch messy at first, there are usually a couple of html errors that I don't notice until reading back through.

The sound of glass shattering announced the rangers’ arrival as they broke down the doors and forced their way into the tower, swords drawn. The armed sense of caution soon proved for nothing, however. As Sylvanas already knew, any trolls that had resided in Kalina’s former home had long since been disposed of. As they cleared the girl's bedroom, however, Sylvanas was nonetheless relieved to find that the snow haired assassin herself had long since vacated the structure, leaving nothing behind to suggest any recent occupation.

‘Good girl.’ the woman thought as she noticed the dust around certain parts of the room had all been swept away, enough to make it impossible to determine if anything other than a troll might have disturbed the place. Turning to face the far end of the room, she briskly stepped towards the balcony overlooking the park. Only as she made it out onto the terrace, however, did a sharp sense of loss suddenly hit her. She hadn’t noticed it the night she was with Kalina, but the view out over the park was gorgeous.

The architecture and cities of Quel’thalas, beautiful as they were, could be made and remade in an instant. There was an aesthetic craft to them, certainly, but at the end of the day they were still instantaneous. The stretch of nature that she now looked out over however, with red and gold leaves woven together as finely as silk and with every last visible detail, both natural and infrastructural, arranged as precisely as something the gnomes might have created, was truly magnificent - for the simple reason that it couldn’t be remade. The Quel’dorei didn’t have any real druidic magic at their disposal, and yet they’d still managed to meticulously sculpt an absolutely gorgeous assemblage, one any damage to which would be largely irreparable.

The sound of shuffling robes behind her alerted her to the mages’ presence. It seemed they’d decided to show up after all. Then again, she shouldn't be surprised. There was far too much glory to be had at far too little risk for the magisters to ever refuse the opportunity. Said noise was soon followed by that of metal boots and panting as a moment later Nathanos’ voice came from behind her, his words spaced between breaths. “Containment established, milady. We're all ready when you are.”

“Understood.” Sylvanas spoke in a low, almost wistful voice as she allowed herself one last look at the beautiful miracle of Quel’dorei labor, before turning to face the team of mages that had assembled in the bedroom behind her. “Burn it.”

Kalina watched calmly, almost indifferently, as the hail of fireballs erupted from a number of points throughout the city and arced through the air before falling out of sight, the sound of the explosions reaching her moments later. Truth be told, she didn't know how to feel about the destruction of a place that was home to so many memories for her, but then again, she didn't exactly have time to think about it at the moment. There was work to do.

The rangers had set up a containment line around about three quarters of the park, starting north and moving south, so as to catch any trolls that tried to flee. It was only at the furthest tip of the enclosure
that she was free to operate without issue. The plan was simple. The park would likely contain some of the enemy’s more dangerous assets. Since those assets likely knew the rangers had seized the north, they’d probably flee south. It was Kalina’s job to take advantage of any disorientation caused by the fire to deal with as many as possible who fell into her lap as quickly as possible.

Retrieving her bow from where it’d fallen when the elemental had hit her had proven all but impossible, not least because of the fact that her bow had been dropped inside the detonation zone left by the goblins. It wasn’t a problem, however, as the number of dead rangers from that event had made simply picking one up off the ground a fully viable option. Granted, she couldn’t speak to the structural integrity of the recurved piece of wood now gripped in her hand, but it was either that or mug Nyana for hers. She’d already broken a litany of orders in regards to no contact with the rangers, it’d probably be best not to add ‘directly interfering with their combat effectiveness to that list.

What was abnormal though was that whereas normally she’d be performing such work as she was about to from a rooftop or a dark room with an open window, instead here she was standing out in the open at street level. It made sense, of course. The rooftops and windows wouldn’t give her the best view into the forest, nor would they give her the maximum amount of versatility in exactly where to shoot. She just had to be a bit quicker than normal.

As the fire began to get closer to the edge of the treeline, she could hear the sound of frantic shouting preceding it, and immediately nocked an arrow in kind. Unfortunately for her, it - along with the rest of her arrows - was still tipped with just the standard paralytic, but that wasn’t a total problem. It just meant that a hit no longer automatically meant a kill, so she’d have to put a bit more work into each shot she took.

A few moments later, Kalina caught sight of a pair of the verdant cannibals barreling through the forest for the safety of the cobblestone ground. Before they could even get close, however, each of them was struck in the abdomen by a pair of paralytic arrows, causing them to rapidly slow down before collapsing entirely, still completely conscious and aware of everything around them but unable to do anything as the flames drew nearer and nearer.

Kalina had never been one for unnecessary cruelty. That wasn’t to say she was above using cruel methods entirely, but rather when she did, it was always cruel for a pragmatic reason rather than out of some sense of sadism. Generally, such reasons included to draw attention, to slow down an enemy, to interrogate someone, or simply because some poisons were in better supply than others; but there was always a sensible reason for it. She was never cruel for cruelty’s sake; she refused to consider herself a monster just yet.

This was an exception.

If there was any part of her that would have held any such qualms about the use of unnecessary cruelty toward the musclebound invaders now slowly nearing their inevitable immolation, it had died at Fairbreeze when she’d been captured and made into a public display. As far as she was concerned now, the Amani weren’t people: they were a plague, one which she would take a quiet solace in helping to eradicate.

The roar of the inferno drowned out all other noise now as more trolls came charging past their downed comrades. Kalina wasted no time in hitting as many as she could before they could get out of reach of the fire, but it wasn’t long before the first one broke through the tree line and out into the open. His reward was an arrow through the throat, causing him to crumple to the ground all at once as he began suffocating on his own blood.

More of them swiftly followed after him. Kalina grit her teeth as she forced herself to stand her
ground, rather than cutting and running as she usually did. Many of them didn’t even notice her immediately upon escaping the forest, but those that did came charging at her, giving those that didn’t plenty of time to see her. As more and more trolls were quickly felled upon the hard stone, the line formed by the bodies slowly inched closer and closer to her, until she reached behind herself again only to find that she was out of arrows.

Dropping her bow without hesitation, she went for her knives, burying the first one in a troll just as he made it to within fifteen feet from her. It took only a few seconds for all six of them to be exhausted. She needed to leave. There were too many of them now and they were right on top of her.

No, she realized. It was too late. She couldn’t outrun them now if she wanted to. Drawing her two main blades, she ducked and slashed at the side of the first troll who made it to her, armed with a mace. He went down almost instantly as the poison took effect while she drove her blade into the abdomen of another.

As she ripped the dagger back out, only to find that she hadn’t been overrun yet, it hit her that something was wrong. None of the other trolls were even bothering with her. She turned her head just in time to see why as a green hand easily the size of her body slammed into her, sending her tumbling across the ground and dangerously close to the now completely ignited forest.

She quickly regained her bearings, looking up to see the gargantuan form of a dire troll letting out a furious yet completely drowned out roar at her. Stumbling to her feet and trying not to let herself fall backwards into the fire that was now all but clawing at her, she realized to her sudden horror that she’d dropped her two main blades, meaning she was now completely unarmed.

The giant brute of a troll seemed to understand the situation as well, because he approached her slowly, and though it was hard to tell, Kalina could swear he was looking at her with a malicious grin. His surviving companions closed in cautiously now as well, forming a loose half circle extending out from him and leaving the girl all but trapped against the approaching monster.

Kalina could only imagine what they’d do to her as they got nearer. They’d probably hold her body in the fire and let her slowly roast alive before cutting off her ears to wear as jewelry and devouring what was left. She sank to her knees. She was hopelessly outnumbered and outmatched, and was facing the most horrific death she could think of short of those inflicted by the Burning Legion.

It was then that she realized that still had one option. Reaching down to a well protected pouch on her armor, she withdrew a small magenta bottle. It was the poison she covered most of her weapons with. A fitting end if ever there was one, she supposed.

A few of the trolls must’ve realized what she was doing, because no less than three of them shouted inaudibly and broke into a sprint towards her. It didn’t matter, she thought as she uncorked the bottle. They wouldn’t get to her in time.

A tear shot down her face as she lifted the bottle to her lips in a now trembling hand, only to stop short as one of the trolls rushing towards her suddenly went crashing to the ground in a crumpled heap, followed by the other two; the last one stopping only feet from her, an arrow sticking clean out of his head.

All at once the scene descended into chaos as a hooded blonde ranger Kalina recognized all too well appeared in the air above the dire troll, putting one arrow after another into the massive brute as she came to a perfect landing amidst the group.

Another tear fell from the snow haired girl's eye, this one of joy however as she swiftly replaced the
cork in the bottle before she turned to see a tusked sabre bounding in her direction, and pelted it in the face with the bottle.

The beast let out what could’ve equaled a shriek as he changed back, clutching at his now glass-embedded face with his hands as he began writhing on the ground

While he was busy with that, Kalina got up and dashed forward, picking up an Amani scimitar as she passed by it and swiftly bringing it across the abdomen of the first troll who tried lunging for her as she made for her daggers while Sylvanas held the attention of the dire troll.

Reaching the pair of blades, she only had time to pick up one before another of the emerald savages came at her, trying to cleave her in two with an axe only to stop as the assassin’s sword cut into his arm, stopping at the bone.

‘Ugh, troll steel.’ She thought for the second time this war as she drove her dagger into the monster’s abdomen before pulling it out in time to catch and deflect troll’s swing with her free hand while bringing her dagger up through his tricep and then out and into his ribs.

Not letting it stay there for more than a second, she yanked it free again and resheathed it quickly to replenish the suddenly much more finite amount of poison, before turning to face the dire troll that Sylvanas had kept busy. She stopped cold as one of the woman’s arrows narrowly missed her head all of a sudden, causing her to instinctively dive for what little cover she could find. She knew the woman had intended it to miss. If she hadn’t, the assassin wouldn’t still be breathing. The message was clear, though. Her job was done. Time to clear out before the rangers completely took this area.

Standing up, she turned and began sprinting south toward the nearest building she could, grabbing onto it and climbing as quickly as possible before breaking into another sprint along the rooftops as beneath her, trolls still making it out of the forest scattered in every direction.

Only after making it a couple of blocks did she stop cold above an empty square, far enough away from the blaze to allow for noise, as the sound of a familiar voice shouting coming from below.

“Mon, dontja know, da city be lost!” The voice of Zul’jin shouted at what Kalina could only assume was some mortified subordinate below. “We be leavin tonight, before da elves can close in on us!”

She didn’t dare peak over the edge of the roof, for fear of being seen. She didn’t need to, though. Standing below her was the best chance at freedom she’d ever have. More importantly, it was the best chance at revenge she’d ever have.

As she inched towards the edge of the rooftop, she only allowed herself a moment’s peak over it—any more and Zul’jin might’ve noticed her—before leaping over the edge, blade drawn in one hand as her opposite arm caught her fall on the shoulder of the general’s companion. Before he could even react, she’d already driven the knife deep into his neck, causing him to drop to his knees as the sound of an agonized gurgling sputtered from his mouth.

Kalina took the opportunity to let go of him and step off before he collapsed entirely. Ripping the blade from the savage’s neck, she resheathed it once to refresh the poison, before drawing it again. As her target’s head hit the ground, she turned to face Zul’jin, who stood at the ready with a pair of weapons the blades of which ran along his forearms.

“Do you know who I am?” She asked calmly from under the hood, even as a cold fury burned inside of her.

Her adversary smirked as his eyes briefly darted to his companion who had now hit the ground face
first. “Da little bird, come back to da cage.”

Her grip on her dagger tightened. “Maybe if you’d made more correct guesses like that, we wouldn’t be curing our kingdom of you mongrels as successfully as we are.”

He chuckled. It was a dark sound. “Watchu don be realizin-” He lunged forward. It was a move Kalina had used plenty of times herself, attacking mid sentence to catch one’s opponent off guard.

That just meant she was ready for it.

Raising her blade, she immediately blocked the strike, before ducking and disengaging as the attacking blade’s partner slashed where her head was a moment ago.

Before she could so much as look for an opening to counter, however, he pressed the advantage, giving her only a split second to retreat back out of the way of the next strike as he began gaining ground on her, pushing her back away from the building and out into the open square.

The sound of Quel’dorei voices shouting from maybe a block away told her she was running out of time. Sylvanas was pressing the advantage too, and before long they’d be right on top of her. She had to end the fight quickly and get out as fast as she could. Unlike when she was still officially alive, she couldn’t just hide in plain sight by posing as her normal self. If she was found even out of armor, it’d be enough reason for the Royal Guard to come down on her.

Her only option was a gamble. Right now she wasn’t playing chess with Zul’jin; she was playing roulette. As he retracted one arm to allow the other one to strike, she lunged forward, her blade extending the moment she was inside his guard.

He was fast. The moment he saw what she was doing, he likewise pulled back while slashing a bladed arm across to block her.

Kalina’s heart skipped a beat as the tip of her blade penetrated the troll’s verdant skin, before he pulled away. It wouldn’t deliver nearly enough poison to kill him, but it was more than enough to give her the chance as she swiftly disengaged and pulled back again.

She watched his gaze move from the tiny cut to up at her with a keen smirk, as if to say ‘naughty’, before he doubled over suddenly as blood began trickling from his nose. His pain only last a second, however, as he almost immediate regained his posture, reaching up with one hand to wipe the blood off, before he doubled over again as he began coughing up the stuff en masse.

Kalina smiled. “Oh don’t worry, it won’t be enough to kill you - and it’s not even close to a fraction of the pain you’ve caused me. But it’s a start.”

It was only then that she noticed the hot wetness spreading around her collar area. She looked down only a suck in a sharp breath as her gaze fell upon the thinnest slice in her leather armor, going from her shoulder and to just past her sternum. She hadn’t even felt anything cut her. Was his blade really that sharp?

She didn’t have time to contemplate though as her body began to shake and her fine motor control rapidly began deserting her. She was bleeding out. Meanwhile Zul’jin was starting to his feet. She had to end this now.

She stepped forward, only for her knees to buckle under her before she could even get close. That couldn’t be right. She had to be losing an extraordinary amount of blood to be dying this fast. How deeply had he cut her?
No. She had to keep going. If she was found dead here, she’d be damned if it wasn’t with Zul’jin’s body next to her. She could hear the rangers getting closer. They’d be on top of her any second. She just needed one more minute of consciousness and she’d have him.

Forcing herself to keep going on all fours, she crawled towards him one step at a time, every movement sapping the life out of her that much faster.

Zul’jin made it to his feet, immediately stumbling backwards as he did so before doubling over again as he began throwing up more blood onto the cobblestones.

‘Come back here son of a bitch.’ Even in her own head the words felt distant, as if her mind itself was fading into nothing.

“It’s Zul’jin! Take him out!” Came a callout from across the square, causing the troll leader to very clearly force himself to keep moving as he turned and began to flee.

A sense of despair overtook Kalina as the blade slipped from her hand, followed seconds later by her arms and what she could still move of her legs finally giving out under her, causing her to collapse facefirst onto the pavement as her world faded into oblivion.
Chapter 37

The first thing she felt as she drifted into consciousness again was the warm glow of the light flowing over her body. As she opened her eyes, she tried to move only to find her wrists and ankles restrained. Okay, so she wasn’t dead. Whether that was a good thing remained to be seen.

Looking up, she saw a male healer with short black hair kneeling over her. “Where am I?” Her voice came out weak and raspy to the point of slurring.

He didn’t respond - or even look up at her, for that matter. The expression on his face said everything it needed to: ‘I’m healing you because I have to, not because I want to’.

She supposed that made sense. If any group had a personal reason to despise her, it’d be the clergy who’d had to clean up the messes she’d left behind in Silvermoon. Though, she conceded, even outside of the clergy, the list of groups and people who had reason to hate her wasn’t exactly an exclusive one.

“Fine, don’t say anything.” She quipped as she tried looking around. From what she could see, she was in an unidentifiable room of clear Quel’dorei design. There didn’t appear to be any windows. “I can tell I’m at least underground. Likely still in Tranquillien.” It definitely didn’t look like a Royal Guard cell. Whereas Quel’dorei architecture was made to, in all its design elements, invoke a feeling of comfort and serenity, the Royal Guard’s cells were specifically dug out and put together with stone bricks by hand, so as to be far more rough and discomforting by comparison.

It was then that, as her eyes explored the very edges of her peripherals, she noticed that she was still hooded, even as, looking down at herself, she could see the rest of her armor had been cut away, leaving her naked from the neck down. “Is this really necessary?”

At that, the healer did answer. “As opposed to leaving you armored so you can hide more tricks? Yeah,” he snorted “it’s necessary.” His expression and tone were a mix of incredulity and indignance, as if to say ‘how dare you’. “You’re lucky the ranger-general wanted the honor of unmasking you herself, or you wouldn’t even have that hood left.”

Kalina couldn’t help but smile softly, before forcing it back down so that it wouldn’t be audible. “If Sylvanas Windrunner wants to unmask me she should just come down here and get it over with. Or is she too scared of little old me to try?”

“She’s busy with more important people.” Nathanos’ voice sounded from behind her. “Leave us.”

The healer looked up with a face of relief at the human, before looking back down at Kalina in disgust. “If you’d been cut just one inch higher, you would’ve bled out before anyone could’ve saved you. What a shame that would’ve been.” He stood and exited the room.

Nathanos circled into view, his own look of disdain for her far more open, more visceral, than the healer’s had been. “The only reason you’re still safe is because she was one of the first on scene after you fell.”

Kalina gave a small chuckle. “I wouldn’t call this safe.” before sighing as her voice took on a serious, more somber tone. “So what happens now?”

“Tranquillien’s been taken, which means that since everything else is more or less in our hands already, Quel’thalas altogether has been officially retaken.” He crouched down next to her. “They’re planning a celebration to be held here. Small - or at least, what people here consider small.” A small
Quel’dorei celebration was about the equivalent of a major human one. “But she’s decided to make you part of it - unmasking one of Quel’thala’s most hated villains in front of everyone of even the slightest importance. Officially it’s supposed to be a surprise, but given how many mages are here…” he waved his hand.

Kalina’s eyes widened. Sylvanas was buying her time, but at what cost? If she escaped, then that’d not be an insignificant political hit - having the Canary captured and bound and still somehow managing to let her escape. But if she didn’t escape or was otherwise unmasked some other way, that would be far worse. Dragging Sylvanas through the mud wouldn’t be an apt enough idiom. If it became public knowledge that the ranger-general had been in a relationship with the Canary, Silvermoon would drag her through gravel over it. It’d be enough to overshadow winning the war, even. Even Nathanos had to see that.

“And Zul’jin?” She asked, hoping for at least a silver lining.

“Gone.” He answered without elaborating. It was as if he’d chosen that exact word so as to create uncertainty. Did he mean gone as in dead or gone as in escaped?

Her teeth clicked together as she inhaled slowly. “I see.”

Silence fell between them for anywhere from seconds to minutes as they stared at each other, before Nathanos broke it in an instant.

“What does she even see in you?” The way he asked it sounded more like an accusation than a question. “Seriously, you’re a traitor to and sworn enemy of the country she’s dedicated her life to protecting, your very fighting style is an affront to everything she holds sacred, you’ve killed rangers under her command while making her watch, shot her several times, murdered members of the Royal Family, put the career she’s spent her entire life working for on the line, and until what I’m certain is very recently in elf years, you were happily married to someone else! What could she possibly be seeing in you that I’m missing?”

Kalina felt like she’d been punched in the gut. “Say it louder, Nathanos, I’m sure they didn’t hear you in Fairbreeze.”

“No,” his gaze snapped back to her as his eyes narrowed “you tell me right here and right now exactly why the fuck she loves you, or I’ll take off your hood and call in the first mage I can find!”

“Yes I’m sure people will be shocked to find you of all people with a missing girl tied naked to a post in a basement!” She hissed back.

His expression turned malicious as he scoffed at her. “Girl? You’re older than my great great grandmother, who are you even trying to kid?”

“Rude.”

The hood was yanked off in an instant, before being pelted at the wall opposite her, giving out a loud thwack as the leather slammed against the surface.

“Tell. Me.” A barely restrained fury emanated from the man now as he gazed back down at her.

Kalina, meanwhile, suddenly felt the overwhelming need to turn invisible, not because of the way Nathanos was looking at or speaking to her, but because of the fact that she was now completely exposed, with anyone able to walk in at any moment. An equal mix of anxiety and shame crept into her voice as she answered him. “Fine, but, it’s not something you can get for yourself, if that’s what you’re hoping for.”
“I don’t care. Tell me now or I start walking towards the door.” He turned away as if to make good on his threat.

“Nathanos!” She called out sharply in response “I’ll tell you.”

The human turned back to face her, raising an eyebrow and waving his hand as if it to say ‘go on’.

Kalina allowed herself a breath before continuing. “It’s how far back we go.” Beneath his gaze, she could practically see Nathanos’ heart sink in his chest. “We’ve been best friends since we were kids. We spent years in a relationship together before I was married off against my will, and she was the one who rescued me from that. The reason she recruited me for the rangers in the first place was because that had been our dream together.” She sighed. “Now, please, give me my hood back before someone comes in and sees.”

Something shifted in his expression. “Why should I bother? Anytime you’re gone she’s that much closer with me.” He snorted. “Why shouldn’t I let someone find you?”

The anxiety in her was rising fast. Being stripped naked was one thing, she’d become relatively numb to that by this point. Her face being uncovered in the context of being the Canary was a whole other. “Because you know it’s not just me that’d be hurt if I was discovered! She’s just as much on the line as I am!”

He considered her for a split second. “Go get it yourself.” He finally spat, before leaning over and shoving something into her hands. Before Kalina could even ask what it was, he’d turned around and stormed out.

As he was leaving, Kalina could almost swear she’d heard him mutter the words “For Quel’thalas.”

Once the door clicked shut, it took her only a few seconds to realize the object in her hand was a nail. Okay, so Nathanos wasn’t completely brain dead. Good to know.

She didn’t waste time. She had none to waste. Any second that healer or someone else would come in and see her, and it’d all be over. She set to work, slowly wearing away at each individual fiber of her bonds for fear that if she went any faster, she’d drop the nail. Her heart pounded in her chest. How long had it been since the healer was last here?

‘Stay calm, stay calm, whatever you do, do not drop the nail.’

After what felt like hours of wearing away at the rope, it finally split. Before she could even pull her hands free, however, the door at the opposite end of the room opened, revealing the healer standing there with a look of surprise which quickly turned to shock as recognition dawned in his eyes.

‘Kalina Dawnblade’ she could see his lips trace out her name silently as he stood there while the door swung closed behind him.

Kalina, for her part, could only freeze and hold the ropes over her wrists together behind the post they were tied to.

“Could you please put my mask back on before someone else sees?” She asked weakly, a heavy feeling of loss starting to close in on her.

He seemed to take her in for another moment in a display of shock before his lips slowly curled into a far more intense expression of loathing than before. “Maybe later.” He started towards her, his hands igniting with the holy light as he knelt down and set to work.
They both went quiet from there. As the healer focused on his work, Kalina gripped the nail tightly between two fingers. Just as she was about to strike, however, he opened his mouth again.

“You know they put up a statue of you in Silvermoon.” When she didn’t say anything, he continued. “You and your husband, holding hands. There’s a whole plaque and everything below it. Talking about how you were a hero, a devoted wife, a friend to all, all this great stuff.” He snorted. “Wonder what your husband would say if he’d lived to find o-”

He was cut off as in a split second Kalina’s hands broke free of their bonds, there being no hesitation as she drove the nail into his jugular and lunged forward, covering his mouth with her other hand as she tackled him quietly to the ground.

“You know nothing of my husband.” She hissed at him as his lifeblood came gushing out of him, causing his struggles to grow weaker and shakier, until he finally went still.

Rolling over onto her back, she hastefully sat up and undid the bindings around her ankles, before standing and allowing herself a momentary sigh. She had officially just dealt a not insignificant blow to the Quel’dorei’s effectiveness in the war. Granted it was only one healer, but that was still a much more irreplaceable loss than a ranger or even a mage would be.

It didn’t matter now. Quel’thalas was retaken, and that alone evidently meant things were safe enough to hold a party in Tranquillien. Her only concern was getting out and getting as far away from the rangers - and from Quel’thalas, if necessary - as she could. She couldn’t see the Royal Guard showing her much mercy after she’d been captured, let alone after her killing a Quel’dorei healer.

She crossed the room quickly, picking up her hood from where it lay and putting it back on her head so that it covered her face and hair completely. Once that was done, she flattened herself against the wall next to the door.

The next issue was actually getting outside. Even Sylvanas wouldn’t be able to get away with leaving such a high value target as her unguarded, which meant she’d have to dispose of the rangers on the other side. But what then? She couldn’t expect to just slip out of Tranquillien naked and masked - though she supposed if she could get above ground, being that this was her hometown, it certainly wouldn’t be as hard as it might be otherwise, especially if she could get to the rooftops. But even so, that meant somehow making it out of the room and to the roof without the alarm being raised.

That led to another issue. Assuning Sylvanas had wanted to make it look convincing, there’d likely be a minimum of two guards on the other side, and Kalina didn’t have any way of knowing what schedules they switched off on, meaning if she timed her kills wrong - and that was assuming she could even get two kills from her unarmed position, both of which would have to be completely quietly done - someone could very easily go investigating.

She looked back down at the healer’s body. And then there was him. Would someone be in to check on him? It wasn’t like she could ambush them if they did. What would happen is that since they knew someone was in here, they’d knock and wait for a response before opening the door, not crossing the threshold until they got a clear look. Even if she could get the ranger to come within reach of an ambush, there’d be no way of keeping it quiet - assuming she survived.

No, she decided. The longer she waited, the worst her chances became. It was best to go now while she could. She took a moment to steel herself for what was to come, before casually opening the door as if nothing was wrong. Her eyes immediately fell upon the form of a single ranger standing facing outwards at the end of a short hallway. As the sound of the door reached her, the girl stepped
aside, clearly expecting the healer to be emerging.

Not waiting for her guard to see that she was most certainly not the healer but was most definitely covered in his blood, Kalina lunged forward, grabbing the ranger from behind with one hand on her chin and the other on her parietal bone. Before she could so much as let out a sound, the assassin had already twisted her chin upwards in a counter-clockwise motion, snapping her neck and causing her to crumple to the ground with a soft thud.

‘Two dead Quel’dorei now. Fantastic.’

As she dragged the girl back into the room and away from any potential view, it occurred to her that there’d only been one guard placed outside her room. Sylvanas was clearly trying to make it as easy as possible to escape. What repercussions might that have for her?

Kalina’s attention turned to the dead ranger’s body as the door clicked shut again. As she examined it, she noticed that it was even sized and proportioned similar to her own - which meant that Sylvanas must’ve known how she would escape and had sacrificed a ranger to help her.

A romantic gesture if ever there was one.

It only took her a few minutes to take the girl’s weapons and armor, careful not to let any touch the healer’s blood. She hated the amount of noise ranger boots made on hard surfaces, but considering they were issued thigh boots, she couldn’t go without them without it looking conspicuous.

They weren’t a perfect fit, but they were good enough where unless she had to wear this armor for a few days straight, she could deal. All she had to do was get outside now and she could disappear easily enough. Even better, if the building had roof access, then getting outside would be disappearing.

Making sure her hood was pulled up enough to hide her face, she emerged from the makeshift cell again, exiting the short hallway leading to her door to find herself in a nondescript basement complex, as indicated by the stairs at the opposite end of the room. All in all, the place was neat and organized enough where Kalina could believe that it had gone largely untouched by the trolls.

She crossed the room swiftly, before turning and starting up the curved staircase. As she neared the top, she could see a pair of rangers guarding the entrance.

‘Right, no pressure, you’ve impersonated a ranger before, just walk by them like you own the place.’

Her heart skipped a beat as she passed between the pair, before a sense of relief washed over her as she realized she’d made it. The entrance to the building was within view of the top of the stairs. If she didn’t want to arouse suspicion, it’d be safer to leave that way than to go poking through the building.

“Report, ranger.” Came a voice off to her left. Kalina turned to see a tall male ranger standing there. She didn’t recognize him, but she didn’t recognize a lot of the rangers deployed to Tranquillien, so that was nothing new.

“Not much change, sir.” She spoke. “That healer’s still in there, but there’s otherwise been nothing to report.”

“Varendis is still there?”

“I don’t remember his name, sir.” It was far safer to look like she’d been careless and forgotten something than to risk ‘Varendis’ not actually being the healer’s name.
He nodded. “Very well. Get some rest. You’ve certainly earned it. making it this far.” He stepped forward and clapped a hand on her tricep.

‘Wait, what did he just say?’

It was only then that Kalina noticed the feeling of a needle pricking her skin through his glove.

“Dismissed.”

Before she could so much as react, every muscle in her body went limp as the officer grabbed her with both hands to catch her from falling.

“Oh! Oh, someone’s tired. Here, lemme help you back to your barracks.” He spoke in a completely unassuming manner as a portal opening sounded behind her.

Kalina, for her part, could only stare ahead in horror as she felt her eyelids growing heavy, before all at once fading to nothing as she lost consciousness.

The first thing she felt as she came to was a sense of crushing fatigue weighing her down and making her newly regained consciousness more than a little uncomfortable.

As she slowly opened her eyes, she found herself to be sitting in an elegantly styled chair of dark grey and sapphire coloring, wearing an off shoulder maroon mini dress and, judging by the matching color of her nails, makeup.

“I think I did a decent job, don’t you?”

Kalina looked up to see Avina sitting across from her at a rather sizeable dinner table, holding a goblet of wine and wearing a cool cobalt dress that fit in much better with the subtle blues and purples of the darkly lit room they were in.

She stared at the lieutenant with a look of apprehension. Was this some elaborate way to get her comfortable before she was punished, or was she just being pulled for information? “…Where are we?”

The dark haired woman set down her cup with an almost tranquil smile before speaking. “A favorite restaurant of mine. One of the VIP rooms, to be more precise.”

Kalina blinked. “Why?”

“I thought a reward might be in order for a job well done, especially after nothing but jerky and water for weeks on end. I hope you don’t mind, I took the liberty of ordering for you while you were unconscious.”

“…A job well done.” Kalina repeated carefully, not taking her eyes off the lieutenant.

“Indeed.”

“…Alright then.” The girl replied, deciding that if they considered all that a job well done, it wasn’t her job to convince them otherwise. Noticing a cup of wine on her side of the table as well, she reached over and pretended to take a sip.

“That said, we do have a few questions for you.”

She gave a polite smile, forcing herself to take her eyes off the woman for a moment to give the
illusion of ease. “Of course. Ask away.”

Before the lieutenant could ask, however, the doors to the room were opened. In came a pair of servers, who each placed an appetizer on the table, before departing as quickly as they’d arrived.

“Spare ribs.” Kalina spoke in surprise as she gazed down at her plate.

“I understand it’s a favorite of yours.”

She looked up at the lieutenant and nodded.

Avina smiled. “They took it off the menu here decades ago, but the chef was happy to bring it back at my request. Serving the crown does have its perks.” She speared a piece of her own dish - a small spider kabob - before putting it in her mouth, allowing Kalina to start in on her own food.

Swallowing, the woman continued. “Now then, during an argument between the ranger-general and Magister Krasinor Starsong, a ranger with poorly fitted gear and her face hidden stepped in and whispered something that caused him to disengage immediately. Said ranger then, while passing key intel to the ranger-general, whispered something in her ear as well. We’d like to know what both these things were.”

Kalina nodded before swallowing a mouthful of eel. The first one she knew they likely knew already, they were almost certainly asking it just to test whether she was being truthful or not. “I told Magister Krasinor that he had been summoned to Quel’danas to appear before the convocation immediately.”

Avina nodded. “And the ranger general?”

“That I was doing her job better than she was.”

It was as if the room itself had turned to ice as Avina’s eyes shifted to a gaze that could pierce armor. “… Perhaps this dinner was a mistake.” She spoke as she got to her feet.

Kalina, seeing her chances of falling out of the sky, quickly continued. “Sylvanas knows the Canary as an enemy that loves taunting her at every opportunity. If I’m already passing critical information to her, and I’m right there, why wouldn’t I take the opportunity to remind her that she’s relying on my help?”

Avina didn’t reply, instead choosing to stare down at her both coldly and expectantly. It was a trick Kalina recognized well to pressure the receiver into revealing more on their own. As such, she didn’t budge on her lie, opting to remain silent as she looked up at Avina with a pleading expression that seemed to say ‘Please believe me, I’m telling the truth’.

“… Fine.” The woman finally spoke again as she sat back down. “While normally such a level of contact between yourself and the reclamation force would be considered a violation of your mission parameters, given the level of relief such contact allowed our forces in terms of both advancement and lives saved, the crown is willing to let this one slide.”

The assassin nodded. “I told you before, I get results.”

“So it appears. Our other question is in regards to your escape.”

“My escape?”

She nodded. “Officially the story is that you snuck out in a ranger uniform until you made it to the
Kalina’s stomach turned. Sylvanas had no idea she’d been caught. What would that mean going forward?

“However during your escape, rather than just dispose of the guard keeping watch on you, you also chose to kill a Quel’dorei healer you could’ve easily let live.” She gestured to the girl’s collarbone. “And who would’ve easily reduced the chances of an identifiable scar forming.”

Kalina looked down at the wound. It definitely had not been healed completely, meaning - as Avina said - it would likely scar if not treated soon.

“What we want to know is why.”

Kalina bit the inside of her lip as she lowered her eyes. She knew she’d have to answer for this one. “... he pulled my hood off…” she spoke softly as her thoughts turned to Nathanos. “Said he deserved a peak since he was the one keeping me from dying…”

Avina held her gaze. “I see. So then it was a matter of containment.”

The girl nodded, still not meeting the woman’s eyes.

“Well in that case, your orders from here are fairly clear.”

Kalina looked back up as her level of anxiety instantaneously shot through the roof.

“You’re going to lay low for the rest of the war. You’ll be put on analysis work to keep you occupied and out of the way while still remaining useful to the crown: Shortly before the war is expected to end, you’ll make a sudden reappearance after having been in troll captivity for the last few months. The story will be that they smuggled you out with them as a consolation prize when they left Fairbreeze.”

It was at the words ‘consolation prize’ that the girl felt an immediate sense of rage ignite within her, causing her to bite down on the inside of her mouth to keep from vocalizing it.

“From there you were kept bound and blindfolded in Zul’Aman to render you docile until you escaped. I trust it shouldn’t be hard to play up considering your time in Fairbreeze.”

Ignoring the taste of blood, Kalina’s attention turned to the fact that there was nothing keeping her bound, let alone keeping her from using the knife on her side of the table. She took another bite of ribs to help incentivize herself further into not saying anything stupid. Avina noticeably mirrored her bite of food.

‘Just stay calm, this is an improvement. You can put up with this bitch for one night.’

She swallowed. “Understood, ma’am. Does that mean I’ll be able to return to my unit?”

Avina likewise swallowed her food. “Until such time that the crown requires your services again, yes. Though you’re still a royal asset, of course.”

Kalina sighed. “Of course.”

Their conversation was interrupted again by the servers coming and replacing their appetizers with entrees. Eel fillet. Once again, her favorite.

“I take it this one was specially prepared also?” She asked in a friendly tone.
“Indeed.” Avina replied, taking a bite of her own dish, a lynx steak so rare it was almost bleeding.

Kalina waited for the servers to leave before asking her next question. “And as for my relationship with Sylvanas?”

Avina smiled at her in a way that’d clearly been practiced in front of a mirror. “The crown would prefer it if things remained the way they are.”

“The way they are…?” She knew where this was going.

“Friends strictly within the context of serving your kingdom. Comrades in arms.”

The girl gave another sigh, “I see.”

A sense of tension fell over the room as they ate in silence. It wasn’t long before they had finished their meals, causing the silence to turn uncomfortable.

“Well then.” Avina finally said, standing up. “I should be getting back.” Pushing her chair in, she turned and strolled over toward the door before knocking on it five times. “Feel free to keep the dress, in the meantime. Red was never my color, anyway.”

Immediately the door was opened from the outside to reveal a pair of mages in blue and gold robes who entered the room while Avina left.

Kalina likewise got to her feet as she maintained her polite smile. “Shall we, men?”

A moment later, a portal was opened, and she was gone.
Chapter 38

If there was one thing Kalina was grateful to have been spared in her 161 years alive, it was desk work. For weeks now, she’d been sitting in her cell, pouring over documents deemed necessary to the work that the Royal Guard had assigned her. Doing good work had made them decide she was more trustworthy with information - not enough to be given less restrictive records access or free roam, but enough where they were willing to share a few choice documents with her - with all relevant names covered up by magic.

It wasn’t a bad way to occupy her time. She’d get a report with relevant, if heavily redacted, contextual info on an occurrence - whether it be a conversation that was overheard by an agent posing as a maid, a deal that had been struck between two people of interest to the kingdom, or something else that the Royal Guard believed warranted a closer look. Once she had everything she needed, her job was to provide an expert analysis and opinion on a course of action based on her experience as both a criminal and, depending on whom one asked, a traitor.

A part of her was horrified at herself for supporting the Royal Guard in its suppressive endeavors - that is to say, for diving deeper into the wolf pit. She tried to silence that voice whenever she could by trying to figure out which ones were Silvermoon residents - something that wasn’t particularly difficult by context - and then constructing her best argument possible for bringing the hammer of Quel’thalas down on them in particular, while trying to spare those outside of Silvermoon the same fate. It made it so that she could work to convince herself that what she was doing was just a continuation of what made becoming the Canary so easy in the first place: her hatred of Silvermoon’s upper society and everyone involved with it.

She was never directly told whether they took her advice or not on a case, though every now and then she’d get another report that painted a clear enough picture of what had happened on a previous one.

It was to that end that she now sat at the edge of her bed, reading over reports of a pair of Silvermoon citizens heard discussing the level of trouble Quel’thalas would be in if the Horde decided to come back and bring their dragons with them, and trying to determine if it constituted defeatism - a severely punishable offense - when a heavy knock on the door of her cell interrupted such musings.

“Back against the wall!” Came the familiar bark from the other side of the heavy door, prompting Kalina to set down all of the documents where they lay and stand back against the wall like she had so many times before.

The door swung open a few seconds later. In filed a pair of fully armored guards, with a mage Kalina didn’t recognize behind him. He had long blonde hair and sapphire robes, and stood with the sort of self-satisfied aura that Kalina frequently saw amongst the nobles of Silvermoon. Such an implication was a surprise, to be sure. Most of the Royal Guard didn’t display traits that might indicate a noble upbringing, and for good reason. It was far easier to police the nobility when one’s own family wasn’t a part of it.

He seemed to pause as he stood there, his eyes scanning her up and down. Before Kalina could ask what he was doing, however, he spoke. “Grab her arms.”

The pair of heavily armored guards stepped forward in unison, each grabbing ahold of an arm and jerking Kalina forward to where she was standing right in front of the mage.

“Hey! What’s going o-“ She was cut off as his fist cracked across her face.
He smirked. “You’re being released.” His tone was one of faux innocence. “We just need to make you look the part.”

Another blow struck the other side of her face, followed by one to the stomach. The mage paused, considering her with a stance that reminded Kalina of an art critic evaluating a new painting.

“Hold her down.” He finally spoke. “We need to be thorough.”

Immediately Kalina found herself being turned around, before being forced down onto the bed.

“No!” She screamed as she realized what was to come and began to struggle. “Let go of me!”

One of the guards put a hand over her mouth.

“Stop struggling. It’ll only make this take longer.” The mage spoke again.

Kalina let out a shriek of equal parts terror and rage into the hand covering her mouth as she felt her clothes being torn off piece by piece while tears began to stream down her face.

She tried biting down on the hand, only for her teeth to hit the metallic claws that covered it.

“What is going on here?” Came a voice Kalina had never been so happy to hear in her life.

All at once the hands holding her in place let go of her, leaving her free to scramble onto her bed and turn around to face the group with her back against the wall, only briefly catching the look of absolute fury on Avina’s face as the woman stood in the doorway, taking in the scene.

“Out. Now. One you go find her a blanket.”

“Yes ma’am.” The mage replied meekly as he and the pair of guards quickly left the room.

“Try that again and I’ll kill all your families!” Kalina shouted after them even as tears continued to fall, her voice an equal mix of fury and utter helplessness. She knew she couldn’t really do anything to them. She just didn’t know what else she could say or do to make things better.

The room went silent as she turned her attention to Avina, who was still standing there. The pair stared at each other. A significant part of Kalina debated lunging at the woman then and there, seeing how much damage she could do before she went down. The rest of her knew thought that it wasn’t logical. Avina had just been the one to save her, after all.

“I’m… sorry for what just happened there.” The officer spoke gently as she stepped closer, before reaching over and placing a hand on the girl’s shoulder. “If he or anyone else tries that again, tell me. I won’t let anyone hurt you. I promise.”

The door opened again, followed by the sound of a light thud as one of the guards tossed a blanket in. Avina got up and went to grab it before walking back over and gently placing it over the snow haired girl, who was now hiding her face with her arms.

“Take it easy.” she cooed. “Everything will be okay. Get some rest. When you wake up, you’ll get to go home and forget everything that happened here today.”

Kalina looked up again as she tried to speak, only to find her breath leave her the moment she opened her mouth.

“I promise, I’ll stay right outside your room the whole time so nothing happens.” Avina continued as she turned and gathered up the pieces of parchment sprawled out at the end of the bed.
“I…” A look passed over Kalina’s face, as though she was being made to swallow lemon juice. “...Okay.” She finally replied in a tone of mixed defeat and self loathing. “Okay. Thank you.”

The moment the door was closed, Avina let the gentle expression of care that had taken her forever to figure out the meaning of in the mirror fall apart as she turned and strode to where the blond mage, Veric, stood waiting for her.

“You had me worried there.” He spoke with a cocky grin. “Another few seconds and I thought I might actually have to go through with it.”

“If you did, I would have had no problem dealing with you as necessary.” She replied curtly as she walked past him while he instinctively fell into step beside her.

The man gave a short laugh. “Good one… you are joking, right?”

She kept walking.

He cleared his throat. “Anywho, I assume the thing with the human went well then?”

“Nathanos performed his task sufficiently as directed, yes.”

“How bout that.” The blond shrugged lazily. “Maybe he has potential after all.”

“For now.”

He jerked his head back in the direction of Kalina’s cell. “When are we setting her loose, anyway?”

“Give a couple hours for the bruises to form and for her to fall asleep. Then wake her up as harshly as you can. Fatigue will help sell the act.”

His tone was nonchalant. “Yes ma’am. That all?”

She nodded once. “Dismissed.”

The first thing Kalina felt as she awoke was the sensation of falling as she was unceremoniously pulled out of bed and thrown to the floor.

“Get up.” She heard the voice of the blond mage from earlier snarl as, without waiting for a response, one of the guards pulled her to her feet, causing her to stumble.

“I’m up, I’m up.” She replied quickly, raising an arm to shield herself.

Even in the darkness, Kalina could hear the smirk in his voice. “Good.” He replied as he took hold of her shoulders and straightened them out facing him. She could hear a portal opening behind her. “In that case, have a nice trip.” His fist immediately slammed into her face hard enough to send her backwards through the portal and onto hard dirt.

The first thing she noticed as she regained her bearings was that it was early afternoon. Or maybe late morning. It all depended on which way was east and which was west. And here she’d thought it was night time. By the Sunwell, her circadian rhythms were a wreck.

She sat up. As far as she could tell, the forest around her was still intact, which at least suggested that she was somewhere in the eastern half of Quel’thalas, but beyond that she had absolutely no idea where she was. She supposed it didn’t matter to the Royal Guard whether she actually made it or not - after all, the war was about to be won, judging by her release. They didn’t need a morale booster
anymore, and dying in the forest would be the perfect anticlimactic end to have her fade into obscurity.

She couldn’t help but chuckle. A lifetime ago, at a party on the waterfront in Silvermoon, she remembered being in a conversation with someone who had been old enough to remember Quel’thalas’ founding, and what he’d told her that was so interesting was that in Kaldorei society, one wasn’t considered an adult until they could walk from one end of the forest to the other completely blindfolded, and recognize every individual root, tree, branch, and animal by feel alone.

At the time she’d just laughed it off as pedantic lowborn druid nonsense, same as everyone else around her. Now... she was beginning to see the merit to it - though her circumstances weren’t what she’d consider to be common or even anticipatable.

She looked up again at the sky. Her current situation wasn’t so hard, she supposed. She just had to wait a little while and then check again which direction the sun had moved in. For now she needed to get out of the open. Standing up, she strolled over to a nearby tree and began climbing it. The bark felt unpleasant against her bare skin, but she’d be much safer from predators this way.

As she sat perched on one of the higher up branches, hidden from anyone who didn’t know to look for her, she heard the sound of heavy footfalls approaching quickly.

“Da city be close.” The lead of a group of four trolls spoke as they stepped into view, carrying a heavy straight bladed axe.

She held her breath as the group passed underneath her. None of them had any small weapons she could grab, and unarmed against such a large opponent, let alone four, she might as well be a child.

Thankfully they passed without noticing her. They’d come in the direction the sun was shining from, meaning that was probably west, and as such it was late afternoon. Okay, that was a start.

The trolls weren’t too much of an issue, overall. Kalina was more than adept at disappearing into the foliage at a moment’s notice. The bigger concern was food. If she was really as close to Zul’Aman as the ones below her had implied, then there was no telling how far the rangers were. It wasn’t that she was helpless. Far from it, survival was a major component of ranger training. But that didn’t mean it was necessarily easy, just that she knew what she needed to do in order to not die.

Assuming she was near Zul’Aman, that put her pretty far from any Quel’dorei settlements. Her best bet was to head north. The farstriders had a major staging area for southern Quel’thalas at the tip of the lake - or at least they had before the war. Depending on where she was currently, it was at least a day away by horse, and that was booking it - which meant that at walking pace, it could take her as much as a week to make it there. Maybe more.

Once she was sure she was safe, she carefully lowered herself from the tree and set off north, staying low to the ground so as to be harder to detect. If she was really serious about remaining hidden, she could’ve just gone vanguard with it and stayed in the trees the whole time, but in bare feet it was something she sought to avoid. Even so, as she moved along, her eyes continually kept watch for the nearest tree she could climb if she needed to hide, and her path didn’t deviate far from it.

She looked down at her body. Another issue was the scar just below her collarbone. It wasn’t particularly wide or vicious, Zul’jin’s blade had been far too sharp to leave any significant carnage, and the healer’s magic had helped, but it was still there, still red, and still definitely visible. It was a certainty at this point that word of her defeat had spread throughout the ranger ranks. It wasn’t unreasonable to assume that the way she was defeated had spread to some degree as well.
She stopped where she was. Kneeling down to the ground, she quickly dug a small hole deep enough to where the dirt was at least a little damp, before grabbing a fistful of it and smearing it across her chest. It wasn’t much, but it was better than nothing. A part of her idly wondered whether she could pass it off as being something the trolls gave her in Zul’Aman, worst case scenario, or whether anyone considering it would see through to the kernel of truth behind the lie.

Once that was done and she was sure it was sufficiently covered, she stood back up and continued on her way. The sooner she got home, the sooner she could see Sylvanas again, and that alone was enough motivation not to dally.

The new moon hung high over the forest as a pair of pale feet turned red by blood hit the ground one after the other as if their existence depended on it, which it did. Kalina felt no pain as she sprinted for dear life, though. At the same time, however, she couldn’t see a thing, either - at least, apart from the distant light of the camp that served as the only thing keeping her from running into a tree or some other obstacle that’d force her to stop running.

The treeline was only about 300 meters away. She could make it. She had to. She refused to let herself die this way - though, that was assuming they were either merciful or hungry enough to kill her right away. She didn’t dare scream for help as she got closer; her lungs were already burning. Any attempt to vocalize would steal away what precious little breath she was able to get as it stood.

250 meters.

She couldn’t hear them behind her, but that didn’t mean anything. They were nothing in the forest if not silent, even when giving chase, and even when there was easily a hundred of them, probably more. She only had to make it a little further and the Farstrider Enclave’s outer guards would slow them down, then the rest of the way would be easier.

200 meters.

She felt something pierce her foot. It wasn’t the first thing that night, and there was no guarantee that it’d be the last. She couldn’t keep doing this, though. The rest of her body wasn’t any better off. She was covered from head to toe in cuts and bruises, her hair disheveled and knotted to the point of getting close to matting, every blood vessel and nerve ending in her body was screaming at her to slow down, and she could feel her strength beginning to give out after running as far as she had this night. The only thing keeping her going was the image of them setting upon her like piranhas, pinning her down and ripping away chunk after chunk of flesh as she thrashed and shrieked.

150 meters.

She was almost there. Just a little further after so long and she’d be safe and warm and well fed and on her way to seeing Sylvanas again.

100 meters.

Her foot caught on a root. The rest of her fell forward, slamming into the ground with force decisive enough to take what little energy she had left.

She knew it was over then and there. With the last of her strength, she moved her arms to cover her face, only to hear the faint hiss of an arrow flying through the air, followed by the much louder one of one of the spiders behind her being struck by it.

‘Get up.’
More arrows flew past her, the death cries of the small arachnids getting closer and closer. She remembered once hearing during ranger training that a single spider egg could hold up to a million of them. After tonight, she didn’t doubt it.

‘Get up you fucking idiot!’

Every cell in her body cried out for her to stay down. It would be so easy to. She was sure the rangers could handle it from here. She could already feel consciousness deserting her. Good. She needed it.

Her sense of self assurance was interrupted by the feeling of someone grabbing hold of her arm and yanking her to her feet just as she felt one of them brush her leg, before an arrow flew inches from her, followed by another hiss.

“Move you idiot!”

The voice was familiar. Or was it? She didn’t know anymore, fatigue had set in too deeply for her to care. All she knew was that it was female. The moment she regained her footing, she felt what strength she had left return as she immediately resumed her agonized dash. Whoever it was didn’t let go of her as they ran, Kalina for her part only weakly keeping up.

As they broke through the treeline, Kalina stumbled, her savior replying with a harder pull forward, closer to the array of open structures with bonfires in the center of each that made up the Farstrider Enclave.

“Someone get me a healer, we got a wounded civie here!” The woman shouted, before looking down at Kalina again. “Just a little more. They're scared of the light, once we get near the fire we can stop.”

The ranger’s hair hung in front of Kalina’s face, along with her own, as she forced her body to keep going, even as her feet bled and her legs trembled. The moment they got within acceptable distance of the fire, Kalina’s body went completely limp, her savior immediately tightening her grip to keep her from falling before laying her down gently.

“Over here!” The woman shouted as she beckoned to someone Kalina couldn’t see, before looking back at her and gently reaching down to brush the girl’s hair out of her face, giving a short gasp as she did so

“Kalina?”

She’d forgotten her own hair was even in the way after running for so long. Only as she looked up at the woman in the light did she really get her a good view of her.

“Hey Vereesa.” She smiled weakly. “Long time no see.”

The woman looked at her like she was seeing a ghost. “They told me you were dead…”

Kalina gave an exhausted chuckle. “I wish.”

The healer arrived at that moment, a young girl with long blonde hair, immediately getting down on her knees next to Kalina as she did so. “Just stay still, this’ll be over in no time at all.”

As the girl’s hands ignited with the holy light and she set to work, Kalina allowed herself to finally relax. Before she could even think of anything else to say, she’d already passed out.
When she awoke hours later, she looked around to find that someone had put a pillow under her head and a blanket over her previously naked body. Rangers were going about their business all around her - some sparring out of gear, others bringing back food from a recent hunt to cook, and still others practicing on target dummies.

She sat up, covering herself with the blanket at she did so. Looking on the other side of her, she found a plate full of still warm food sitting atop a folded note, along with a set of clean clothes folded next to it. The first thing she went for was the food, holding the blanket around herself with one hand while using the other to grab piece after piece of roasted meat and shove it into her mouth. It was the first full sized meal she’d had since she’d had dinner with Avina, however long ago that’d been.

Only once her hunger had been at least mildly sated did she attend to the other two items, starting with the clothing. It felt a tad awkward to be getting dressed in full view of the entire Farstrider Enclave, but she supposed that couldn’t be helped given the circumstances. The clothes themselves were fairly light - a pair of small shorts and a training bra. Fairly standard attire for rangers when not geared up. As she put them on, she noticed that most, if not all, of the cuts and bruises she’d sustained during her time in the wilderness had been completely healed. The bra didn’t cover her scar, but considering how she probably looked when she’d made it here, she shouldn’t have any trouble waving it off as something she got in the wild or in Zul’Aman, after all.

Turning her attention to the note, she picked it up and unfolded it to reveal Vereesa’s recognizably jagged cursive.

Kalina,

My battalion’s leader sent word to Ranger-Captain Lor’themar that you were okay. As for myself, I sent a letter to Lady Moon saying about the same. My company’s lieutenant told me that they’re planning on having the mages portal you to Silvermoon when you’re ready. The main force is currently returning from Lordaeron, last I heard. There’s gonna be a victory celebration in Silvermoon for them, so you and Sylvanas should be able to see each other again.

Come talk to me before you go,
-Vereesa

Kalina looked up from the note with a soft grin. She was going home. The thing she’d spend every waking moment dreaming of since the Royal Guard had taken her, and now it was finally hers again. Placing the note safely into her training bra where she could hold onto it with her hands occupied, she folded up her blanket before placing the pillow and plate on top, and going to deliver them to where they needed to go, a renewed spring in her step.
Right! So! News! I'm gonna be moving my chapter posting day from now on to Saturday instead of Friday. Thanks!

She found Vereesa sitting out on the edge of the platform looking out over the lake adjacent to the enclave’s main building, her legs kicking back and forth idly as her silver hair caught the breeze, giving her an almost surreal appearance.

“It’s always nice to see a familiar face out here.” Kalina spoke as she took a seat next to the youngest Windrunner sister.

Vereesa gave a short chuckle. “I’m just glad to be here in the first place. Up until a few days ago, Sylvanas had me cooped up in Silvermoon for the entire war.”

“You’re kidding.”

In truth, it didn’t surprise Kalina in the slightest, considering how much Sylvanas had lost already, but she wasn’t supposed to know about what happened to Windrunner Village and past that, ‘you’re kidding’ always got a positive response, as far as answers went.

“Well okay, I don’t know it was her decision that my battalion spend the whole war in Silvermoon, but she is the Ranger-General, and it’d totally make sense that she’d do something like that after-” She stopped short as though she’d been struck by a hammer.

Kalina knew what was coming, and loathed herself for what she was forced to do next. “After…?”

She watched as Vereesa’s breath caught in her chest and her eyes watered, and she realized that if she let this happen, there was probably a good chance Sylvanas would actually kill her.

“You don’t have to tell me.” The snow-haired elf quickly added, placing a hand on Vereesa’s shoulder to steady her. “Whatever it is, I promise, I’ll take your word for it, okay?”

The woman shook her head. “No.” her voice sounded miniscule, as if it was coming from somewhere far away. “It’s okay. Sylvanas is going to tell you anyway, you should at least be prepared.”

See the inevitable standing before her, Kalina could only nod in carefully restrained horror. “Alright then.”

Whereas Sylvanas had sobbed softly when relaying the fate of Windrunner Village, Vereesa barely made it to the word ‘Lirath’ before bursting into a series of loud wails as tears began flowing freely. It was all Kalina could do to wrap her arms around the girl as her entire body shook while she half-incomprehensibly recounted what she’d been told had happened in vivid detail, one family member at a time.

They sat like that for several hours, Kalina holding onto Vereesa as the woman went through some of her favorite memories of her now slaughtered family, things she’d say to them if she could see
them one last time, and her sense of guilt over not having been there to help somehow.

Eventually, as the sun was beginning to set, the silver haired ranger seemed to run out of steam. “Th…” She hiccuped as she began to pull herself together. “Thanks for doing this.”

Kalina smiled gently. “Doing what?”

“Sitting here and listening to me just… go on and on like this. I haven’t seen Sylvanas or Alleria or anyone in so long and I-”

Kalina placed a hand on her shoulder. “Don’t mention it. That’s what friends are for, right?”

She gave a weak smile of her own in reply. “Yeah.”

The snow haired elf turned to look out over the water. “… It’s getting late. I should probably get moving before someone comes looking for me.”

“Wait.” Vereesa’s hand caught Kalina’s wrist as the girl stood to leave. “There…公开发行 she swallowed. “There’s a reason I called you out here, beyond just catching up.”

“Oh. Sure thing.” She sat back down.

The silver haired woman steadied herself, her entire body stiffening as she forced herself to stop crying.

“Okay.” She began. “So, technically at my rank I’m not supposed to be in on this, but… since I’m a Windrunner, no one really was gonna tell me no, so…” she took a deep breath to compose herself, before leveling her gaze at Kalina. “Some of the officers are saying you’re a deserter.”

A rage ignited inside the girl in an instant. “What?” The single word came out like the crack of a whip.

“I don’t know what happened in Fairbreeze, nor does anyone else, but the story is you disappeared after the blast and no one had seen you since, and now you’re showing up right at the end of the war, out of uniform.”

It dawned on Kalina that the crown hadn’t told anyone she’d been captured. Of course they hadn’t. She was supposed to be presumed dead. She resolved to ask Avina about that choice of cover stories the next time she was unceremoniously knocked out and taken in.

Her voice was calm but cold as she spoke. “I was in Zul’Aman. They captured me at Fairbreeze and took me with them, so that they could force me to serve as a…” she closed her eyes and bit the inside of her mouth. “The blast shattered my legs. I couldn’t have deserted if I’d wanted to.”

Vereesa nodded. “I know you didn’t - as do most of the officers here, but there’s definitely a sizable chunk that looks at you and sees a pampered rich girl playing at war and raking in social status for it, one who was conveniently nowhere to be found the moment things got too intense.”

Her teeth clicked together as she let out a small sigh. “So they see me as a mage.”

“Pretty much.”

“In that case I’m gonna hope that such opinions die down once I submit my formal report.” She spoke as she lay back on the stone surface, legs still hanging off the edge.

Vereesa shrugged. “Probably, but the point remains that you have enemies, even in the rangers.”
Kalina chuckled. “I already had enemies in the rangers.” She sat up. “Still, I do appreciate the heads up.”

Vereesa gave a half smile. “That’s what friends are for.”

Kalina nodded. “Thank you.”

“Anyway, you should probably get going. We’ll see each other at Winter’s Veil, yeah?”

“Definitely.”

The silver haired elf leaned over and hugged her, a hug which Kalina happily returned. Once that was done, she stood up and started back towards the main building, where she was sure there was an impatient commander waiting to send her on her way.

Sylvanas was exhausted. No, exhausted didn’t do it justice. But there wasn’t really a word she could think of that could come even remotely close to encapsulating the sheer sense of deeply embedded fatigue she felt at that moment, so ‘exhausted’ would have to suffice.

It was worse being an officer. Whereas the lower ranking rangers were unofficially allowed to show exhaustion considering the circumstances, the officers had to remain invincible, even when civilians weren’t watching. Especially when civilians weren’t watching.

It was then that the ranger-general found a special sort of irony in her sister, a ranger-captain, holding onto her from behind with her head resting fast asleep on the younger Windrunner sister’s shoulder. It couldn’t be helped, she knew. Alleria’s horse had been slain in the battle at Capital City, and it would’ve felt weird if Sylvanas had told her to walk, so here she sat, the only officer in the entire force that was actually in a position to sleep on their journey without it looking like a major faux pas.

They’d passed through Tranquillien a few days ago. While most of the city was still deserted, there was nonetheless a small, heavily guarded rebuilding effort going on. It’d been almost unnerving passing by it, for the simple reason that she hadn’t recognized the rangers guarding it as they’d looked up and saluted her.

After serving for between decades and centuries, sometimes even millennia, most rangers recognized most of their comrades by face if not by name. A new face in a unit was the subject of much gossip not just within that unit, but amongst the entire Ranger Corps. It was almost like a giant family, in that regard.

So it was because of that that cantering through a reclaimed city and not recognizing the majority of the rangers holding it had been so discomforting to the ranger-general. Granted, it hadn’t hit her as hard as it would’ve had she been, say, her mother or someone else with a far more sentimental bond with her rangers. After all, arrows were arrows. But even so, it’d still been jolting to see. She preferred known variables over unknown ones.

The sounds of boots hitting the ground at a pace far quicker than the steady march of her army caused one of her ears to twitch as it caught her attention. She turned to see a ranger wearing the bare minimum amount of leather protection and carrying only a lightly weighted bow and a small dagger slowing down beside her.

“Message for you, ma’am.” The runner said as he produced a sealed envelope.

Sylvanas took it in one hand, looking down at the seal to find it was that of her own family. There weren’t many people alive who could still use it. She wondered if she’d feel the sense of loss she
now felt, every time she saw her family’s crest. What would it be like, then, returning home?

Her gaze lingered on the symbol and what it represented for far longer than it should have, before she gently reminded herself that she was in full view of the majority of the Ranger Corps.

Opening the letter carefully so as not to break the wax symbol itself, Sylvanas read it through once before folding it between two fingers as her previous expression of hardened stoicism melted away to a peaceful smile.

She looked back down at the messenger, before giving him a quick nod, signalling that he could go, and feeling Alleria stirring as she did so.

“Watcha got there?” The woman mumbled sleepily as she peered over Sylvanas’ shoulder.

“News from Little Moon.” She replied, her smile turning into a grin as she passed the letter back.

Accepting it, the older ranger turned to the side to be able to read it. Sylvanas could feel the woman’s grip on her tighten as she went through it, followed by an excited gasp.

“You’re kidding!” The woman exclaimed as she passed the letter back and wrapped her other arm back around her sister. “By the Sunwell, that’s fantastic!”

Sylvanas found it difficult to find a set of words that were able to capture her own excitement, while also not humanizing her, so to speak, in view of the other rangers.

She came up empty. Kalina was waiting for her in Silvermoon. She hadn’t seen the girl in easily a month, and now they were going to be together again forever. No words could adequately articulate the level of joy she felt.

It seemed almost surreal to Kalina, seeing Silvermoon again after so long. Not just because of the time since she’d been away or everything that’d happened since then, but also because of the sheer state of it. The city was, as always, immaculate. Or, perhaps less so with the celebrations that were being set up for the returning army, but even that - the sheer display of abundant food and merriment to come - was a far cry from the desolate likes of Fairbreeze and Tranquillian.

She’d been escorted to be debriefed almost immediately upon stepping through the portal, a report which she liked to think she gave a fairly convincing performance for; before being released and allowed to officially return home. Luckily the enclave’s quartermaster had been more than happy to supply her with a new set of gear before she left, so she at least didn’t have to walk home dressed in little more than underwear afterwards.

As she neared her old tower in Silvermoon, a minor sense of dread seemed to take hold of her, the feeling intensifying as she rounded a corner and came face to face with the gigantic building.

‘One foot in front of the other, Kalina.’ she urged herself as the tower seemed to loom over her, as though it were a beast of prey deciding what part of her to devour first.

She’d had this problem returning home ever since she’d gotten her first ever leave from the rangers. She remembered herself excitedly walking home with a spring in her step early one morning, her mind full of thoughts of soft beds and hot meals, only to turn and completely freeze in absolute terror as she’d come with sight of the tower she’d for so long called home.

She’d ended up spending that entire vacation in Farstriders’ Square.
The first time she’d actually made it to the front door, Sylvanas had been with her, holding her hand and providing words of encouragement every grueling step of the way. And even then, she’d had to ask the woman to spend the night holding her tightly to keep her from having a panic attack in her own bed.

Now, 26 years onward, the sight of her old home didn’t hold the same grip on her that it once did, but that wasn’t to say she wasn’t terrified. She’d just gotten better at managing it.

As she made it to the front door, a part of her noted that this was the first time she’d actually been home since at least a decade before the war. It hadn’t been long enough, she thought.

That wasn’t to imply that she’d gone years without a vacation. She’d had plenty. They’d just all been spent with Sylvanas.

The sound of the door clicking shut behind her as she slipped inside was all the signal she needed to sink to her knees and begin taking a series of sharp breaths.

‘Get it together. He’s not here anymore. He’s dead, and he’s never coming back. Breathe.’

In another life, she might have appreciated the irony. Here she was, fully armed and armored, fresh off of slaughtering an army of trolls, standing in her own home, even, and she’d never felt more powerless.

Thankfully, a growling from her stomach interrupted her terror, giving her all the excuse she needed to head back out. It was late, sure, but that just meant that there would be plenty of taverns open to get something quick along with a drink to calm her nerves.

Standing up, she turned and slipped back out of the house at a brisk pace, as though it would be angry if she took too long.

Wayfarer’s Rest wasn’t her favorite tavern by a long shot. It was a great place, to be sure. Warm, lively atmosphere, excellent food, great drinks, and friendly staff. But it wasn’t her favorite. Her favorite was an old place in Augur’s Row that she used to frequent on occasion in her early days as the Canary. It was dark, dingy, had watered down drinks and food that wasn’t safe to eat, and everyone continually stared at each other as if preparing for the moment when all chaos would break loose and they’d all have to shank each other with a bottle.

But despite all that, it was out of the way, and people didn’t talk. She could go there as the Canary and sit there, in full gear, and no one would say a thing to the guards or anyone else. There was a certain sense of invisibility there that the rest of Silvermoon lacked.

Of course, it didn’t hurt that it had been one of Lysenna’s fronts.

Wayfarer’s Rest, on the other hand, despite its name, was anything but restful, and certainly not private. It was exactly the sort of place groups of young Quel’dorei that had just come of age would go out to together on weekend nights.

So of course, the beautiful white haired ranger snacking on a plate of roasted chicken and sipping idly from a mug of beer didn’t go unnoticed.

“Hey.”

Kalina looked up from her drink briefly to see a male with short blonde hair standing there with a confident look. She wasn’t really sure as to his age - such a thing was almost impossible to tell in Quel’thalas - but she was fairly certain he still hadn’t completely finished growing yet. Regardless,
this was the absolute last thing she was in the mood for. “Hi.”

“So you’re a ranger, right?” He asked as he leaned on the table

She nodded once, taking another sip of her drink.

“Is it true the war’s really been won?”

In Quel’thalas, there were ever only two acceptable answers to this question, regardless of the truth: ‘yes’, and ‘not yet, but we will’.

“It is.”

“That’s so awesome!” He exclaimed as he pumped his fist in the air, before sitting down opposite her. Her response was to take a long sip of her drink. It was going to be a long night. “So? What’s it like?”

She looked up at him. “I’m sorry?”

“Y’know, going on adventures, killing baddies, saving the kingdom! It must be so exciting!”

She set down her mug. “What’s your name?”

“Elas.” He seemed to proclaim almost with a touch of pride. “Elas Nerilen. You know you look a lot like the chick from the posters?”

“I get that a lot.” She replied offhandedly. “Right, Elas. What is it you do for a living?”

“I’m studying to become a mage! I wanted to join up with the rangers when the war broke out, but my parents wouldn’t let me until I got further into my studies.”

She placed her mug in front of the younger elf. “Drink.”

His reply was a sharp smirk. “No problem.” Before picking up the tankard and making a dramatic show of chugging the lot.

“Right, Elas, you seem like a nice enough kid. Have you ever killed anyone?”

He shook his head. “Not yet, but when I join up I promise I’ll slaughter a thousand trolls for the glory of Quel-”

“No. You won’t.”

It was like she’d tripped him midsprint, as his look of confidence dropped into one of being taken aback. At his silence, she continued.

“More likely than not, you’ll run out with an arrow nocked or your sword drawn and get hit by a stray spear before you even had a chance to fight back. Or maybe you’ll spontaneously combust. Or be swallowed whole by a nearby tree on command of an enemy you never even knew was there. That’s what most of our deaths were this past war. New recruits like yourself being randomly slaughtered by something they had no control over. Nothing they could’ve done to prevent it, just bad luck.” She signaled the barmaid for another beer.

“And even if you did manage to survive long enough to kill a troll, or an orc, or any of the other filth that’s laid waste to our kingdom…” She drew in a gentle breath, letting her body relax as she did so. “Look, you wouldn’t be able to handle it, mentally.”
“Are you calling me stupid?” He seemed to take a sudden offense to that.

“No, though you’re not exactly convincing me on that front. I’m calling you weak.”

To his credit, he clearly took far less offense to that.

“You asked what it was like, so I’m going to tell you. One thing they never prepare you for, when they tell you how glorious it is to kill someone, is the way they stare at you as they die. It’s this horrified gaze of betrayal, as if they’re asking ‘Why? How could you?’: How could you, their enemy, actually kill them? Because I guarantee they imagined themselves the same way you do now. They imagined themselves as fighting gloriously and racking up kill after kill, and that if they did end up dying, it’d be in some beautiful last stand wherein they’d take a thousand people with them. They never, in a million years, imagined that they’d randomly take an arrow to the throat, choke on their own blood, watch as their companions leave them behind, and that that’d be it. Their story. Done.”

The barmaid set down another mug of beer. Kalina gave a quick thanks and took a sip before continuing. “And that stare follows you. For each person or troll you kill. Imagine a thousand sets of eyes staring at you in that look of betrayal for all time, every moment of every day. I’ve seen more than a few rangers go insane over it. And that’s not even covering the actual feeling the first time you kill someone.” Her thoughts returned to the same place they always did, that first night over a hundred years ago. “It’s this feeling like you’ve just crossed this unthinkable threshold, like you’ve done something that you can never undo, and can never get away from. That never leaves you either.”

“I’m different!” Was his immediate retort. “I have no problem doing what needs to be done.”

The girl sighed, taking a large gulp from her mug. “No. You’re not. The fact that you’re trying to convince me proves that.”

He stood up. “Well fine, fuck you too then! I’m sorry I even tried to talk to you. What are you doing home before the rest of the army anyway? Did you really see action, or did you just get some easy assignment holding some fishing village that the real soldiers already too-”

He was cut off by her drink being thrown in his face as she stood up, taking him by surprise as she stared at him with an expression of muted rage.

Wiping his eyes, he opened them again to stare at her with a look that told her exactly what was coming next. “Oh that’s it.”

His fist came hurtling towards her, only to be deflected out of the way at the wrist, before he was pulled forward by the offending arm just in time for the Kalina’s own fist to meet his temple.

He crumpled to the ground all at once, his body collapsing wildly onto the table before sliding off, taking the girl’s plate of chicken with him.

As he regained his bearings, Kalina crouched down next to him.

“Look, if you’re really serious about serving the kingdom, study frost magic. There was a shortage of frost mages at Fairbreeze and it would’ve saved a lot of lives if we’d had even one more.”

She looked up from the young mage to see several people staring at them now from around the room. Deciding it was probably a good time to leave, she pulled up her hood and placed the money for her food and drink on the table, plus some extra for the mess, before turning on her heel and quickly heading home.
That night, she slept just a bit more peacefully in her bed.
Chapter 40

Chapter Notes

Long chapter this time to make up for the extra day while switching over to Saturday!
Hope everyone enjoys!

It was around mid afternoon the next morning that Kalina was unceremoniously awoken by a heavy pounding on the door of her home, the sound magically carrying through the entire building and interrupting her dreams of Sylvanas.

Forcing herself to open her eyes, she let out an annoyed groan as she reluctantly got to her feet, before threw on what she liked to call her haphazard robe - a loose robe she had specifically for this purpose that could be put on and taken off quickly. Another round of pounding at the door told her her caller was growing impatient as the girl left her bedroom and set off down the stairs.

By the third set of knocks, Kalina was almost there. “I’m coming, hang on!” She called out tiredly as she made it to the heavy cherrywood door, opening it to find a short blond in blue and gold messenger’s attire clutching a scroll in his hands, flanked by a pair of Royal Guards.

“Oh no.”

“Lady Kalina of House Dawnblade!” The messenger began, letting go of the scroll as it magically unfurled itself in the air. “You are hereby summoned to the royal palace, effective immediately! You are to arrive well dressed and in full military uniform! Is this understood?”

Her eyes darted back and forth between the pair of guards, not leaving the pair as she opened her mouth again.

“It is. Thank you.” She answered, giving the messenger all he needed to roll up the scroll once more and depart, taking the pair of guards with him.

Closing the door, Kalina turned and leaned back against it, head angled at the ceiling as she slumped to the ground. Just one day, she would like to herself. Was that too much to ask?

It’d taken over an hour for her to get washed, brushed, and put on her makeup, and another half hour to put on her ranger uniform, but she was finally ready. Or, rather, as ready as she was ever going to be for what could be her last day on Azeroth.

It wasn’t unusual for the Royal Guard to use an immediate summons to Sunfury Spire as a way to make someone quickly disappear in broad daylight without a huge scene, usually on some made up charge if anyone did ask. In fact, it was their preferred practice for softer targets. By creating the perception among Quel’dorei high society that the Royal Guard tended to grab people by summoning them to the palace, it made it all the more unexpected when they deviated from that modus operandi. What that meant was that Kalina could very well be getting ready to walk to her death - or more likely, worse.

It was also for that reason that the girl included the full set of weapons that were typically carried into
battle by a ranger as part of her uniform. She’d be in Sunfury Spire, after all. If they did try to take
her out, somehow, there was plenty of damage she could do in there - assuming it wasn’t just another
Tranquillien where they knocked her out before they even saw her coming.

Either way the weapons’ presence made her feel safer, a fact that had become more and more
pervasively true in her everyday life. Whereas once she’d been happy and carefree enough to never
need to have an assortment of weapons nearby at any given moment, now she felt naked and
vulnerable without at least a few blades within reach, as though she were not just tempting, but
obligating the universe to send something horrible her way.

As it turned out, however, no one had made even the slightest attempt to disarm her, confront her, or
grab her upon her arrival. That at least left her somewhat optimistic about the nature of the summons.

That said, the presence of uniformed members of the Royal Guard everywhere in the palace didn’t
help. Kalina realized that guarding this building in particular was the absolute core of their stated
mission, but it didn’t do anything to ease the anxiety she’d learned from being around them.

It was for that reason that she now stood leaning upon a high balcony in the spire, watching as in the
courtyard below, tents and crates of military supplies were cleared away and and replaced by feasting
tables and casks of wine large enough to keep the city hungover for a month.

She smiled. If there was any image to symbolize a return some semblance of normalcy and
enjoyment in her life, it was the cleanup taking place below her.

“Kalina Dawnblade, I presume.” An almost melodic male voice spoke from behind her.

She turned around to face the speaker “That would be m-” only to stop cold as she found herself
standing face to face with Prince Kael’thas Sunstrider. “My prince!” She exclaimed as she dropped
to one knee as though her leg had been swept out from under her. “Forgive me, I-”

“Arise, ranger, it’s quite alright. I trust you had a safe trip?”

A part of Kalina almost felt flustered as she stood up. Even for someone as sociopolitically influential
as herself, meeting the prince was an incredibly rare occasion. Even for most national celebrations,
he was nowhere to be found, instead choosing to spend all his time down in Lordaeron with the
human mages of Dalaran.

“Yes, your highness.” Kalina responded, trying to keep the nerves out of her voice.

He gave a light smirk. “I’m sure you must be wondering why I had you summoned here on such
short notice.”

She folded her hands in front of her chest, only able to give a quick nod. While such a dainty gesture
might seem a touch soft for an active ranger, they’d become all but second nature to Kalina in
civilian life. Quel’dorei high society demanded femininity, after all, and it was a skill she’d had
drilled into her since birth.

“I’ve read over the report you gave upon returning to Silvermoon. I understand you were forced to
spend much of the war in... less than optimal accommodations.”

“That’s certainly one way of putting it.”

Kalina closed her eyes and gave a short nod. “Yes, my prince.”

“Well then,” he gently took one of her hands and clasped it between his. “In light of your excellent
service to the kingdom, I was hoping you’d do me the honor of standing next to me for the return.”

Kalina’s breath froze in her chest. It went without saying what a monumental honor this was, let alone the level of influence it’d buy her, being seen as close to the prince.

What did he want from her?

“But, why me?” she began. “Surely there are plenty of other heroes-“

“All the other heroes are either too wounded to join in, or are part of the return parade. Seeing as you were left out of the latter, I thought you might like the chance to be seen regardless.”

Time seemed to stand still as Kalina stood there, the prince’s answer setting in. It couldn’t be. Was he really just doing this out of kindness? She couldn’t remember the last time someone in Silvermoon had done something because they were genuinely just a good person.

“Th…” She started, taken aback by the almost simplicity of the situation. Her eyes began to water, and she looked down at the ground to hide it. “Thank you, my prince.”

A hand tipped her chin up, angling her gaze upwards so that their eyes were now locked.

“Kael’thas.” He corrected her.

Kalina took a deep breath, giving herself a moment to compose herself, before nodding.

“Kael’thas.”

If there was one thing Kalina could say she’d never seen of Silvermoon, it was the city being silent. The curfews during her years as the Canary had certainly come close, but even those had held at least some noise, whether it was the gentle hum and heavy footfalls of the arcane guardians, or the sounds of rangers and guards on patrol. But as close as those nights had been, even they now paled in comparison to the absolute, almost overpowering silence that now took the city in its grip.

All across the city, the streets were lined with crowds clamoring for a glimpse of the soon to be returning heroes that had saved their kingdom from annihilation at the hands of the Legion’s Horde. Those streets that weren’t going to see the rangers’ footsteps had instead been converted into celebration grounds, full of tables stocked with hot, fresh food kept so by magic, along with all the alcohol the rangers - and the rest of the city - could ever wish to drink.

It was at the very end of the rangers’ path, at the Court of the Sun, that Kalina stood, watching over the open courtyard from a low balcony in Sunfury Spire meant for giving speeches, along with a number of other Quel’dorei. At the center of the group stood King Anasterian himself, with off to one side the four most powerful members of the Convocation. Off to the other side stood Kael’thas, followed by Kalina in full gear with her hood down, followed by the three lowest ranking members of the Convocation.

It didn’t escape the girl that she was standing closer to the king than several members of the Convocation were, and for that she had to force back a tremendous smirk as she stood there, gazing down at the open space below and the crowds gathered around the edges of it.

Looking down at them, Kalina recognized a number of faces, many of them holding wine glasses, wearing outfits clearly chosen for the occasion, and flanked by groups of attendants. It made sense, of course. The closer one got to Sunfury Spire, the higher the housing prices were, meaning the more rich and powerful their inhabitants. The only exception to this rule was Augur’s Row, which sat not
adjacent to the palace, but remarkably close nonetheless. Of course, no one wanted to agitate that situation, especially given the sheer level of damage a single assassin based out of that area had done without being provoked, so most of Silvermoon’s elite were happy to let sleeping dogs lie.

It was at the edge of the city that the sound of cheering first erupted, causing Kalina’s face to split into a wide grin as the roar of the crowd slowly got closer until, in the very distance, she could see the people there burst into cheers and applause as, shortly after, a parade of rangers, some on horseback, others on foot, rounded the corner.

It was at that point that entire court burst into excited roars and applause, Kalina herself clapping almost hyperactively as her eyes found Sylvanas and focused in on her, the blonde in turn looking up at her with a confident grin of her own. The two locked eyes as Sylvanas drew ever closer, before the woman was forced to shift her gaze to the king as her horse came to a stop, the crowd immediately falling silent.

Kalina noticed Alleria’s gaze catch her as she sat on the back of Sylvanas’ horse, followed by a mouthed ‘Hey!’.

Kalina covered her mouth to suppress a giggle. Alleria had never cared much for formality, even in a military setting. Mouthing a quick “Hi!” back, the girl gave a short wave, before gesturing towards the king to indicate that they should focus on him at the moment.

“My king!” Sylvanas called out dramatically. “Our enemies have been vanquished! Victory belongs to Quel’thalas!”

All at once, the cheers resumed, as if almost rehearsed, but this time more cacophonous than before, only stopping again when the king held up a hand to ask for silence.

“All of Quel’thalas is in your eternal debt. For you, glorious rangers, mages, and healers, are the-“

Kalina zoned out at that point as the king dove headfirst into a speech about the glory of the Quel’dorei and their ability to surmount any obstacle the world might confront them with. Distracting herself instead with mischievous fantasies, she wondered what would happen if she were to take hold of Kael’thas’ hand at that moment, simply for the purpose of creating chaos. The crown had officially made her end her relationship with Sylvanas shortly after becoming a war hero. If she decided to move her hand just an inch to the left right now, in full view of the entire city, there would be absolutely no way the crown would ever be able to get rid of the implication it’d create. It’d be a major political blow to an entity generally seen as invincible. And all she’d have to do was move her hand one inch to the left.

Nah, she thought, shaking that fantasy away. Kael’thas seemed like a good person. He didn’t deserve that.

It was at that moment that a cold realization came over Kalina as turned that thought over in her head. He was a good person. He didn’t deserve that. A member of the royal family was a good person, and didn’t deserve to have something bad like that happen to him.

Her eyes focused back down on the crowds below her. If Kael’thas Sunstrider, of all people, could turn out to be a good person, then how many others amidst the crowd of nobles could be the same way? It’d been so easy to commit all manner of atrocities with the assurance that those on the receiving end had deserved it for being a part of the system that had ripped her away from Sylvanas and married her off to Rhalyf.
How many of the lives she’d destroyed had really just belonged to good people?

Her eyes began to water as, for the first time in her life, she saw the Canary the way the rest of Quel’thalas saw her. A butcher. A taker of lives and destroyer of dreams.

She tried to escape the thought by distracting herself with the king’s speech. He was going on about sacrifice now. Kalina supposed that was lucky. If she did cry now, it’d garner sympathy from the crowd below - though she didn’t know how the rangers would react.

It wasn’t that rangers were expected to be complete rocks. They were a family, after all. It was normal for them to help each other through exactly the sort of emotional carnage war brought. But even so, it wasn’t a publicly done thing. They were still expected to be strong and set an example for the rest of the kingdom. A uniformed ranger, in full view of all of Silvermoon, shedding tears when the king was talking about sacrifice - that was a gamble, to be sure.

Forcing herself to be strong at that moment, she instead focused on the individual words and phonetics of the speech, regardless of their greater context. Luckily, it wasn’t much longer before he began to wrap up.

“Now go!” the king finished. “Celebrate, drink, and rest! Every single one of you has earned it.”

With that, what formations and boundaries there had been in the crowds below dissolved as ranger and civilian alike went to grab food and drink while attendants took away the horses. Kalina looked down to see Sylvanas meet her gaze with a smile, before beckoning once to her and dismounting along with her sister.

Kalina gave a vigorous nod in reply.

“Coming, Kalina?”

She turned to see Kael’thas standing there waiting for her.

“Oh! Yeah. Sorry.” She answered as she turned and followed him off the balcony.

As it turned out, when Kael’thas had said ‘stand next to me’, he hadn’t just meant for the speech, as Kalina now found herself unable to get away as the prince rambled on excitedly about what life in Dalaran was like.

“Of course it can’t compare to Silvermoon in terms of sheer grandeur, but it does hold a certain, almost warm charm that’s very easy to fall in love with.” He continued as, in the background, one elf tried to climb a nearby building without dropping his mug of beer while a small crowd cheered him on. He made it about half a floor up before realizing her needed both hands, and trying to balance his mug on his head accordingly. He didn’t make it further than that.

She swirled her goblet of wine. “I never considered it like that. I’ll have to spend a vacation there sometime.” In reality she wasn’t listening too closely, though if Kael’thas noticed he didn’t show it.

What she was more focused on was finding Sylvanas. Her eyes scanned around for any sign of the woman, and disappointingly finding none - though she did catch more than a few venomous stares fixed her way from other socialites.

“Prince Kael’thas.” A young woman in an almost ethereal looking white dress sat down on the other side of the prince. “Ayla Salonar. Listen, some friends and I were thinking of getting some food and seeing what we wanna do after that. We’d love it if you came with.”
‘Yes, please, go with the crown chaser.’

“My apologies, Lady Salonar,” Both Kalina and Ayla seemed surprised to hear him addressing the woman by her last name. “But I’m afraid I already promised Kalina here I’d spend the evening with her.”

Ayla’s eyes hardened as they turned towards Kalina, but her smile didn’t falter. “Oh how silly of me to intrude. You two have fun!” With that, she stood back up and strode away, her movements just a little too stiff.

Kael’thas turned back to face Kalina without missing a beat. “So anyway, as I was saying, humans tend not to live very long, but they make up for it by studying far harder so as to learn as much as they can in what time they have. I’ve known several who have become mages almost on par with those here in Silvermoon by spending every waking moment they have studying.”

Kalina smiled. “I actually met a human mage during the war, Sireena… Mor’li? I think it was? I’m not good at human names.”

“Serena Morley is definitely a human name.”

“Excellent!” She raised her glass briefly. “Serena Morley it is then!”

He clinked his own glass against hers. “To Serena Morley!”

They both knocked back their glasses. Kael’thas reached over and the bottle they’d been using to pour some more, only to find it empty.

“Oh, it appears we’ve run dry.” He laughed. “Allow me to go fetch us some more.”

With that, he stood up and started off. Had he been almost anyone else, at this point Kalina would’ve ditched him, but she knew it wasn’t wise to pull such a maneuver on the heir to the throne.

It wasn’t long after Kael’thas was gone that Kalina felt a tap on the shoulder, and turned around to see a pale skinned blonde girl wearing a loose fitting sleeveless mini dress and with her hair in a loose braid standing next to her.

“Uh, hi.” She began, gripping one arm in an expression of anxiety. Kalina noticed that she was ripped. “Are you the chick from the posters?”

Kalina gave a polite smile. “Probably.” Before standing up and extending a hand. “Kalina Dawnblade, at your service.”

The girl accepted the handshake. “You can call me Nira. Listen, a friend of mine’s a really huge fan, could you maybe come and talk to her? It’d be huge.”

Kalina felt someone else take a seat next to her, turning to see it was another girl, this one also wearing a similar style dress, and who also appeared to be in peak condition.

“I’d love to,” she replied, turning back to Nira “but at the moment I’m kinda waiting for someone. If you can get her to come over here I’d totally be happy to, though.”

The girl gently tugged at her hand. “My friend is super nervous to come over to you. It’ll only take a second. Please?”

Kalina noticed at that point the other girl had stood up behind her. “... You know you two are in
pretty fit condition for people not wearing ranger uniforms tonight.” She sighed. “Just tell me what Avina wants, I know you wouldn’t dare try to grab me out here.”

Any trace of juvenile expression faded from Nira’s face immediately as she leveled a far more serious gaze at Kalina. “Hang out with someone else tonight. Anyone else, we don’t care, just stay away from the royal family.”

Kalina smiled, and leaned forward dramatically, as if to just slightly taunt the guard standing before her. “My pleasure.” Before shoving the cup she’d been holding onto into the girl’s arms and leaving to find Sylvanas.

“My lord!”
“My prince!”
“Your highness!”

Kael’thas paid little mind to the plethora of shocked subjects bowing or kneeling as he passed. His primarily goal was finding an unopened bottle of wine. He supposed he could try a tavern or liquor store, if only he actually knew where to find one. It’d been a while since he’d last been in Silvermoon.

A hand placed itself gently on his shoulder. “Pardon me saying so, my lord, but you look lost.”

Kael’thas turned to see a blond elf with hair darker than his own walking alongside him now. “I’m looking for an unopened bottle of wine. I’m sorry, you are…?”

“Veric Proudsong.” The man extended a hand, revealing a signet ring of the Royal Guard.

Kael’thas took, it shaking it firmly. “Is there sometime specific you need, Lord Proudsong?”

He smirked. “Just a few minutes of your time.”

It was a few minutes later that the pair ascended the stairs to the second floor hallway of a nearby building, where a pair of plainclothes guards could be seen standing casually on either side of one of the doors.

It was Veric who stepped forward to open the door for the prince as he stepped through, before closing it behind him.

Kael’thas turned his head as he entered the room to see a single other occupant in there with him, a woman with short jet black hair leaning against a support column dividing the way out onto a balcony facing out over the street. Like the other guards, she too was out of uniform, wearing a simple tunic and leggings.

“My highness.” She gave a short bow, before returning to her leaning position with her arms crossed.

Kael’thas, for his part, offered a polite smile. “You must be Lieutenant Darkflight, rising star of the Royal Guard.”

While he tended to spend very little time in Quel’thalas, and the Royal Guard was, in fact, beholden only to the king, his father had still made a point of making sure he was familiar with every officer in the organization, specifically because the king was their only oversight, and if a new king went in
blind or with a poor knowledge of the group, it would be ridiculously easy for them to puppeteer the
throne.

“Indeed I am.”

“A pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

“Likewise.” She held her gaze on him.

The prince did the same. His father was right. She was exactly as icy as he’d been told.

“What are you doing?” She broke the silence.

“Oh- my apologies.” Kael’thas began. “I just couldn’t help but stare at someone so breathtakingly
beauti-”

“Oh. That. Of course. He spread his arms in a cocky gesture. “Enjoying the party, of course.”

The officer seemed to tense up just a bit. “And if you know who I am, then surely you must know
who she is.”

“The greatest career boost a member of your group could ever hope for. Yes, I’m perfectly aware
who she really is.” He replied, strolling around the room as he spoke.

“Then why are you putting yourself in such unnecessary danger?”

He turned to face her. “Because, dear lieutenant, we destroy our enemies by making friends with
them. You should know that better than anyone.”

She closed her eyes. “I’m working on that.” Her words came through gritted teeth.

Kael’thas only replied with a questioning look, to which the woman opened her eyes and unclenched
her jaw. He’d seen the look she was now giving him before. Had he been anyone else, he was sure
she would’ve called him a petulant child.

As if to confirm his thoughts, she spoke as if explaining something to an actual child. “By making
her see me as a protector, I build loyalty in her. I’ve done it a thousand times before.”

“Lieutenant.” He held up two crossed fingers. “She’s like this with the ranger-general. She has a
protector. What could you possibly be protecting her from that Lady Windrunner isn’t?”

Avina gave the all-powerful smirk of a prison guard right before they beat their captive. “From the
full wrath of the crown, of course.”

Kael’thas, for his part, wasn’t amused. “So, you’re protecting her from your own organization, then.
What do you think will happen when she realizes you and the Royal Guard are one and the same
from where she’s standing?”

Avina spread her hands, as though the conclusion was obvious. “Then she won’t have a choice,
because I’ll still be the only thing standing between her and everything else.”

“And all the while she’ll be looking for a way to break the leash. What happens when she finds it?”

“We eliminate her the moment she tries.”
He stepped towards the balcony “And throw away an invaluable asset in the process. My way is better, lieutenant.” He strolled past her. “She needs a friend, not a protector.”

She turned around and followed him. “She has friends already. A century’s worth.”

Kael’thas turned back to face her, arms spread again. “And what’s wrong with one more?”

“Your way is liable to get you killed. She could poison you in plain view of everyone down there and even you wouldn’t notice until she was long gone.”

He turned around to look out over the edge. “An assassin of her calibre isn’t stupid enough to try something like that.” He replied as his gaze found the white haired girl below, still waiting for him to return but now talking to a pair of girls in minimally restrictive dresses.

“You underestimate her recklessness.” Avina leaned on the balcony. “In another life, I imagine you two would’ve made the best of friends.”

“We’re making pretty good friends right now, lieutenant.”

She smirked again. “Are you?”

It was at that point that the prince could see the girl shove her goblet into one the guard’s arms, before turning and leaving a brisk pace.

“Was that really necessary?”

Avina turned around to face him. “Well, considering I’m only sworn to protect your father, no; but it was certainly to your benefit.”

He opened his mouth to snap at her, before being cut off.

“Go back to Dalaran, my lord. It’s safe there. Quel’thalas will survive in your absence.”

At that, he couldn’t argue. While Avina didn’t outrank him as a mere Royal Guard lieutenant, she certainly didn’t answer to him, and he doubted his father would have a much more lenient view on the matter.

“As father wishes. If you’ll excuse me.” He acquiesced, before quickly departing. It didn’t matter anyway. Someday he’d be king, and then neither the Royal Guard nor anyone else could stand in his way.

Kalina bit the inside of her mouth. She’d been walking around searching for Sylvanas for at least a half hour now, all while narrowly managing to outmaneuver those who would otherwise corner her into another prolonged interaction.

She wondered whether Sylvanas was looking for her too. It’d certainly be a lot harder for the blonde to find her in a crowd, let alone a party spanning the entire city. Deciding it’d at least help to make it easier for her, Kalina turned to look for somewhere more open yet secluded to go to, only to stop as she caught the briefest sight of a tattooed face further down the street.

‘Alleria?’

She started after the woman, following her at a steady pace until she caught up to find the woman standing near the edge of the cliff leading down to the harbor, leaning on the ornate blue and gold railing and staring out across the water, to where, in the distance, the night sky was split in two by
the light of the Sunwell.

“Alleria!” The girl called out as she got closer.

The blonde looked back over her shoulder, before turning around completely. “Kalina!” Her speech was moderately slurred as she held up a large amber bottle in greeting. “Glad you’re alive!”

“Is that bourbon?” The younger elf asked as she went to lean on the railing next to the eldest Windrunner. She’d tried bourbon before, but it wasn’t by any means a common or even widely available drink in Quel’thalas. In fact the only two ways she knew to get it were a small imports store there in Silvermoon, and by smuggling it in. Neither option was cheap.

Alleria nodded, before holding out the bottle. “Have some.”

Kalina was more than a little taken aback. “Uh, are you sure? I mean I don’t want to take any away from-”

“Kurdran gave it to me to share for when the war was won. Have some.” The way she spoke made it clear that this was not up for debate.

“... Thank you.” Kalina replied she accepted the bottle, before taking a swig and handing it back.

The ranger-captain turned back to face Quel’danas. “It’s still in one piece.” The remark came with a heavy sigh. “Did Vereesa tell you what happened?”

Kalina gave a nod as she answered softly. “Yeah.”

“Alleria’s eyes widened. “Oh, you didn’t hear?” She took a swig from her bottle. “We’re not even getting rid of the Horde. You know, the invaders who consorted with the Burning Legion to wipe out all of Azeroth? That Horde? We’re letting them live.”

“Oh, you didn’t hear?” Kalina replied she accepted the bottle, before taking a swig and handing it back.

The ranger-captain turned back to face Quel’danas. “It’s still in one piece.” The remark came with a heavy sigh. “Did Vereesa tell you what happened?”

Kalina gave a nod as she answered softly. “Yeah.”

“Almost everyone is gone. And what do they get? A slap on the wrist and a stern talking to.”

At Kalina’s look of confusion, Alleria’s eyes widened. “Oh, you didn’t hear?” She took a swig from her bottle. “We’re not even getting rid of the Horde. You know, the invaders who consorted with the Burning Legion to wipe out all of Azeroth? That Horde? We’re letting them live.”

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“Whose idea was that?”

“Lordaeron’s.”

“Of course it was.”

This time Alleria took a much longer drink from her bottle, before sitting down with her back against the railing. “I... I don’t think I’m ready to go home yet.” Her speech was getting audibly more slurred. “I don’t wanna go home. There’s too much back there. I’m not ready to go back yet.”

Kalina’s voice was soft. “What do you wanna do?”

Alleria smiled. It wasn’t a happy look. “I wanna kill every last orc on Azeroth and Draenor, starting with the children. I wanna wipe out every last orc child while their family is forced to watch.”

Kalina nodded gently. “Yeah.” She placed a hand on the woman’s shoulder. As easy as it had been to forget with how fast he’d been growing up, Lirath had still been a child. Even by human standards, he’d been a child when he’d died. And he’d certainly been Alleria’s favorite. “By the way, did you happen to see where Sylvanas went?”

Alleria shrugged limply. “She said she was going to look for you...”

Kalina could see the woman was beginning to lose consciousness. She looked around. It probably
wasn’t safe for her to pass out out here.

“Hey, stay with me.” The girl spoke as she knelt down and slung the woman’s arm over her shoulders. “Come on, let’s get you somewhere safe.”

They were overlooking the waterfront near Sunfury Spire, which meant that Kalina’s home - loathe as she was to return there - was nearby. All things considered it was probably their best bet.

She tightened her hold on the woman’s arm. “Ready? Three, two, one, up!”

The pair stood up, Alleria’s legs buckling under her as Kalina held her aloft, before the woman gained her footing and they started down the road. They were about halfway there when Alleria spoke again.

“Your name is so fun to say sometimes, you know that? Kaaaaaaaaaliiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiinaaaaaaa. Ka...li...na! Kali Kali Kali Kali.” The woman paused. “Why does she call you that anyway? I asked her once and she just insisted that that was your name. Like… I don’t think I’ve ever heard her call you Kalina. Even on military stuff she lists you as Kali.”

The girl let out a giggle. It was definitely not a common nickname in Quel’thalas. “You weren’t there when we first met. I had a cold that day, and my nose was all stuffy, so it was super hard to finish my sentences. So I meant to introduce myself as Kalina, but I couldn’t get past ‘Kali’ no matter how many times I tried. I think it was the fourth attempt when it officially became too late. After that I was too nervous to correct her so it kinda just stuck.”

“Kaaaaaaaaliiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii. Na.” The blonde laughed, raising her bottle into the air with one hand and swinging it around with each syllable like it was a maestro’s baton.

It wasn’t much further before they made it to the girl’s front door.

“Right,” She began as she unlocked the door, and forced herself to step inside, Alleria in tow “I’m probably gonna be gone for the rest of the night. I’ll be back in the morning to check on you. Until then just try to lie down and take it easy.”

“You’re the boss, ranger…” The officer replied as she began nodding off again.

Seeing that they weren’t gonna make it to any sort of furniture, Kalina instead chose one of the many large pillows spread out on the carpeted floor, and did her best to gently lay the increasingly limp woman down on top of it.

A few moments later the door clicked shut, followed by the turning of the lock, as Kalina hurried out of the building and back out into Silvermoon.

It was around midnight when Sylvanas stood leaning against a wall near the door that Kalina called home, waiting for the girl to come back out. She’d been tailing the younger elf since she’d taken the bait Alleria had been kind enough to serve as.

It wasn’t long before the quiet click of the door opening prompted Sylvanas to dart for nearby cover as, a moment later, the thin, pale form of the girl she loved exited the building. If she’d noticed her, she didn’t show it as she locked the door, before turning back around to stare up at the night sky as she let herself lean back against the wood, a hand now covering her eyes.

Was she crying?
No, Sylvanas realized as she watched the girl set off back into the city. She was just tired.

Stepping out from her hiding place to stand just behind the girl, Sylvanas waited for her to take a few steps away before calling out after her. “Behind you.”

The effect was immediate. The moment her voice rang out, Kalina seemed to freeze as though struck by the paralytic she so often employed, before turning on a dime and all but diving into Sylvanas’ arms.

The blonde gave a soft chuckle. “It’s good to see you too, Kali.”

“I missed you so much.”

She began gently stroking the girl’s hair. “As did I.”

A silence fell between them as they stood there, savoring each other’s touch after so long apart. Sylvanas could feel each of Kalina’s breaths on her chest as the assassin leaned in, seeming to gradually let all the tension leave her body.

“I brought wine.” The woman finally spoke again with a cheeky grin, in reference to the pack slung over her back that - true to her word - held a rather nice Dalaran red along with a pair of goblets. “I know a great spot in Farstriders’ Square we can sneak off to if here’s not good.”

“Here’s good.” Kalina murmured in reply, taking her by surprise. “It’s safe when you’re here.”

She planted a quick kiss on the shorter elf’s forehead. “Alright then.”

Kalina was the one who broke the hug, reaching for her keys to unlock the door again. As they stepped inside, Sylvanas notice an unconscious Alleria laying off to the side, curled atop a large pillow with a more than half empty bottle of Dwarven bourbon sitting next to her. It was hard to tell given that some of her hair was in her face, but Sylvanas was certain she could see a set of mascara streaks slowly forming.

She let out a gentle sigh. Hopefully her sister would feel better come morning. Their mother’s death at the start of the war had been hard enough, but the majority of their family getting wiped out, including their little brother… that was something that couldn’t be buried.

It was a few minutes later that the pair reached the bedroom at the top of the spire. As they stepped through the doorway, Sylvanas unslung the pack and set it down in preparation for what was to come.

The moment the door swung closed, she sprung into action like a pouncing viper, her lips, along with the rest of her body, crashing into Kalina’s, sending the pair of them tumbling to the ground in front of the bed as the ranger-general wasted no time undoing the girl’s armor with one hand, before yanking each piece off and tossing it haphazardly out of the way, while the other hand pinned the girl’s wrists high above her head.

“Wait…” Kalina whispered as she broke the kiss just long enough to breath, before her lips were set upon once more like a rabbit under a lynx.

Finally Sylvanas’ fingers managed to get the girl’s belt undone as a moment later she slid into the assassin’s pants, her fingers tracing along the outer-

“Wait.”
Sylvanas’ ears caught the word that time as it came out far louder than before. Immediately she removed her hand, pulling her face away from Kalina’s likewise to look into her eyes.

“What’s wrong?”

The girl seemed to look away for a moment, as if ashamed, before meeting Sylvanas’ gaze once more.

“Sylvanas… Am I a bad person?”

Sylvanas’ breath froze in her lungs. That… was a question she’d worked very hard to keep from thinking too much about.

“What makes you think that?” Was her answer as her throat quickly began to feel much dryer.

“Well,” She looked away again. “I was out a tavern the other day, and there was this guy who came up to me and asked me what it was like to kill people. And I told him. And then, later, I just sorta started thinking about all the people I’ve killed and how many of them actually deserved it, and… well, it just kinda hit me. I really am the villain here, aren’t I?”

Her retort was immediate. “You are not the villain!” It was true, that Kalina’s methods were the height of dishonor, not to mention the fact that the majority of her targets had been friendly civilians. She was exactly the type of person Sylvanas had sworn to strike down in defense of the kingdom, the very epitome of the word ‘villain’ from a ranger’s point of view.

But then, she hadn’t really had a choice, had she? It had either been continue killing for money, or forever resign herself to a life as a psychopath’s punching bag.

“It’s my fault.” Sylvanas added after a moment, her grip tightening on the girl. “I should’ve never let them take you.”

And that, more than anything else, was the crux of the issue. Sylvanas had let her be taken away from her and from her dreams to be sold off to the man of her nightmares. More than anyone else, she blamed herself for what her lover had become.

“Look.” She grabbed Kalina’s chin, and forced the girl’s gaze back into her eyes. “You did what you had to to survive. Alone. With absolutely no one to come save you. And yet you’re still the same Kali I fell in love with 150 years ago. As far as I’m concerned, that’s all that matters. The fact that right now, you’re here, you’re alive, you’re in one piece, and you’re mine. Okay?”

She began to nod, hesitantly at first. “Okay. Okay.”

Sylvanas could see now that her eyes were watering.

“What’s wrong?” Her voice was soft.

“Nothing.” Kalina’s expression split into a grin. “I’m just… so happy right now.”

The blonde chuckled, before getting up and stepping over to where her pack lay, producing the aforementioned wine and cups from it a moment later, while Kalina got up and went to sit on the bed.

“You’ve had a long war.” Sylvanas said as she poured a cup full of the sweet nectar, before holding it out to the girl. “Drink. You’ve earned it.”
Kalina didn’t question the sentiment as she accepted the cup, while Sylvanas went to pour one for herself. No sooner had she looked back up from her own cup than she saw that Kalina had already emptied hers.

She stood there, mouth slightly agape for a second, before nodding as if to say ‘alright then’ and pouring the girl another cup.

It wasn’t long before the entire bottle had been emptied, about ¾ of which having been the work of the shorter girl with the insatiable thirst, who now lay sprawled out on her back atop the indigo bedspread, with Sylvanas sitting next to her, trying to suppress a grin.

“Sylvaaaanas.” She moaned as she turned over to face the woman, wrapping a limp arm around her waist. “Let’s go get more wiiiiine.”

At that, Sylvanas couldn’t keep it back anymore, as she burst into laughter, putting one hand to her mouth to try to contain it and absolutely failing. “I think you’ve had quite enough, young lady.”

“Nuh uh, cus I’m only a few years younger than you.”

“Exactly.” She replied with a look of amusement as she lay down next to the girl, almost immediately feeling her other arm wrap its way around one of her own before being joined by the first one.

The moment both arms locked into place, Kalina was out cold. Sylvanas could only smirk and plant a soft kiss on the girl’s lips, before likewise letting herself fall asleep. There was a lot of work ahead of them. Best rest while they could.
Chapter 41

The days that followed were both some of the most joyful and most somber in recent memory. With the war officially over and rapid rebuilding efforts underway on a large scale, the refugees that’d flooded Silvermoon were able to return home and resume their lives as before. Celebrations, admittedly much smaller than the official one, took place for weeks afterwards as friends and loved ones gathered together to breathe a collective sigh of relief and enjoy themselves once more.

At the same time, the death toll from the war had been astronomical, both in terms of civilian and military casualties, and there was rarely a point throughout any given day where more than a few funerals weren’t taking place.

Kalina had had to attend more than a few for her company, both for faces she recognized and ones she didn’t - new recruits that’d been slaughtered right out the gate.

None were as bad, though, as the funerals at Windrunner Village that Sylvanas had asked Kalina to come along to for support. For two weeks, a funeral was held every day for those who had been slain.

There had already been a funeral for Lireesa held in Silvermoon as a state affair, but as with all major ceremonies in Silvermoon, it’d quickly turned into an opportunity to look good and network. If there was one line Kalina overheard that might sum up the event, it was ‘I would cry, but I’m wearing too much makeup. But don’t worry, I’m crying with my soul’.

As a result, a separate, more private funeral had to be held in Windrunner Village for the former ranger-general. Alleria and Sylvanas had sobbed at the event, though that wasn’t unexpected. The pair had spent the entire war bottling up their grief to focus on the war, it was only now that they were allowed to let it all crash down

To everyone’s surprise, however, Vereesa had barely shed a tear, instead just staring at the coffin somberly and trying to control her breathing. It wasn’t surprising. She’d had plenty of time stationed in Silvermoon to work out her feelings, at this point for her the funeral was probably little more than a painful formality.

Lirath’s funeral, on the other hand, had been the complete opposite. Vereesa had bawled uncontrollably, whereas Alleria had just stared unblinkingly at his corpse, her gaze as endless and terrifying as the void itself.

Eventually, however, the worst was over, and another pressing matter took centerstage: promotions. In Quel’Thalas, the idea of a field promotion, even for lower or minor ranks, was pretty much non-existent. When a spot opened up, normally one person would be assigned to take command until an official replacement was chosen. While it was only ever an interim position, outstanding performance in such a role would often go a ways towards improving the individual’s candidacy. Promotions were far too rare and significant events to assign in a spur of the moment. Often the deliberations would take months or even over a year, depending on the rank.

The only problem was that more than half of the Quel’dorei chain of command was made up of interim positions at this point, meaning that unless they wanted to be backed up by years and years deliberating, to the point where the interim officers would pretty much get the positions simply by becoming entrenched, they had to expedite the process.

It was for that reason that Kalina now lay on the floor in Sylvanas’ office, alongside both the ranger-general herself, and a sitting Nathanos, helping the woman sort through the endless mountains of
parchment that’d come to dominate the room in the last few days.

“What about Halduron?” She asked as she stared up at a page of a report summarizing the search for a new ranger-captain for a battalion that’d been established during the war.

Sylvanas shook her head. “I’m giving him ranger lord already.”

Kalina sat up. “You’re kidding.” Halduron was certainly a good leader, there was no question there, but ranger lord was a whole other level of good. They didn’t even lead units, though they could certainly commandeer them. Instead they were each given individual missions to undertake for Quel’thalas, answering only to the ranger-general herself.

Sylvanas chuckled. “You missed his performance during the late war. He actually captured Zul’jin.”

Kalina’s gaze snapped to the blonde. “You are kidding.”

It was Nathanos who piped up from his chair across the room. “He did. I was there.”

Sylvanas sat up too. “Seriously, he actually managed to capture Zul’jin.”

Kalina blinked as a feeling of constriction took hold of her. “And?” Her voice was barely a whisper.

Sylvanas turned to give Nathanos a look prompting him to answer.

“Cut off his own arm and escaped.”

The girl’s mouth fell open just slightly, before she gave a short nod and lay back down. “Alright then, ranger lord it is.”

Sylvanas held her gaze on Kalina as the room went silent again, apart from the sound of Nathanos shuffling papers in the background.

“...Nathanos.” The ranger-general spoke, turning around to look at the human. “Could you give us a few minutes?”

His entire body seemed to stop mid motion as he looked up, silent for a moment before answering.

“Yes, milady.”

With that, he promptly set the papers he was attending to aside as he got to his feet and exited the office at a brisk pace.

It wasn’t until the door had closed all the way that Sylvanas spoke again.

“You know, the position’s yours if you want it.”

At that, Kalina too froze as the the words registered in her mind, before looking up at her lover in shock. “Me? Are you sure?”

The woman shrugged. “You’re a war hero. I don’t think anyone would object.”

A grin spread across Kalina’s face as she sat up again, opening her mouth to answer, only to be cut off by a perfectly manicured finger on her lips.

“But before you answer, there is another position I have in mind for you.”
Kalina closed her mouth, before nodding for Sylvanas to continue.

“So, I was doing some reading, brushing up on my military history, and I came across an old position that hasn’t seen use for at least couple generations now, but was never actually eliminated.”

Now the girl’s curiosity was peaked as Sylvanas removed the finger from her lips, allowing her to speak.

“Tell me.”

A knowing smirk spread across the woman’s face as she took hold of Kalina’s shoulder with one hand, lowering the girl back down into a lying position as she leaned in and whispered in her ear a single word.

“Steward.”

At that, Kalina’s face all but lit up. Stewards were considered a more archaic tradition, even amongst the nobility, but they were definitely not forgotten, and certainly not out of use. They were basically a personal attendant to their charge. They guarded them, cooked for them, lived with them, and even accompanied them at formal functions. In essence, it was everything a girlfriend did, but as an official position.

It was perfect.

Kalina began nodding vigorously. “I accept.”

“Good.” Sylvanas whispered, before leaning in and planting a warm kiss on the assassin’s lips.

Their eyes met, and for a moment, the entire world around them disappeared as they took each other in, before Sylvanas broke the silence.

“Think we should call Nathanos back in now?”

Now it was Kalina’s turn to smirk. “How long do you think we can make him wait?”

At that, the blonde let out a laugh. “You know you two really should try to get along more. You’re pretty much my right and left hands, after all.”

“I get along fine with him, he refuses to get along with me.”

“I’m sure.” Her grin widened, before she sat up and called out. “You can come back in now, Marris!”

The snow fell gently on Quel’thalas that year as Winter’s Veil approached, and for the first time in Sylvanas’ memory around this time of year, Windrunner Spire was quiet. It wasn’t that no one was home. Both she and her sisters were there, along with Kalina. None of them just knew what to do.

Vereesa had holed herself up in her room and had barely been seen since they’d all gotten leave. Despite Sylvanas’ best efforts, her sister hadn’t come out for a few days now. Even when she was allowed into the girl’s room, Sylvanas didn’t think she ever saw her let go of the pillow she’d clearly been crying into.

Alleria, meanwhile, hadn’t stopped training except to eat and sleep since she’d gotten home, and even now she could be seen outside, skin red from the cold as she continued putting arrow after arrow into an archery target that’d been set up on the beach down below.
As for Sylvanas herself, she just sat with Kalina in the same kitchen where they once used to make breakfast after every training session together, neither one saying much as they contemplated the situation at hand. Normally this time of year would be spent putting up extravagant decorations, getting ahold of musicians, bartenders, and chefs; shopping for something to wear, composing the guest lists, and sending invitations. But preparing the Winter’s Veil celebration had always been something that her mother had taken charge of, and it was a celebration the woman had always held a strong sense of pride in. And now not only was she gone, but so was a large chunk of Windrunner Village, and more importantly, of her family. Even if they did throw something together now, it’d be in the middle of a veritable ghost town.

No. A ghost town at least implied some infrastructure. What was left was a ghost town, which wasn’t much. The dragons had done more than one pass over the place, turning much of the area into a burnt out wreck - and while buildings in Quel’thalas could generally rebuilt with magic without too much issue, a remote village owned by a now almost extinct house wasn’t high on the magisters’ list of priorities, especially considering how well her house in particular - or more specifically, she herself - had gotten along with them during the war.

The point was, getting people to come, either as guests or as staff, would be a challenge of its own.

“We could ask Alleria if she wants to take the reins.” Kalina spoke, interrupting the deafening silence.

Sylvanas gave a half-hearted smile. It would certainly make sense, at least in theory, for Alleria to take control of the planning. She was the eldest daughter, after all, not to mention being an excellent leader. But at the same time, she was a bit too much of a maverick for that sort of thing. As capable of a leader as she was, it was clear - even by just looking at her military career - that she preferred her independence. “She’d probably bite our heads off if we tried.”

The pair both turned their attention out the window, to where the eldest sister was now wailing on a target dummy relentlessly with a short sword, her hair covered in snow.

“... we should at least bring her, like, a cloak or something so she doesn’t freeze.”

Sylvanas nodded, though she wouldn’t be surprised if her sister somehow managed to scare the cold away out of pure determination. “Let me bring it down to her. She’s less likely to bite my head off than yours.”

“Good idea.”

And so it was that the pair went upstairs to Sylvanas’ room, where they set about looking for a cloak heavy enough for the current weather. After about ten minutes of searching, the back of the woman’s closet mercifully spit out a heavy black one made of what appeared to be bear fur.

It only took them about a minute to fold it up together, at which point Sylvanas started down towards the beach with the thick article held in both arms while Kalina watched from above, legs dangling off the balcony.

“I hope you don’t intend to freeze to death out here.” The woman called out as she strode across the sand towards her still practicing sister.

Alleria stopped what she was doing at once, her shoulders tensing as she remained facing away from her younger sister, before finally turning around.

“And what am I supposed to do?” She asked, spreading her arms.
“Put on this cloak, for starters.” Sylvanas held it up briefly as if to punctuate the statement.

“I meant about our family!” The brief flash of regret on the older woman’s face told Sylvanas she hadn’t meant to be that loud. Turning her attention to a nearby patch of sand, she casually chucked her sword into it before continuing. “They butchered our family, took everything from us, and what do they get?” She smiled incredulously as she began to pace. “Mercy. And everyone is acting like they’re okay with it. Little Moon’s holed herself up in her room to cry, you’re just hanging around with your girlfriend like you always do, and I’m the only person in all of Quel’thalas, it seems, who’s actually thinking about the day we get to finally put them down for good!”

“Dying of frostbite won’t bring anyone back.”

“Then what else am I supposed to do?!” She all but screamed.

“Kali and I have been trying to plan a Winter’s Veil celebration to honor mother.”

All at once the anger seemed to melt from Alleria’s face, replaced with sorrow as she let out a sigh. “Exactly. Kali and you. You have Kalina, Vereesa has you, and who do I have?”

“You have us.” Sylvanas answered as if it hurt to have to say it directly. “You’ve always had us.”

Alleria looked back up at the house, almost wistfully. Sylvanas followed her gaze, and was relieved to see Kalina pretending to stare at the ocean from her perch on the balcony.

“You’re not him.” She spoke, before leveling her gaze back at Sylvanas as her eyes seemed to focus once more. “Thank you. For coming out here and bringing me your cloak. I genuinely mean that.”

Sylvanas gave a half smile. “It’s what sisters are for.”

Taking the cloak, Alleria nodded. “Yeah, you’re right. I’ll... I’ll be in soon, just let me finish up here.”

“Take all the time you need.” Sylvanas said, before turning around and starting back across the beach.

Winter’s Veil that year turned out to be a rather private affair. With no way to set up a large party like the kind Lireesa would’ve wanted, and no real will to do so after how much of a pain working with the magisters had been during the war, it’d ultimately decided to just put together a small celebration for the four of them.

And so it was that the morning of, Alleria and Sylvanas went out on a wild hunt together to gather enough meat to make a Winter’s Veil dinner fit for a group of rangers that included Sylvanas, meaning several groups of rangers, while Kalina and Vereesa - the two cooks of the group - manned the kitchen, each wearing a red and white Winter’s Veil hat.

Throughout the day, one or the other of the pair of hunters would occasionally return bearing small to midsized animals for use in making smaller dishes from, Kalina and Sylvanas sharing a kiss each time the blonde was the one carrying it in. It was around midday when the two sisters returned together, dragging in with them the corpse of a heavyset boar with a pair of arrow wounds in its shoulder, the shots landing practically on top of each other.

The rest of the afternoon for the kitchen team became dedicated to preparing the beast as the main course of their Winter’s Veil dinner while Sylvanas and Alleria got cleaned off and put away their cold weather attire.
It was several hours into such preparation that Kalina and Vereesa were in the midst of basting the boar to put it back in the oven, when the former’s vision was suddenly covered from behind by a pair of soft fingers.

“Behind you.” Came the smug whisper in her ear, eliciting a short laugh as Kalina turned around to face Sylvanas, only for time - and her breathing - to suddenly stop.

There Sylvanas stood, wearing the same smirk as ever, in a maroon off shoulder dress with a white trim around the bottom that accentuated her shape flawlessly. In line with those two colors, her lips were colored with an almost entrancing ombre, starting white at the tips and transitioning to the same shade of red as her dress, at the middle. Most spectacular though were her eyes. White and red blended into each other in her eye shadow, mixed with a healthy dose of glitter, that - even when they were closed - made the blonde’s eyes impossible to not get lost in.

As always, she was a goddess.

“Sooo, how do I look?” She asked, and Kalina realized that she’d been staring for some time now.

“I…” The girl trailed off, struggling to come up with words to adequately describe the level of ‘good’ that was occurring here.

Sylvanas’ smirk grew a fraction. “You…?”

Kalina’s mouth just sort of gaped as even the word ‘I’ left her.

Sylvanas looked at Vereesa with a chuckle. “I think I broke her this year.”

At that, Kalina snapped back to cognition. “I… wanna kiss you… so, so much right now. But I also don’t wanna ruin your makeup.”

At that the woman burst into laughter, before stopping short with a sudden, authoritative “Come here.”

Before Kalina had even registered the immediate shift, Sylvanas’ lips crashed into hers, her tongue immediately laying siege to the girl’s mouth as said girl rushed to keep up, her own tongue now slipping gently into Sylvanas’ mouth as the two began their soft, warm dance.

“Ahem.” Came Vereesa’s voice from behind, causing the pair to freeze, before disengaging.

“Sorry.” A red faced Kalina squeaked.

The dinner itself was probably the warmest and most cheerful Windrunner Spire had been since everyone had returned to it. Laughter and storytelling dominated the setting as the atrocities of the war were all but pushed aside in favor of letting out a collective breath no one had really realized they’d been holding in.

After everyone had eaten their fill, the four of them sat around the fire with heavy mugs of cocoa and began exchanging and unwrapping gifts, one at a time. Before long, it was time for Sylvanas and Kalina to exchange theirs.

As Sylvanas took a single step towards the girl, she held out a medium sized parcel wrapped in shiny red paper with a bow to match.

“Open it!” She prompted in an excited whisper.
A wide grin on her face, Kalina tore open the crimson wrappings in a gleeful flurry, finding herself face to face with a quiver of arrows. Granted, these weren’t just ordinary arrows. They held a faint, off green glow to them, and felt noticeably heavier than the standard issue.

“Thorium arrows.” Sylvanas proclaimed with a tinge of pride. “Densest material on the market. They can move through even the toughest steel like butter.” The woman’s eyes visibly hardened in a way Kalina felt like only she noticed at the words ‘even the toughest steel’.

The implication was clear.

“I love it.” Kalina answered, setting the quiver off to the side and embracing the blonde in a fierce hug.

It was an amazing gift. Thorium weapons were incredibly rare and expensive. Only a couple of blacksmiths in all of Quel’thalas were actually proficient enough to work with the metal, and given the rarity and high value of the material itself, they certainly didn’t keep it on hand.

As Kalina let go, she picked up her own present from where it lay under the nearby tree. “This is for you.” She spoke with a touch of perhaps bashfulness to her tone as she held it out.

Sylvanas took it with a soft, warm grin. Before she could undo the wrappings, however, Kalina placed a gentle hand on her arm.

“But it’s only for opening when we’re alone.” Her own smile widened.

Alleria covered her mouth firmly to suppress a knowing snicker, something she failed spectacularly at, while Vereesa’s face simply turned a deep shade of red.

Sylvanas nodded. “I love it already.”

It was at that point that Alleria gave up, bursting into raucous laughter as she fell back onto a nearby couch.

It wasn’t until they’d adjourned to Sylvanas’ bedroom for the night that the present came up again. As the door closed, Sylvanas held it up with a suggestive smirk, making an overdramatic show of trying to discern what was inside.

“Wonder what could be in here. It wouldn’t happen to be something you acquired from a very certain shop in Silvermoon, would it?”

Kalina giggled. “Open it and see!”

At that, the blonde ever so slowly undid the wrapping paper, only to adopt a puzzled expression as her eyes scanned over the tiny, liquid-filled bottle in her hand along with, tied to it by a length of twine, a folded piece of parchment.

“It’s…” Kalina began, anxiety overtaking her as the suggestive pretense fell apart and she grabbed one arm with the other, looking away. “It’s the recipe for my paralytic…”

Sylvanas continued staring down at the bottle bundle. “The recipe for your…” her gaze snapped back to the girl. “You’re kidding.”

Kalina gripped her arm tighter, now looking at the floor. “It’s just, well, I might not be around forever, and… since I’m always the one who takes the shots that you don’t want to… well, I thought you should at least still have the option after I’m gone.”
She felt Sylvanas’ hands gently place themselves on her shoulders, causing her to look up again just as she was pulled close into the woman’s chest.

“I love it. I love you. And you’re always going to be around, okay?”

Kalina nodded briskly before burying her face in Sylvanas’ body and letting the anxiety of a moment ago melt away.

That night, however, she found herself unable to find sleep, on account of a single question buzzing around in her head like an insect. Her lover had given her thorium arrows for Winter’s Veil with the implication that they were to be used against the Royal Guard. Did that mean things escalating?

No, she supposed. The Royal Guard was just as controlling and threatening as it always was. It was just now they were entertaining the possibility of fighting back. But was that in and of itself escalation, or could it be considered the opposite since it meant the knife wasn’t pressed as tightly to Kalina’s neck?

Deciding she probably just needed some fresh air to distract herself, she quietly unsnaked her arms from around Sylvanas’ and got out of bed.

A few minutes later, she found herself sitting outside as the snow continued to fall, perched on a branch at the very top of one of the trees a ways down the path to the spire. The top of a tree certainly wasn’t her favorite place to get some thinking done, but considering the possibility of ice and the chill of the air as she got higher up, it was much safer to do that than to climb somewhere high up and exciting.

It was there, sitting in the tree and looking at the stars, that Kalina noticed the sound of a horse being led along coming from below. She looked down to see Alleria leading it along. Slung over it was the same large pack she’d first returned home with at the beginning of their leave.

Swiftly descending from her perch, Kalina’s feet hit the ground silently and she began to stroll up to behind the eldest Windrunner, her feet still not making a sound against the hard earth.

“Not a fan of goodbyes, I take it?” She spoke aloud as she got close, causing the woman to instinctively whirl around and draw her bow, before relaxing as she recognized the snow-haired girl in the moonlight.

“I couldn’t stay here.” She answered with a deep breath “Everything here feels wrong, and I think there’s someone down south I need to be with, for a bit. I didn’t exactly wanna desert my sisters for Winter’s Veil, though, so I came back here, but this place… it isn’t the same.”

Kalina simply “I understand.”

“Yeah.” Alleria shrugged. “So, see you later. Take care of Lady Moon for me while I’m gone, okay?”

At that the girl let out a laugh. “I’ll do my best.”

Without another word, Alleria mounted her horse and was gone a minute later. Deciding now was as good a time as any to have another go at getting some sleep, Kalina turned around and started back up the path toward Windrunner Spire.
Chapter 42

Chapter Notes

Sorry this got uploaded so late in the day! It's midterms season so I've been kind of exhausted and passed out a lot. Anyway, it's up now, so I hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Even the cold air blowing in from the balcony couldn’t quench the heat that’d come to dominate the dark bedroom as, for what was definitely not the first time that night, Kalina broke the silence by letting out a shaky noise halfway between a moan and a scream, while every muscle in her body contracted and she found herself forced to grab hold of the sheets beneath her in order to maintain some semblance of stability, before devolving into helpless spasms as she lost all control and let out an absolute scream of ecstasy, which was thankfully suppressed by Sylvanas’ hand clapping over her mouth. There was still a chance of Vereesa being asleep, after all.

As the climax came to finish, all the tension in the girl’s muscles began to gradually release. It was at that point that the woman let go of her mouth, allowing her to draw in a cool breath of air, before limply settling back into the pillow her head was resting on.

She only barely registered the sensation of Sylvanas’ tongue leaving her as the blonde lifted her own head up, before climbing her way up the bed to where she was now face to face above the girl, before planting a gentle kiss on her pouty lips and rolling over to lie next to her.

“Hey,” Sylvanas started as she settled in beside the girl, interrupting the quiet rhythm of panting and fabric shuffling that’d come to dominate the room. “Before we go again, there’s actually something I need to ask you.”

Kalina nodded twice. “Sure thing.” She answered breathily as she rolled onto her side to face the woman that’d just made her kick and squirm like a virgin.

“Do you think you’d be more effective in battle if you knew a bit of magic?”

She smiled. “It’s still vacation, y’know.”

Sylvanas returned the grin far more sincerely. “I know, but it’s something to think about. While you were gone, I talked with some of the mages, and they have a few spells I think you could really put to use.”

She sat up a little. “Wait, they don’t know, right?” A hand from Sylvanas on her chest swiftly pushed her back down.

“You didn’t come up, don’t worry.”

She relaxed. “So what kind of magic did you have I mind then?”

“Whatever you think could make you perform better.” Sylvanas shrugged.

The girl smiled again. “Now I feel like I’ve been doing a bad job so far.”
That earned her a chuckle. “Just think about it?”

Now it was her turn to shrug. “It’s worth a shot, I suppose.”

“Thank you.” Sylvanas learned in and planted another soft kiss on the girl’s lips, before seizing her shoulders with each hand and pinning her back against the bed, aggressively getting to her knees and straddling Kalina’s face before she could so much as let out a squeak. “Now then,” she smirked as she sat triumphantly atop the helpless girl. “I believe it’s your turn.”

While most of Silvermoon was, as ever, Kalina’s least favorite place in Quel’thalas, a notable exception to that unofficial stance was the Ranger Lodge in Farstriders’ Square. While, granted, it certainly held the same posh, pompous atmosphere as the rest of the city, it was special in that - unlike even the rest of Silvermoon’s military district - it was secluded from the public eye, meaning she and every other ranger there could use the space as a place to take a deep breath, let the fake smiles fall, and speak just a bit more honestly, before forcing themselves to venture back out into the ornate wasteland of vapidity and backhandedness that was the crown jewel of Quel’thalas.

Luckily for Kalina, however, the ranger-general’s office was there, meaning her own reprieve from the city outside lasted far longer than that of most of her comrades. Indeed, her entire work duties largely consisted of remaining in this building, by Sylvanas’ side or occasionally helping her mitigate the steady flow of visitors by handling some of the less pressing concerns in the woman’s stead.

It was for that reason that she now stood in the central training room of the lodge, overseeing a delivery of blunderbusses that the Dwarves had sent up their way both as a gesture of good faith in their newfound Alliance, and as a not so subtle attempt to try convincing them to see the merits of gunpowder over bows and arrows, the way the rest of the Alliance already had.

“I’m just saying, we should give it some thought.” Nathanos spoke with crossed arms, having been spending the past ten minutes trying to make the case for the weapons’ effectiveness.

Because of his excellent performance during the war both in combat and in terms of planning advice, coupled with the fact that as a human giving him an officer position had the potential to go very poorly, Nathanos had - like Kalina - been pulled out of regular service, in his case in favor of serving as an advisor to the ranger-general on any and all military matters where his abilities might prove useful.

“And all I’m saying is, the war we just fought is the exception rather than the norm. Even you’ve been a ranger long enough to know that we’re meant to operate quickly and quietly. Gunpowder is neither of those things.”

“Maybe the face of war is changing, have you considered that?” He spread his hands.

“And if it is changing, then adapting for a war like the one we just fought would require a massive overhaul of our entire doctrine, not an awkward half measure that’d leave us effective at neither the last war nor anything before that.”

They were interrupted by a small tap on each of their shoulders, prompting them to turn around to see a grinning Sylvanas standing there, looking almost intentionally nonchalant.

“Rangers.”

They both immediately stiffened into a crisp salute and a simultaneous “Ma’am!”, which managed to make the blonde chuckle softly.
“At ease.”

With that they relaxed, returning to their previous positions - Nathanos with his arms crossed and Kalina with one hand on her hip.

“Kali.” Sylvanas turned to the girl, her lips pursed in an expression of restrained excitement. “Guess who just arrived.”

Because Kalina was still a ranger, spending decades studying magic full time was largely out of the question. Luckily, however, the magisters had been kind enough to agree to send someone to give her the main points she needed to know.

“My tutor?” She asked with a small grin.

Sylvanas gave a vigorous nod as her face split into a full beam. Truth be told, the prospect of her learning magic seemed to excite her lover far more than it excited she herself. All the same though, as long as it made Sylvanas happy, Kalina was more than thrilled to go along with it; and it did, so she did.

With that, the blonde’s hand shot out and took ahold of hers, before she began leading her along at a short jog, almost as though they were kids again, leading each other around to show each other the best new spots to play hide and seek.

It was about a minute later that they reached the door to Sylvanas’ office.

“Kali Dawnblade.” The woman began as they stopped outside the entrance to the room. “May I present your new tutor…” She took hold of the door. “Lord Veric Proudsong!”

With that, she swung the door open, revealing the blond mage standing there with an absolutely wolfish grin.

All at once, Kalina’s heart froze in her chest, along with every other muscle in her body, as she suddenly found herself frozen there in absolute terror. She hadn’t known his name until this exact moment, but she certainly remembered his face.

“Lady Kalina.” He began, his smile widening just slightly as he took in her reaction. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

‘It’s a pleasure to meet you’. The words echoed in her head.

‘Okay. She told herself ’Just... breathe. you don’t know each other.’

She continued to stand there, perfectly still, as though she might shatter at any moment.

‘Just breathe.’

This couldn’t be happening. Surely she’d wake up any minute now and bury her face in her general’s chest and it’d all be over.

‘By the Sunwell, just fucking breathe!’

Slowly, her lips contorted into what was possibly the most forced smile to ever grace Silvermoon City - which was quite a high bar all things considered - as she came to the quietly terrifying realization that this was not, in fact, a dream, and she was very much conscious.

“Lord Veric. It’s a pleasure to meet you as well.” She began in a silky tone, putting one foot in front
of the other as she forced herself to approach him.

His gaze was absolutely predatory. No, it was far more sadistic than that. It was downright vicious, like that of a demon that had a Kaldorei cornered. He gave her a brief nod. A polite idiosyncrasy to the casual observer, but to Kalina the message was clear:

‘Good girl.’

Her heart rate quickened.

“Alright then, no point in wasting any time, is there? Let’s get started, while we still have some daylight to burn.” He stepped towards her.

“Actually, magister,” Sylvanas interrupted, causing Kalina to visibly exhale in relief as the woman placed a hand on the mage’s chest to stop him. “I was planning to have a quick word with Kali before you two began, if that’s alright.”

He shrugged. “Sure, take as long as you need. I’ll be hanging around outside when you’re ready.”

With that, he strode out of the room, the pair watching him go. Only when the door was closed did Sylvanas turn back to face the terrified girl.

“Alright, tell me what’s wrong.”

She let out another exhale, before beginning to hyperventilate. This was it, she was alone with Sylvanas, she could say whatever she needed to, and then she never had to see Veric Proudsong again.

No, she stopped herself. She was being willfully naive if she thought there was any hope of it actually being that simple. This was Silvermoon City. Worse yet, it was the ranger-general’s office. The chances that the Royal Guard didn’t have eyes and ears here, or anywhere else for that matter, were absolutely nonexistent.

She couldn’t tell Sylvanas, she realized with a dawning sense of newfound terror. Her protector, her one lifeline amidst everything, the closest feeling she had to the word ‘home’, was now cut off to her.

“Nothing.” She forced another, more intimate smile. “Just nervous is all.”

“Kali.” Sylvanas placed a gentle hand on each of the girl’s shoulders. “You’re shaking.”

Was she? She glanced down at herself. She was.

“Really, it’s just anxiety, is all. I’ll be fine.”

“I can ask them to send someone else if Lord Veric-”

“I’m fine!” Kalina cut her off sharply, far more forcefully than she had intended. At Sylvanas’ look of hurt, she mentally kicked herself. “I’m sorry. Look, just… I promise, it’s nothing.”

‘Liar.’

Something in Sylvanas’ expression hardened as the woman gave a thoughtful nod in response.

“Alright. If you say so. Just... remember, I’m here.”

She had to go now she knew. If she stayed in that room with Sylvanas any longer, at that moment, there’d be nothing she could do to keep from breaking down and telling her everything.
It was for that reason Kalina wasted no time in breaking away from the blonde’s grip, even as every fibre of her being shrieked for her to stay there and tell her lover the truth. “I probably shouldn’t keep him waiting.”

She could feel Sylvanas’ eyes on her as she left.

“What are you doing here?” Venom practically dripped from Kalina’s lips as she asked the question, her terror having given way to an overwhelming urge to strangle her new tutor once she’d realized she wouldn’t be able to get away from him.

They were standing in an empty office that’d been set aside for Kalina to learn and practice in. It wasn’t a particularly large room by any means, but for studying and note taking, it was plenty.

Veric, for his part, spread his arms in a gesture of faux innocence. “Why, I’m simply here to teach a beautiful young lady some ma-“

“Don’t you dare call me beautiful!” She spat.

He smirked. “And what are you gonna do to stop me?”

At that she didn’t answer.

“I’m telling the truth, my dear. I’m just here to help you learn a few spells to improve your effectiveness in battle, just as the ranger-general asked.”

Kalina scoffed. “She asked for you, specifically?”

“No, but she didn’t ask for anyone specific either, and what better way for the crown to keep an eye on its asset, and any possible ways she might try something she’d regret, than to have a trusted officer be the one teaching her?”

“I seem to remember Avina saying something about keeping you at bay.”

He raised his right hand. “I’m not to harm a hair on your head, per her orders.”

Kalina bit the inside of her mouth as she looked off to the side in thought. She didn’t trust the lieutenant at all, but if she was the one keeping him on a leash, she trusted that she’d keep him that way.

Leveling her gaze back up at him, she sighed. “Let’s just get this over with so we never have to see each other again.”

“That’s the spirit, sweetheart.”

As it turned out, learning actual spells required a solid foundation in magical theory to do competently, which meant an extensive and intense build up in class to actually being able to cast anything of use. And so it was that after about six intense hours of relentless drilling on the fundamentals of such, Kalina left that day feeling marginally less furious, if only due to the mental exhaustion sapping all other energy from her.

It was on the third day of such training that the long class hours and the heavy studyload she’d been assigned outside of class began to wear on her. She was about halfway through listening to Veric’s review of ley lines when she began to feel her eyelids growing heavy and her attention slipping to other matters.
It couldn’t hurt to rest her eyes, even for just a few seconds. She’d been working, training, and studying nonstop for the past few days. She could still listen to the lesson.

It took maybe ten seconds for her to fall asleep.

She was almost immediately woken, however, by the sudden feeling of a hand wrapping itself around her throat as she was lifted into the air, a thumb gently pressing down on her windpipe.

“Sorry to wake you, but you mind telling me what happens when a ley line is blocked?”

She went for her dagger, only for Veric to light a fire in his other hand, which he proceeded to hold dangerously close to her face. “Try it and I won’t have to call you beautiful anymore.”

Her hand released the hilt of the blade immediately. Personal vanity aside, there were only two metrics by which social mobility could be measured in Silvermoon: beauty and magical power. The threat of disfigurement was far more than just a personal threat, it was a sociopolitical one as well.

His thumb continued to press down, now much harder than it had been a second ago. “Now would you mind answering the question? What happens when a ley line is blocked?”

“I…” Kalina tried to speak with what little air she had left as her head pounded and she began to feel herself suffocating. “Ley fissure…”

All at once the flame went out and the hand around her throat released her, letting her drop to the ground unceremoniously as she began gasping for air.

“Good. Now, where were we?” He asked as he looked back down at the textbook.

“What in the Sunwell was that?!” She shouted up at him as she found her breath again.

“You’ll have to fill me in on what you mean.”

“I thought Avina told you not to hurt me!”

Veric smiled again. “Mm. I see the misconception.” He held up a finger. “She said not to harm a hair on your head. She didn’t say anything about the rest of you. Now you wanna like to get back to learning, or would you prefer something more decisive?”

Tears of rage welled in her eyes as she spoke her next word through gritted teeth. “Learning.”

“Glad you’re finally ready to learn, then.”

She didn’t fall asleep in class again after that.

It was almost two months of daily study before Veric deemed Kalina ready to try her first spell. On the morning of the last lesson before the exam, the girl sat in the room alone, waiting for the mage to arrive. She’d long since learned to be early for class, in a similar manner to how she’d learned not to fall asleep.

The sound of the door opening gave her just enough warning to look sharp as the teacher she had only found new ways to loathe in the time they’d been together strode into the room, a pastry that Kalina recognized as being from a nearby bakery held in one hand.

“Sorry I’m late, they were about to run out of turnovers.” He held up the pastry, before taking a bite of it. “You’re probably expecting a review today for tomorrow’s exam, but I actually have a better
idea for how to make sure you’re prepared.”

At Kalina’s look of skepticism, he continued.

“We’re taking a field trip.”

And so it was that that afternoon, the pair strode across the bridge to the massive floating network of platforms and buildings suspended over a wide river that made up Falthrien Academy, one of the most elite magic schools in all of Quel’thalas.

As they stepped onto the academy’s grounds, or lack thereof, Kalina could see a number of looks, some friendly, others dirty being cast her way. It couldn’t be helped, she supposed. Rangers and mages were never the best of friends, and she was walking into their academy dressed in full gear.

It wasn’t long before they reached one of the higher up classrooms, open on all sides to the air around it, where, alongside them, students were beginning to file in and take their seats on the benches facing the front, while the pair took a standing position at the back of the class.

After maybe 10 minutes of waiting, the mage teaching the class arrived, striding down the aisle between the seats to the front of the class before turning around to address the group of students.

“Alright everyone, let’s all quiet down and get started.” He spoke gently, his voice magically carrying across the audience and causing all chatter to quickly cease as every prospective mage in the room - or at least, what counted as a room - turned their attention to the front.

The professor continued. “Today we actually have a special treat for you. A former colleague of mine, Lord Veric Proudsong, has kindly offered the use of one of the Magisters’ community service volunteers.”

Kalina’s eyes widened in horror, and she turned to look at her teacher only to see him standing there in that same prideful yet nonchalant manner he always did, bowing his head once to the class in a gesture accepting the acknowledgement.

“Now,” the instructor continued. “I trust you all did the last night’s reading on the misuse of certain spells and the regulations surrounding them. So today, I thought a demonstration would be helpful to illustrate why we have such regulations, and why specifically they’re enforced so tightly.” He gestured to the blond. “Lord Veric, if you would.”

“Sure thing.” Veric’s eyes flashed with the blue and purple glow of the arcane as he raised his hand into the air. A horizontal portal split the air above a section of the front of the class, out of which fell a circular stone platform along with, shackled to it by all four limbs, and emaciated girl covered in scars, burn marks, and tattooed runes all across her body.

Kalina’s eyes widened in horror for the second time that day as recognition ignited itself like a flame in her mind. She remembered the girl. More specifically, she remembered her hair. A deep, beautiful shade of cobalt, now matted with blood.

“Lira…” she barely mouthed the name of the shopkeeper she’d acquired most of her reagents from back before and while she was the Canary. It was she that had originally put her in contact with Lysenna, thereby starting the whole chain of events that led to where she was now. It was she that’d given her that first step she’d needed on the road to freedom.

“04261 here is going to help us today by demonstrating why arcane magic is so strictly regulated.”

The terrified girl’s eyes met hers, and she saw recognition dawn in them. “Ka-“ before she could get
out more than a syllable, however, she was silenced with a quick wave of the professor’s hand.

“I’m sorry, 04261, but this will have to be a silent demonstration. I’m sure it’s no trouble.”

Lira tried to move her lips, only to break down into silent weeping as no sound came out. She wasn’t the first test subject Kalina had been made to watch, nor was she the first she knew personally, but that didn’t keep it from twisting inside her any less. She could only imagine what the magisters had put the girl through.

The professor, meanwhile, produced a scroll bound in red ribbon from a pocket in his robes, which he gently unfurled and held it out to the cobalt haired girl.

“I do have a treat for you as well, 04261.” He spoke with a friendly smile as she took the piece of parchment in a shaking hand. “That treat is actually your freedom. All you need to do is perform the spell as written for the class, and you’ll be free of those chains in no time.”

She didn’t even seem to question it as she took the piece of parchment and, almost unthinkingly, began moving her lips, mouthing the long incantation needed to do the spell without any training, before suddenly being cut off as she all but disappear in a flash of blue and purple, only to reappear in place almost instantaneously.

That swiftly proved to be a horrible thing, as the shackles that had just a moment ago been clamped around her wrists now fused with her body, one melding with her left hand, then other with what passed for her thigh; while her feet had fused with the rock beneath them, leaving her rooted in place.

Her face contorted into an agonized expression, mouth wide open, and Kalina realized she was trying to scream as she began to shake and thrash, as if trying to loosen the bonds that’d now become a permanent part of her.

“This, students, is why it’s so important to have proper regulation for the use of arcane magic, so that those who aren’t trained or aren’t qualified don’t accidentally hurt themselves or those around them.”

Lira’s hand and leg began to turn an off purple color as the iron now phased into her flesh cut off the flow of blood, causing them to slowly begin to die.

“Now then, while we still have 04682 or whatever it was, here, I do have another treat for you, class.”

The students, for their part, seemed absolutely indifferent to the horror that was going on before them. Kalina could even see a few whispering jokes and pointing at the now sobbing Lira, as she stared at the professor, silently begging through tears.

“As most of you know, I had the honor of fighting for Quel’thalas against the Horde during the recent war, and while fel magic is still a banned practice for good reason, I was nonetheless allowed a small bring back for a class demonstration like this one.”

This time, he produced a pair of gloves from his robe which he quickly donned; along with a small key, which he then inserted into a heavy lockbox sitting on a nearby table.

Kalina had never seen the fel up close. Even in Lysenna’s gang, anything fel related was absolutely forbidden. If one were caught practicing it, it didn’t matter who they were, the family wouldn’t bother waiting to plan it so that it looked like an accident or something, they’d just deal with the offender then and there and figure it out afterwards; or so she’d been told.

So it was an almost nightmarish feeling that settled in her stomach as the heavy box was openers to
reveal a small, glowing green crystal fragment.

She clearly wasn’t the only one set on edge by the revelation, either, and more than a few students actually got out of their seats and stepped back at the sight of the Legion’s signature magic.

“Now, if a living creature ingests enough of the fel, it becomes corrupted by it, and thus becomes a demon. But if it stops short of that goal… well, 04936 can show you.”

She could see Lira now leaning as far away from the crystal as possible as she desperately thrashed against the chains that held her, mouthing a word Kalina recognized as ‘please’ over and over as the professor approached.

Kalina’s hand went for her blade, only for Veric’s hand to wrap around her wrist, stopping her cold as she felt it heat up just enough to give her the warning.

And so it was that she stood there and watched as Lira’s mouth was covered by the hand forcing the crystal into it, while the other held her nose to force her to swallow.

The moment she did, the effect was immediate. Her skin began to wrinkle and turn an unsettling shade of grey as her eyes bulged out of their sockets and turned a shade of glowing green to match the crystal she had just ingested, while her hair began to fall out in large clumps, scattering to the wind and obliterating the most striking feature Kalina had remembered her by.

Her skin quickly began to peel off as black ichor suddenly poured forth from her lips, causing her to hunch over in agony while her still intact hand deformed into a claw like shape.

The display went on for at least a few minutes, before what had been Lira settled into its new form, devoid of anything but its most feral instincts as it now pulled against its chains again, but this time by trying to lunge towards the students.

“That’s more than enough, 04321. Veric?”

As if he’d been waiting for the request, Veric immediately raised his hand, causing another portal to open beneath the test subject, which she and her shackles promptly disappeared through once more.

“Thank you.”

The rest of the class went by almost mundanely by comparison, as the professor boredly droned on about the history of magical regulation as though he hadn’t just forced the fel upon a fellow Quel’dorei.

Kalina, for her part, didn’t bother even putting in the appearance of listening, all her effort instead going towards holding herself together.

As villainous of a figure as she may have been to the majority of Quel’thallas, even she still had a line, and everything about what she had just seen had violated that line to a level she’d scarcely dreamt of.

After another half hour, the class mercifully ended, and the students filed out one by one, until it was only Kalina and the man she despised having to call her teacher, once more.

Once she was sure they were gone, she let go of any attempt to hold herself together, her knees buckling under her and causing her to drop to all fours, looking out over the edge of the platform down at the river below. Before she could even think of a word to articulate what she was feeling, or even just what she’d been forced to witness, she began vomiting uncontrollably over the edge, tears
now streaming down her face.

Suddenly there was the feeling of a boot pressed down on her back, and before she could react, she was forced down by it to where more than half her body hung out over the edge, only kept from tumbling over and into the river below by the foot on her back.

“The very last assignment I ever wanted” Veric sneered above her. “was to be stuck babysitting an enemy of the crown while she learned a host of new ways to betray her kingdom someday.”

Kalina’s arms frantically searched for purchase on the edge of the platform.

“But I took it anyway ‘cus surveillance is part of what being Royal Guard is all about.” He paused. “What I didn’t sign up for…” he pushed her just an inch further out. “Was to watch you and that whore you call a general dance around each other like you don’t think we can see your filthy perversion on full display. I didn’t sign up to watch the pair of you happily wave around your betrayal of Quel’thalas and, more specifically, of the crown’s orders.” He pushed her out another inch. “But hey, I’m merciful, and more importantly, I’m a good teacher, so here’s my offer. You pass your exam with flying colors tomorrow, or I’ll have no problem letting Avina know exactly what you and the bitch you call a general have been getting up to when you think you’re alone.” He leaned in closer. “And trust me, princess, when she finds out, I’ll make sure what you just saw pales in comparison to what’ll happen to you.”

She felt a hand take her by the back of her collar, before yanking her away from the edge and leaving her to sprawl out on the hard surface.

“Don’t be late tomorrow, or I’ll fail you then and there. Class dismissed.”

Kalina lay staring up at the ceiling as the sound of Veric’s footsteps steadily grew more and more distant, until she was relatively alone.

Eventually, she sat up. Her survival - no, she wished it was her survival - her ability to not end up like Lira depended on what she did in the next 12 hours or so. For a moment, she considered putting a thorium arrow through him while he wasn't expecting it. Or, better yet, going to Sylvanas and telling her everything while the blonde held her and let her cry her eyes out.

But she couldn't, she knew. The former would get her killed, and the latter would get them both killed. There was only one thing she could do now to ensure her survival.

Shakily getting to her feet, she started off back down the stairs that led to the academy's exit. If she wanted to have any hope of still being herself a week from now, she didn't have a second to waste. With that in mind, her polite walk quickly broke into a sprint as she bolted to grab her books and start cramming while she still could.

Chapter End Notes

Okay so fun story. While I'm finishing this chapter, my friend's like "Hey you wanna play another game of Monster Prom?" And I'm like "I can't, I have to get this chapter submitted." and he's like "Where do you post your work" and of course I don't want him finding my angsty OC x Sylvanas shipfic, so I just say "...Nowhere." And he's like "Then how do you submit it." "The mail." "Then who are you sending it to?" And I'm just on the spot like "... The cast of Riverdale. It's not Riverdale fanfiction, mind, I just
want to make them suffer." and he's like "Do you even watch Riverdale?" And I'm like
"No but they butchered my favorite song from Heathers so now they shall be forced to
languish for all eternity." So now my friend sincerely believes that I mail the cast of
Riverdale Batman x Penguin fanfiction on a weekly basis.
Hey! Sorry I've been away for a bit, had an emergency to attend to that kinda threw my schedule for a ride. But I'm back now, and here's an extra long chapter to make up for lost time!

It was the middle of the night when Sylvanas was cruelly awoken by the sound of parchment furiously rustling just a few feet behind her. As her eyes reluctantly opened, she gave a soft exhale in memoriam for the lovely food dream she’d been having, before forcing herself to sit up in her bed. Turning around to face the source of the noise, her gaze fell upon a disheveled Kalina hunched over near the window, surrounded by an absolute mess of papers and books.

She wasn’t surprised. Quite the contrary, she’d expected the younger elf to be the source. It certainly wasn’t the first time she’d awoken to find her still up and studying since her magical studies had begun. Even so, though, she’d never seemed as... obsessive as she currently looked, with that trait only becoming magnified the longer Sylvanas took in the scene.

“Kaliiii.” She called out sleepily to her girlfriend as she waved an arm in her general direction. “Come to beeeeed.”

Sylvanas opened her eyes a bit wider. Something was off. She hadn’t heard any bad news on Kalina’s studies with Veric. On the contrary, he’d had only good things to report of her progress as of yet. “You can study in the morning. Come sleep.”

Kalina didn’t look up at her this time. “Can’t. Must study.”

She gently sighed. She and Kalina had done a lot of things for each other in their time together, but what she was about to do was perhaps the most undeniable expression of love she could offer.

Swinging her legs out from under the blankets, the blonde let go of the bedspread as she got up and out of bed.

Strolling over to where the girl was still bent over, she knelt down and gently draped her arms over her shoulders from behind, leaning into her as she did so and taking in the green apple scent of her hair.

“Come on.” Sylvanas tugged softly. “You’ll have plenty of time to study in the morning. I need my steward at her best, after all.”

“I can’t!” Kalina exclaimed far more loudly this time, her voice cracking. There was fear in her voice, Sylvanas realized. “I can’t. Please…”

She released her embrace, instead putting her arms gently on Kalina’s shoulders and turning her around to face her. Before the girl could pull away or try to return to her studying again, one of the woman’s hands shot out and grabbed her tightly by the chin.

“Alright, what’s going on?”
The smaller elf pulled weakly against the grip, but with her jaw held in such a compromising manner, there wasn’t much she could do.

“Please…” She repeated, and Sylvanas could see her eyes watering amidst the darkness. “I have an exam tomorrow. I just need to keep studying so I-” She stopped herself.

“So you what?” Sylvanas’ tone was direct and unyielding.

Kalina’s eyes averted her gaze as a tear rolled down her cheek. “Just so I pass...” Her breathing quickened into hyperventilation. “I need to keep studying!”

The grip tightened. “No. This is not just test anxiety. Every time I’ve seen you around Veric, you’ve either looked at him with loathing or terror. Tell me now what’s going on.”

“Please-”

“That’s an order, ranger.”

It was at that point that Kalina descended into quiet sobs as her entire body shook, and the tensed, hypervigilant state she’d held a moment ago gave way to defeat. Recognizing that the stick was no longer needed, Sylvanas let go of her girlfriend’s face and gently pulled her in closer, wrapping her arms around her as she did so.

Kalina, for her part, simply accepted the hug, burying her face in the crook of Sylvanas’ neck.


Kalina sucked in a breath to speak, seeming to choke up for a moment before finally finding her footing. “V…” She broke down into tears once more. “Veric’s… Royal Guard…”

Sylvanas didn’t say anything as she held her. It was better to let her go at her own pace here.

The snow haired elf took a moment to pull herself together, before continuing. “A few days before they let me go, he came into my room with a pair of guards, and made them…” she swallowed. “He made them hold me down while he… he tore off my clothes and he-“

“I’m going to kill him.” Sylvanas cut her off matter of factly as she let go and stood up. “Let me borrow your thorium.”

“No!” Kalina stood likewise and grabbed hold of Sylvanas’ arm frantically. “If anything happens to him, they’ll come down on me in a heartbeat.”

Sylvanas whirled to face her, her features now a mask of rage as she all but shouted “He assaulted you! What else would you have me do?”

“Just… we’ll think of something, but right now the important point is surviving tomorrow’s exam.”

“How is that more important th-“

Kalina locked eyes with her. “Because if I don’t do perfectly tomorrow, he’ll have me forced into community service.”

“He’ll what?!“

It was at that point that Kalina recounted everything that’d happened between herself and the
cockroach masquerading as a Quel’dorei by the name of Veric, starting from when he’d first arrived to teach her and ending with the display she’d been shown the previous afternoon.

“... I’m going to kill him.” Sylvanas repeated with a renewed conviction as she started towards her bow again, only to be pulled back again by the pair of petite hands on her upper arm.

“Please. Just wait. We’ll figure out how to kill him, but just running in there isn’t the solution. Take it from the person who’s entire job it was to kill specific people.”

Sylvanas felt like she’d been gut punched. The last thing she liked hearing about was a reminder of Kalina’s past, of how badly their dreams had been mangled and of the person she’d been turned into; worst of all, of how they’d had to fight each other.

“I…” she closed her eyes. “Fine. Then what do you suggest we do in the meantime?”

“We wait for an opportunity.”

Sylvanas sighed. That was perhaps the most non-answer she could’ve received. Still, Kalina was right. Assassination was her realm. “Alright, but I’m assigning a few rangers to keep near you in case he tries anything.”

Not every ranger, or even the majority of rangers, would likely refuse an order from a member of the Royal Guard - especially now that the majority of rangers were new blood. But even so, Sylvanas knew enough veterans with unwavering loyalty to at least put together a basic protection detail. She was not going to lose Kalina again.

“That’ll be plenty.” The snow haired girl smiled up at her. It wasn’t a convincing look, but Sylvanas wasn’t going to say that.

“Good.” She replied, before pulling the younger elf’s head in close and planting a kiss on her forehead. “I love you. So much.”

Kalina only giggled in reply. It was a wonderful sound, even now. “I love you too, Sylvanas.”

It felt wrong the way Kalina was trying to make light of the situation, as though she wasn’t facing one of the most miserable fates Quel’thalas could offer her - as though they weren’t looking at being torn apart again, this time for an excruciatingly final time.

She knew the girl understood the situation perfectly under that grin, she just wished she’d stop trying to put on a brave face to assuage her fears. That was her job, not Kalina’s.

“Come to bed?” She asked gently, even as her grip on the smaller elf tightened.

Kalina nodded. “Of course.”

It was around midday when Kalina rose from her desk in the corner of Sylvanas’ office. The sunlight was filtering in through the window, while the sounds of rigorous training echoed up from the courtyard below, to where the ranger-general was busily attending to after action reports from eliminating the last few cut off pockets of trolls in Quel’thalas.

“Hey, uh…” she called out as she stood there, getting the busy woman’s attention. “It’s time.”

All at once, Sylvanas’ body seemed to slow down as her muscles tightened, before she looked up at the girl with a regretful nod. “Okay.”
Without another word, she got up and strode over to where Kalina waited, before all at once lunging forward, wrapping her arms around the girl like a snake as she did so.

“I promise, everything’s going to be okay.” She whispered so that only Kalina could hear, even though they were the only two in the room. “Nathanos will be watching in case he tries anything. If he does, there’ll be plenty of rangers there ready to fill him with arrows.”

Kalina couldn’t help but giggle at the woman’s determination. “I trust you. If you say I’m safe, I’m safe.”

Sylvanas squeezed her just a bit tighter. “That’s the spirit.”

The shorter elf was the one to break the hug. “Anyway, I should probably get going so I won’t be late.”

“Wait.” Before Kalina could ask why, a hand shot out and grabbed her chin, holding her there as the taller woman dove into a soft, warm kiss.

She didn’t have time to savor the moment, however, as by the time she registered what was happening, the blonde had already let go again. “I love you.”

Kalina smiled softly, trying not to cry as it began to weigh on her that this might be the last time they would ever see each other. “I love you too.” She hiccuped, eyes now watering.

A pair of hands on her shoulders. “You’ll be fine. I promise. I won’t let anything bad happen to you.”

She closed her eyes and nodded, pulling herself together. “You’re right. You’re right. I’ll be fine.” She nodded again, more for herself than anyone else. “I should probably get going now. Might as well get it over with.”

“I know you’ll do great.”

With that, Kalina turned and quickly hurried out of the room. Sylvanas was watching over her. She’d be safe. That, she could at least count on.

“Good, I was wondering when you’d show up.” Veric spoke as Kalina stepped into the room.

It came as a surprise to her that he was there, waiting when she entered. Normally he arrived late, or in rare circumstances, on time. So seeing him leaning against one wall, at least 10 minutes early, was rather unusual. The only time he’d ever arrived early was to see if she was arriving early - which, now that she thought about it, she supposed made sense, given yesterday’s threat about her being late.

“Might as well get started now then.” He gestured to a nearby table, upon which sat a small bottle corked and filled with a glowing blue liquid. “Drink it.”

At the look of suspicion Kalina gave him, he made a show of sighing overdramatically. “It’s just a mana potion, so you have enough energy to make it through this thing.”

She didn’t trust him for a second, but saw little other option ahead of her. Nodding slowly, she approached the table before taking the bottle, uncorking it, and chugging it down. As she set the empty bottle back down again, she almost immediately found herself stumble off balance, having to steady herself on the table to keep from collapsing.
While she’d admittedly not had very much experience drinking mana potions on account of never having needed them, she knew they weren’t supposed to do what was happening now. Quite the contrary, they were supposed to give the opposite sensation, one of power and control.

She tried to step forward, only for her back leg to collapse under her, bringing her to one knee. Reaching for her dagger proved fruitless. Her fingers had long since lost all fine control. She looked up at Veric and could see him mouthing something softly.

A portal opened behind her as the man stepped forward, and as he did so, Kalina could just barely make out what he was saying.

“Four… three… two.” It was at that point that he planted his foot on her chest, before delivering a strong kick backwards through the portal.

The last thing she registered before she descended into unconsciousness was the ceiling of her old cell appearing above her as she fell back.

“Say that again.” Sylvanas’ voice was cold, like a steel dagger covered in a thin layer of ice.

“As I said, milady, they were gone before I could stop him.”

“Where?” Her eyes narrowed, giving the impression of a lynx suddenly staring at a very succulent looking chipmunk.

At that, Nathanos actually had the nerve to shrug. “I really couldn’t say.”

Fine, then. If that’s how fate wanted to play it, she’d call its bluff. “Assemble every ranger you can get your hands on. I’ll burn the magisters’ hold to the ground before I let them so much lay a f-“

“Before you let us do what?” The door to Sylvanas’ office opened to reveal the blond mage that had been the one to take Kalina from her again. “Careful there, General. Don’t wanna say anything that could be taken as sedition.”

“You.” She lunged towards him, only for her arms to be caught by Nathanos before she could get close. “Where is she?! Tell me or I’ll have you skinned alive and sent back to the magisters buried in salt!”

“Might wanna watch that temper, too.” He smirked. “She’s taking her exam in my custody. Just a bit of high security proctoring, nothing to get upset about. Once she passes, she’ll be returned to you safe and sound in a week or so.”

“And if she doesn’t?!”

Now Veric was the one to shrug at her. “She’ll need remedial lessons.”

The simplicity of his response forced Sylvanas to pause and take a deep breath as she reconsidered the optics of the situation. Okay, as far as anyone else knew, he was telling the truth. It’d be a lot harder to get her rangers to follow her in taking up arms against fellow Quel’dorei - more specifically, their own government - and her steward having to take a long exam for her magic studies wasn’t a very good casus belli.

“Very well.” Her words were carefully measured as she locked a burning gaze with Veric’s own nonchalant one. “One week. Unharmed.”
With the grin of someone who knew they’d won, the mage clapped his hands together. “Glad to see we’re in agreement! Anyway, got a party to get ready for, so you guys just sit back and relax in the meantime, K?” Without waiting for an answer, he turned on the spot and vanished into thin air.

Only when he was surely gone did Nathanos let her go. As his arms fell away, Sylvanas seemed to take a deep breath and begin to calm herself.

“Thank you, Nathanos.” She spoke gently as she turned to face him, just before her fist slammed into his face.

Kalina awoke to find herself in complete darkness, lying on what she could tell was a stone floor. She felt around herself. All her armor and clothes were still on, but she’d been completely disarmed. Whatever. It had all been standard issue gear anyway.

Sitting up, she thought back to her last moment awake. She vaguely remembered seeing the ceiling of her old Royal Guard cell. Was she still there? She felt around in the dark, trying to find anything to suggest that was the case. It was to her dismay that she discovered that this was in fact not that same room. It was much too big for that, and every direction as far as she felt was completely empty.

“Hello?” She called out. Judging by the acoustics, it wasn’t a small room she was in, either. Not an endless one, but definitely not small. “Anyone here?”

No response.

Was this her exam? She was supposed to figure her way out of this place somehow?

No sooner had she begun considering what exactly she was supposed to do, that her thoughts were swiftly diverted by the feeling of emptiness in her stomach, causing her to realize how hungry she was. Okay. That was at least something she could do. Probably.

She thought back to what she’d learned. Everything in existence was really just a superposition of probability waves at various points in space. By using arcane magic to manipulate those probabilities and their superpositions towards a favorable set of outcomes, magic could in effect be performed, drawing from both anywhere and everywhere in the universe simultaneously to - in the case of conjuration - make the necessary object appear; with the larger or more complex the object, the more magic required.

It was simple enough in theory. Channeling the actual magic was another matter. She’d only practiced channeling a few times alone, just to make sure everything worked, and while she knew now that her magical circuits worked well enough, she’d never actually tried to cast anything.

As she felt the electrifying sensation magic begin to flow through her at a steady rate, she focused it to her fingertips, before all at once letting it loose, only to fall back in shock as a burst of arcane lightning - the crudest spell one could perform - came forth, the flash illuminating the room for a split second. Letting out a yelp at the sudden burst, she instinctively scrambled backwards. While the room was, thankfully, empty - if large - the spontaneous bolt of lightning from her hands was nonetheless frightening.

“My name is Whore...” she found herself muttering to the empty darkness on force of habit before she even realized she was doing it. It took her about ten minutes to stop shaking enough to prod herself into trying again.

The second time went better. She got... well, it was a roll of bread. It wasn’t pretty, at least by feel, but it’d do; and at least now she knew she wouldn’t starve to death. As she devoured the morsel of
food in a few short bites, her attention turned to escape.

She stood up. She didn’t want to summon any arcane lightning again, not only because of the way it made her shake, but also because of how rapidly draining it was. At the same time, though, it was her only possible source of light. Quel’dorei had excellent dark vision, but even dark vision still required at least a small amount of light to work. There was none in here.

The good news was that she thought she saw a door at the far end of the room. Holding a hand out in front of herself in case of unforeseen obstacles, she slowly started towards where she thought it to be.

It was a few minutes before her hand touched the rough stone of the wall. Okay, so she hadn’t completely missed. If she wasn’t going to have any light, then moving along the wall would probably be the safest way to navigate assuming the door didn’t work.

It was only as she took a moment to pause did it actually strike her how utterly, perfectly silent the room was. Even her own footsteps barely echoed throughout the chamber, as though the darkness instead simply swallowed the noise.

It took another few minutes of walking for her hands to touch steel. The door, she could sense, was protected by a magic charm to keep it locked. Was this her test?

Every static charm or spell in existence was, at its core, an oscillating wave function. If one wished to break it, they had to find a weakness in the function and exploit it so as to either destructively interfere with it, or otherwise cause it to either decay or expand in amplitude to a point where the amount of magic feeding it became hazardous and unsustainable.

Of course, that relied on actually being able to probe it and get an idea of what the wave function was, something that more well protected spells had defenses against. She took a breath, before setting to work. Veric had taught her the basics of probing a spell. It was a good way to learn by observation, as well as a crucial talent for any aspiring mage.

Smirking, she watched as the door began to reveal its secrets to her. The first piece of information, the amplitude, was almost in her gr-

Her confidence was cut short as arcane electricity surged through every fiber of her being, causing her to stiffen in place before crumpling to the ground as it released her. She hadn’t even realized what had happened until she found herself lying on the hard stone, panting and twitching.

‘Okay yeah I am not doing that again.’

Was that what Veric wanted her to do? She hadn’t even sensed the defensive charm, it was no doubt far beyond her level of skill to take a shot at. So did he just want her to keep shocking herself for bit by bit of information until she was somehow able to withstand the agony long enough to introduce a modifier to the wave equation?

It wouldn’t surprise her if that was genuinely what he wanted. Light knew he was sadistic enough, and he certainly didn’t seem inclined to be doing her any favors.

It was then that she became acutely aware of how drained she felt. The door must’ve sapped her mana. She let herself relax. Clearly, whatever she was supposed to do, it wasn’t meant to be a short exercise. She might as well get some rest and recharge before trying again. With that in mind, she closed her eyes once more, and let unconsciousness take hold of her.
It was about two days in - at least by Kalina’s count - that the solitude, silence, and perpetual darkness began to take its toll on her. Being kept in Royal Guard captivity had been one thing, at least there she’d had the guards checking in on her regularly. At least there, there’d been light in the room, not to mention sound. But here? There was nothing to keep her sane but the empty, expansive nothingness, and the wall she had to stay near to survive. In the two days she’d spent in here, she hadn’t received the slightest sign that there was even an outside world to even speak of. For all she knew, she wasn’t even in Azeroth anymore.

That wasn’t even to speak of the hunger. Conserving mana was crucial, so she only allowed herself a small daily meal of some water and a roll or two. It meant going to sleep with pain in her stomach, but whatever she had to do, she couldn’t do it without mana.

It was halfway through this daily meal that Kalina began to hear something she hadn’t heard in a long time - a sound she’d almost forgotten.

Whispers.

Her ears focussed in on the noise. It was coming from all directions - every direction except the wall. Far too quiet for anything discernible but far too loud to ignore, as though they were slowly trying to worm their way into her mind.

“Hello?” She called out nervously, setting her bread down and inching back up against the wall. Nothing happened.

She tried to distract herself by thinking about Sylvanas. Her general was probably tearing Silvermoon apart looking for her. It was only a matter of time until she heroically burst through the door, Veric’s head in tow, to rescue her and take her home so they could have a happy life together once more.

She wondered if she’d ever see her again.

And then there was Nathanos. She could only imagine the level of fury he must’ve received for this. At least there was that to derive some solace from.

Either way, whatever she was supposed to do, she certainly wasn’t doing a very good job of it. At this rate, it was only a matter of time until she was made a test subject.

“It’s hunting you.”

Kalina froze, her ears now focusing in on the whispers again. They were slightly more discernible now - a few sparks of comprehensibility amidst an ocean of jibberish.

“It draws near.”

“You’ll wish you could die.”

It was then that Kalina saw it, a humanoid silhouette just barely discernible amidst the pitch darkness, like a hole in reality cut out of a black background, standing perfectly still maybe 10 meters from her with its arms at its sides and facing towards her.

At least, it looked still at first. As she kept her gaze fixed on its form, she quickly realized with a dawning sense of horror that it was inching towards her, getting ever closer with each passing moment.
She tried stepping back from it on instinct only for her back to hit the wall the same way it had a moment ago. She was trapped.

It inched closer, still not moving a muscle.

Seeing no other options, Kalina raised her hand, her magical circuits flaring as a moment later a bolt of lightning discharged forth, arcing out at the thing and illuminating the room for a split second, only for the flash of light to reveal nothing standing there.

Darkness fell once more as the lightning ceased, revealing the figure now standing exactly where it was before, still slowly inching its way towards her.

Kalina turned and bolted, sprinting with her hand trailing along the wall in the frantic hope of getting away from it. She had to stay along the wall, she knew, otherwise it could come from any direction, and then she was truly doomed.

After about a minute of running, she hit the corner of the room, turning around with her back to it as her eyes scanned the darkness. Nothing. The whispers were quieter now. She let herself exhale as she began panting, not taking her eyes off the darkness in front of her.

It was maybe three hours before the whispers began to get louder again. Kalina looked around in terror as they did so, only to stop cold as she just could barely make out the faintest outline of the figure amidst the darkness, gradually growing clearer as it slowly approached her from the direction perpendicular to the one she’d run in.

Turning away from it against every instinct in her body, she ran again, this time back in the direction she’d come from, before eventually coming to a stop at the opposite end of the room, panting and sinking to her knees. She knew how this would end if she didn’t find a way out soon. She’d pass out at some point, wouldn’t wake up in time, and it’d reach her.

Okay, she thought. The furthest point from where she currently was was the opposite corner of the room. Whatever it was, it couldn’t move very fast, but it seemed to have no trouble tracking her in the darkness. It had taken about three hours for it to get from her spot near the door to where she was in the corner, which was about half the length of the room; which meant that if she could draw it in to where it was almost in the corner with her, she could run to the opposite corner of the room and would have enough time for if she did pass out.

For now she had about six hours. She should get some rest while she could, otherwise the whispers and the six hours of absolute nothingness would drive her mad alone; and when she did finally fall unconscious, she’d be too tired to wake in time. She’d just have to sleep lightly for now and hope for the best.

“All light must be broken.”

“The mind is a library. Set it ablaze.”

“Only madness can save you.”

Kalina’s eyes shot open to the overbearing sound of whispers, each one clear as day, as she looked up to see it maybe two meters from her and slowly closing in.

Clapping a hand over her mouth to keep herself from shrieking, her limbs sprung to life in a haphazard mess of activity as she desperately scrambled past it through what little gap there was left, before breaking into a mad dash as she stood up, not caring which direction she ran in so long as it
was a direction.

Eventually, mercifully, her hands hit a wall as she steadied herself through shaky breaths while tears now rolled down her cheeks. Even so, she didn’t have time to stop. She had to find a corner.

Forcing herself not to break down as she did so, she unleashed another bolt of lightning, only to watch with mounting horror as the darkness swallowed up the light given off by it, allowing her only a few feet of illumination at most.

She didn’t have time to waste on this. She kept running, keeping a hand along the wall to ensure her safety. Eventually, thankfully, she came to a corner of the room, immediately backing up into it and letting herself break down into fearful breaths.

She had to occupy her mind. In this sort of absolute solitude, stagnating meant giving into insanity - perhaps she already was insane. Staring out at the all consuming darkness once more, she shakily began to sing. The songs weren’t anything special, just the basic Quel’dorei patriotic songs everyone learned as kids, but they were better than nothing.

It was about five hours into her watch that fatigue began to set in again. No, she had to stay awake.

She was desperate at this point. She had no issues admitting that anymore. Any moment it’d appear again and do light knew what to her.

She had no other options. Placing a hand on her arm, she bit the inside of her mouth, before delivering herself a jolt of just enough electricity to stay awake.

All at once the feeling of being chained, naked and bloodied, returned to her, causing her to let out a short, anguished noise, before steadying herself.

“My name is Kalina, my name is Kalina, my name is Kalina.” She forced herself to repeat, against every instinct in her body telling her not to. Her own words - her own name - felt hollow, but it was better than nothing.

It was after maybe an hour that hunger brutally reasserted itself. She summoned another roll to manage that, followed by some water, all the while not taking her eyes off the darkness as she ate and drank.

The darkness felt, almost, heavier now, as though it had some physical presence or effect beyond simply being the absence of light.

She wondered if a kinetic weapon, like an arrow or one of her knives, would stop the thing that was chasing her. Maybe that was why Veric had taken them.

It occurred to her at that moment that it might be tracking her by sound. She removed her boots, just in case, followed by the rest of her armor just to be sure. It was only slowing her down anyway.

Over the next couple days, she fell into a maintainable cycle. She’d sing and shock herself to stay awake and occupied, run when it showed up, and repeat. It wasn’t at all healthy, and was only barely sustainable, but then, letting it catch her was neither of those things.

One moderately positive outcome that did ensue was that it slowly became easier to tell herself her own name. Had the circumstances been less desperate, Kalina might’ve laughed at the cruel irony - that the thing that finally shattered the last vestiges of Rhalyf’s grip on her mind was just having something else to be scared of.
After days of running without sleep, though, eventually she collapsed. She’d run to the furthest corner of the room, just like she planned, but she knew she probably wouldn’t wake up in time to escape this time. She’d run out of mana to shock herself too, let alone summon food or water. Sleep was inevitable, and this time she didn’t try to resist as unconsciousness took her. The sooner she gave in, the sooner she’d wake up.

When she woke again it was maybe three meters from her. She couldn’t keep doing this, she knew. The darkness felt heavier and heavier with each passing second, like she was sitting at the bottom of the ocean, except the ocean was made of insects trying to crawl inside her ears and under her skin.

“You are alone.”

It was clear by now that Sylvanas wasn’t going to make it to save her in time. The whispers at least had that right. It was going to reach her and enact whatever horrors that entailed. It was over, and she’d die - or far worse - spending her last moments trying to keep the whispers out of her mind. For all her resistance, it only seemed futile now.

It couldn’t hurt to just let a little sip in, she ceded, as the futility of her exercise became ever clearer. At least, if she was to die, she might as well give herself that tiny comfort.

Taking in a shaky breath, she let go of all resistance for the briefest fraction of a second, letting the smallest modicum of the whispers come flooding into her mind.

All at once new knowledge ignited within her like a burning pyre; a whole new magical theory taking shape, that of not a manipulation of infinitely pervasive probability, but as a superposition of an infinite set of solutions to a theoretically infinite sea of energy.

It was closing in on her now. It wasn’t enough, she needed to know more. Her breath quickening, she opened her mind to allow more of the infinite secrets to burrow their way in, before closing herself off once more as another fraction of a second later, a solution materialized - one that could save her.

She didn’t waste time, as energy the likes of which she was wholly unfamiliar with but which was definitely not the arcane surged through her immediately, before Kalina felt the darkness around her beginning to bend and wrap around her form, until she was completely engulfed by it.

The figure stopped, maybe a foot from her now. Kalina didn’t dare breathe as it held, as if carefully planning a new course of action. It seemed to stand there, frozen for an eternity, before finally starting backwards at the same agonizing pace, inch by inch, until eventually it was gone.

The moment she was sure it was, Kalina released the spell and began to hyperventilate. She was okay. She was alive and sane. She knew releasing the spell would just let it hunt her once more, but the fact that she could now hide from it, however temporarily, was no small advantage.

Before long, it drew near again. This time, however, Kalina was prepared. As soon as it came into view, she shrouded herself in darkness once more, making her escape at as fast a pace as she could while maintaining the spell. It wasn’t much, but it’d buy her at least an extra half hour, which could make the difference between waking up ready and waking up with it standing over her the next time she needed to sleep.

It was a little over a day later when she felt the need to sleep again approaching as she sat in one corner, lightly shocking herself to keep awake as the figure drew near. She waited for it to get close, before shrouding herself once more and starting across the room.
She was about halfway across when she was suddenly cast into light as the door swung open without warning.

'It doesn’t exist in the light. Stay in the light.’

Kalina didn’t move a muscle as a pair of royal guards filed in carrying heavy shields, followed by the robed figure of Veric Proudsong, who immediately extended his hand and loosed a spell, causing torches high on the walls around the room along with brazers hanging from the ceiling to ignite, bathing the chamber in a warm glow.

She reached up to wipe away the tears of relief that had now begun streaming down her face, only to discover that her hand was completely invisible. Looking down at herself, she realized that her entire body had in fact completely vanished from sight.

Veric stepped forward. If he left without finding her, Kalina knew, the door would be closed and she’d be trapped in here with that thing indefinitely. At the same time, whatever she did, she was fairly sure she hadn’t completed her exam as assigned, meaning being found would spell an equally gruesome fate.

“Where is she?” The blond mage turned to level a gaze of cold fury at one of the guards.

Staying silent on the balls of her feet, Kalina started towards the door.

“I swear by the Sunwell that door never opened once this entire week!” One of the guards protested.

“Funny since I don’t see anyone in here.” He stepped further in, before cupping his hands around his mouth and calling out a loud ‘hello’.

Kalina didn’t stop. She had too much ground to cover before the door closed once more.

Veric turned around the face the guards again, spreading his arms. Kalina had to lean out of the way to keep from being clipped by one. “Nothing. So here’s what’s gonna happen. You’re going to find her and bring her back or it’ll be you I put in here next. Got it?”

Her movements slowed down as she carefully stepped through the open doorway between the pair of guards, her arm brushing against one of their shields for the briefest moment, causing her to dart outside before she could find out whether she’d been discovered or not.

Contrary to the rough stone of the massive cell, the hallway stretching out before her now, leading upwards at a steep angle, was of a more Quel'dorei design. That was at least a relief. At minimum, it meant she was still in Quel'thalas. Not waiting to be found, she started up it quickly, unwilling to let the spell fall until she knew she was somewhere safe.

At the end of the hallway was another door, identical to that of her cell. Quickly, Kalina realized she couldn’t focus on maintaining the spell and manipulating the door, and found herself at an impasse.

The sound of Veric’s voice behind her getting steadily closer told her that her time was running short. Not seeing any other way forward, she let the spell fall for the briefest moment as she tried the door to find, to her relief, that it was unlocked. As she stepped through, she found herself standing in another hallway, this one curved and lined with doors she recognized as belonging to more cells.

She recloaked just in time for a guard to come into view, immediately flattening against the door as he passed by her. The moment the armored male was gone, Kalina let the spell keeping her hidden fall once more, revealing her naked form. A part of her debated trying to kill the guard from behind and sneak out in his armor. No, it’d be clear to anyone with half a brain that it was she who did it,
and that’d only give the Royal Guard reason to bring her in for good once she resurfaced. She had to make a clean escape.

The heavy turn of the door behind her signaled that her time being visible was up. Reapplying the spell, she sidestepped out of the way of the door a moment before it swung open, revealing a furious looking Veric storming past.

Deciding he was probably her best chance of finding her way out of here, she followed after him as he continued down the hall, before turning sharply to face a door identical to all the others on the inner wall of the circle. He took a moment to sigh to himself, before retrieving a key from his robes and unlocking the door. As Kalina stood there waiting for him to open the way, she realized that it was much easier to keep the spell going the less she moved. The fruits of this discovery were short lived, however, as a moment later he opened the door and stepped through, the girl darting after him before it closed again, revealing a short set of stairs leading upwards to another, identical door.

As she stalked her tormentor past the next door, she came to step out onto a walkway looking out over an absolutely gargantuan cylindrical atrium. Above and below them, members of the Royal Guard went about their clandestine business, some working furiously on floating platforms, others sparring on the lower levels, still others carrying stacks of parchment.

It wasn’t hard to guess from the absolute utter lack of windows, and the fact that Kalina had never seen any building in her 161 years in Quel’thahalas that would match this interior externally, that the way out was up.

Veric turned and started down one walkway leading deeper into the complex. Kalina knew she shouldn’t follow, but he had keys, and more importantly, it was ironically the cleanest shot at him she’d ever have. If he died on the surface, it’d be clear who did it. But if he died at his desk, deep within the Royal Guard’s headquarters, on the heels of such a major failure as letting her escape, way out of the way of any potential escapees, and in the right manner to make it look self-inflicted… Well, not even Avina could reasonably pin that on her.

It was about two levels down that they arrived at a sturdy mahogany door with the name “Avina Darkflight” engraved on a sign next to it. Veric seemed to take a moment to compose himself, shaking his hands and using one to briefly cover his eyes, before instantaneously adopting the proud, self superior demeanor Kalina had come to expect from him as a moment later, he swung the door open without knocking.

“Avina!” He exclaimed with an air of bravado as he swaggered into the office, Kalina stepping in after him, to where the short haired woman sat in her standard blue and gold armor, a glass of wine held in one hand as the other jotted something Kalina couldn’t make out down onto a piece of parchment. “How’s my favorite gal doin?”

Avina, for her part, visibly sighed before taking a long sip of wine. At that moment, Kalina almost sympathized with her. “Speaking as your commanding officer, just tell me what you need, Veric. I have little time or energy for this.”

Without waiting for a prompt to, he sat down in a chair opposite her. “So ya know how I’ve been teaching the Canary some magic and stuff?”

Avina froze. “I am aware, yes.” She answered as she set down her quill and turned her full attention to focus on him.

“Yeah, about that. Soooo, I’ve kinda been going a bit… hard on her to, y’know, make her suffer after everything, yeah?”
“Okay.” Avina replied in a manner which suggested she was waiting for the other shoe to drop.

“So, uh, for her exam, my idea was to put her in one of the big cells downstairs, and uh, just, leave her alone in the dark for a week or so. If she survives, she passes, if not, who cares?”

Kalina’s breath caught in her chest as she realized with a dawning horror how badly she’d just screwed herself.

Avina, meanwhile, stared at him unblinkingly, as if commanding him to continue.

“So, anyway, I maybe kinda neglected to tell her… anything… except that if she failed her exam, I’d have her put on community service.” Before Avina could interject, he quickly added “To make it harder on her, of course! But, uh, we went into her cell today to see if she survived, and, ah, she was gone.”

The glass in Avina’s hand shattered instantly.

“Want me to go get a heal-“

She cut him off, seemingly oblivious to the pieces of glass now cutting into her hand. “You mean to tell me. That a major enemy of the crown - an enemy we firmly had on a leash - now believes we’re actively trying to put her down.”

Veric nodded once.

“Is there anyone else who knows about this?” Her tone reflected a sort of forced calm suggesting that at any moment, she might lunge across the table and strangle him.

“Two of the guards in charge of her cell. Kiryn Sunsong and Errus Aeranil.”

Avina closed her eyes. “I see.” Before reaching over to her wounded hand and unflinchingly pulling out a piece of glass - much to Veric’s clear discomfort - which she then placed gently on her desk.

“Alright. Here is what will happen. I will handle the two guards myself. You, meanwhile, are not to breathe a word of this to anyone outside this room. As far as the crown is aware, we still have full control over the Canary and that control has never wavered. You will find her and subdue her however necessary, but she is to remain alive and functional. Should you fail in this, I will take whatever steps are necessary to contain your failure.” She placed added stress on the last three words.

He visibly swallowed. “Yes ma’am. I’ll start by going through everything we have on her, see if there are any clues there.”

Kalina bit the inside of her mouth. Perhaps killing Veric would have to wait. A much grander opportunity was now presenting itself.

“Good. Now get out of my sight.”

It took a couple minutes of travel throughout the structure for them to arrive at the well guarded double doors to the Royal Guard archives. On either side of the doors each stood one one guard, along with what Kalina recognized as an officer standing in the middle, holding a piece of parchment in one hand and an enchanted quill in the other.

As Veric came to a stop directly in front of said doors, Kalina made sure to give him a berth of about a meter so he didn’t accidentally bump into her. Skilled as she was in the ways of killing things and then running away, she doubted even she could make it out of here if things went hot.
“Veric Proudson, here on authority of Lieutenant Avina Darkflight.”

The officer didn’t respond, instead looking down at a parchment in his hand, before swiftly jotting down what Kalina could only assume was Veric’s name and perhaps the time.

“Go on in.” He finally spoke, stepping aside as both guards on either side of him reached over and took hold of either side of the doors, pulling them both open in perfect sync to reveal a long hallway, lined with multiple sets of guards, with another set of doors at the far end.

As Kalina followed Veric inside, she found herself thankful that it was only guards keeping watch and not an arcane guardian. The last thing she wanted was to test her invisibility against one of those.

Reaching the end of the hallway, they stopped once again, waiting as a single guard unlocked a wide variety of both mechanical and magical locks, before opening the doors.

“Just kn-“

“Knock when I’m done, I know.”

The Royal Guard archives were absolutely massive - a deep, cylindrical atrium wrapping all the way around the rest of the Royal Guard headquarters like a sort of shell, starting far above where they were standing and continuing far, far below, each level connected by a series of bridges and mobile floating platforms, with the occasional mage in guard robes milling about.

She smiled.

It took several minutes of walking, as well as two floating platforms, to finally come across a long, expansive section of shelves at the complete opposite end of the circle, with a sign above them denoting it as ‘The Canary Wing’.

Someone had clearly enjoyed the opportunity to make the pun.

Deciding she’d wasted enough time following the wretched excuse for a mage standing in front of her, she ducked into an adjacent aisle to let the spell fall, before placing a hand over her mouth to keep herself from breathing too loudly.

Hearing the sound of shuffling robes coming her way, she immediately darted to the end of the aisle before taking cover behind the end of the bookshelf as the sound passed. Once she was sure she was safe again, returned to her aisle, wasting no time in peaking through the gaps in the shelf to see Veric speaking quietly with a short, crimson haired girl Kalina assumed was a librarian. That wasn’t good. She needed him alone.

Shrouding herself once more, she watched as the librarian turned and started gently away from him, out onto the walkway overlooking the wide emptiness. It briefly occurred to Kalina that she could push the girl over the edge, and no one would know. It was easily a 20-story fall. She doubted the sound would even make it back up here, and even if it did draw attention, it’d provide plenty of distraction from what she was about to do.

She chastised herself. Above all else, she was still a professional. Carnage without reason only ever brought downsides, and the slight possibility of a distraction made for a poor reason. Besides, the more corroborating witnesses for what was about to happen, the better it would be.

Returning to where Veric was standing, she waited for him to move on to the next row of shelves. As he did so, she debated decloaking then and there, before deciding against it. He was her exit ticket, after all. There was only one entrance to or exit from the archives, and there was no way she’d
be able to sneak through it on her own, even with her newfound ability. She was in no rush. Besides, as it stood, there was too much risk of her being seen through the shelf if she decloaked.

She waited until he seemed almost ready to leave before appearing again, stepping into the last row he’d occupied as he made his way along the walkway to the nearest floating platform, about 100 meters away. Not wasting any of what little time she had, she set to work, placing a hand on a stack of scrolls before letting small, thin trails of lightning surge forth from her fingertips.

It only took a moment for the stack to catch fire, the flames quickly growing and spreading to adjacent pieces of literature as their creator moved on to the next most flammable looking spot nearby. Once she was sure that set of shelves was doomed, she moved on to another further away set of shelves Veric had occupied and repeated the process there.

Once that fire had caught as well, she peeked her head to find that Veric had made it about halfway to the platform. She probably had just enough time to set one more shelf ablaze before catching up with him.

No, that librarian could be back any moment, and there was no way the fire wouldn’t spread now. She’d done enough. Cloaking herself once more, she started after the mage.

Snapping his neck from behind when he was alone would’ve been easy, making it look like he’d hung himself or thrown himself from some high place would’ve been easy, but it would’ve only ever been a kill like any other, no matter how much malice she’d put into it. But this - setting the Royal Guard’s archives, likely millenia of irreplaceable knowledge and intelligence, ablaze, with him as the chief and only suspect - he’d be far worse than dead.

And now they were even.
As the pair of them set off on the platform leading a quarter of the way around the circular archives, Kalina looked back just in time to see the fire engulfing an entire section of shelves. Veric, for his part, seemed oblivious, though she couldn’t couldn’t completely blame him for that. She’d probably be oblivious too if her career and Avina’s wrath were on the line.

Gently drifting away from the imminent destruction, Kalina continued watching the results of her handiwork as the flames quickly caught onto another shelf, followed by another right after. And then another. And then several more further away, all in the span of maybe a few seconds. As the rapidly increasing speed of the fire’s spread registered in her mind, particularly in comparison to their own traveling speed, her eyes gradually widened in a dawning sense of horror at the realization of the single, critical mistake she’d made:

She’d forgotten how quickly forest fires moved.

“Fire!” Someone shrieked from a couple hundred meters away, followed by several other cries from even further, finally getting Veric’s attention as the blond elf shook his head - clearly snapping himself out of some other line of thought - before turning around to investigate the source of the sudden panic, only for his face to drop in an expression of utter terror at the now rapidly spreading fires that were slowly but surely catching up to them.

As the flames began to consume more and more kindling and rapidly grew into a full on inferno, smoke started to rise en masse along with a flurry of hazardous embers; both of which were moving largely upwards to the levels above them, but that wouldn’t last long if anything below them managed to catch, which it surely would before long.

The platform came to gentle stop at its still untorched destination. Kalina was the first one off it, Veric disembarking shortly after at a brisk pace. The second platform they needed to take, the one that’d drop them off near the door, was five levels below them, which meant if they could get to the stairs, they’d be reasonably safe so long as they kept moving.

A series of shrieks gradually increasing in intensity went up in rapid succession from the direction of the approaching inferno. Evidently someone’s attempt at containment had failed. Kalina wasn’t sure at the moment if that was a good thing or not.

Veric, for his part, seemed to be trying to ignore the sounds of intensifying anguish as he set off at a fast walk towards the stairs, about 50 meters away. His slowness in the face of a firey death made part of Kalina wonder if he was an idiot or just trying to make the situation look less bad for himself than if he were running away. All the same, she reminded herself, she wasn’t in any position to complain. If he did come to the conclusion that standing in the midst of flammable material during a fire was a bad idea and took off at a run, she wouldn’t be able to catch up while maintaining her invisibility.

The roar of the inferno began to drown out everything else now as it raced ever closer, the sound of wood cracking and splintering only an afterthought to the chaos that was closing in on them, promising one of the cruelest deaths imaginable as they continued walking perpendicular to its path at a brisk pace.

By the time they made it to the stairs, Kalina could see the glow coming through the shelves, intensifying as it engulfed one source of kindling after another, the seconds tickling painfully by as they started down the short flight just as the shelves behind them ignited, the blaze narrowly missing
them as it surged over, devouring everything it touched.

They made it to the next platform a short while later, and even then Kalina could see the orange glow of the flames beginning to show through the gaps in the shelves, meaning it was spreading to the lower levels. That had to be expected at some point. It was only a matter of time until some piece of burning debris or ten made it down those steps and set the whole floor ablaze.

Flaming wreckage rained down from above now as they pulled away from the pyre, while smoke had begun to fill the massive chamber, making the act of breathing steadily more laborious as the air likewise heated and grew thicker.

The one silver lining in all of this was that because Quel’dorei architecture was summoned rather than built, it meant that things like wooden supports weren’t necessary, meaning a far smaller chance of the entire place caving in and killing them all.

Any momentary respite they might’ve had was short lived, however, as it was to Kalina’s - and likely Veric’s - horror that the fire on their level soon overtook them, rushing past in a suffocating blaze as it raced toward their destination faster than they did, meaning that what was shortly before a floating chariot to salvation had now turned into a painfully slow and yet at the same time morbidly fast hearse, on track to silently feed them into the furnace as it continued on its way.

She wondered whether it might be better at that moment if she let herself fall backwards off the edge, to a quick, painless death below, than to let herself be roasted alive, either by the inferno itself or worse, falling debris that managed to land on the platform.

That would truly be a horrifying death, she thought. Whereas the fire would burn all of her at once - and she could at least hope to pass out from the smoke; being pinned by burning wreckage would mean that she was under the fire, ensuring that she’d be left helpless, unable to move as she felt every single cell of her body being charred and grilled until there was nothing left but ash and a blackened skeleton, its mouth permanently affixed in a shriek of unfathomable torment.

At the same time, assuming they made it to their destination, the platform would drop them off right near the exit - meaning there was still entirely a possibility that she could make it out and escape to see Sylvanas again.

Not ruling out the falling course of action just yet, she resolved to at least wait and see what her chances were before making a decision.

A bigger issue soon presented itself - that of making sure her decision of how she wanted to die remained her decision, as a powerful gale soon began relentlessly coming down from above, getting stronger as the fire descended in altitude and pulling her towards the edge of the platform, no matter where on said platform she stood.

Veric seemed to be facing the same issue, but worse, as his loose fitting robes caught the wind, resulting in a much more powerful force pulling him towards the edge. The wind only seemed to prove an issue for the mage momentarily, however, as after a few moments of resisting, he seemed to alleviate the issue by managing to get low to the ground near the center of the platform.

Seeing little other option as the current only continued to gain in strength, Kalina did the same, though a bit further out so as not to be within hazardous distance. The effect was immediate. All at once, she felt the force pulling her toward a certain, though slightly preferable, death diminish, allowing her a momentary sense of relief.

As their transport neared its destination, it was to Kalina’s further relief that she caught sight of a
team of mages forming a small half circle around the landing and the adjacent bridge, narrowly keeping the flames at bay with what seemed like every bit of frost they could possibly evoke as they nonetheless pushed outwards, all while burning debris continued to rain down from overhead, only to be deflected by an arcane shield another pair of magic wielders focused on maintaining.

It was at this point that, as they set foot onto at least temporarily safe ground, Veric finally broke into an all out sprint across the likewise shielded bridge to where the previously heavily protected set of double doors were now being held wide open as mages and guards rushed through, many with arms full of mana potions, to try and help contain the fire.

Thankfully, the bridge was wide enough to where Kalina was able to avoid crashing into anyone, allowing her to narrowly slip by as she too started across it, immediately becoming aware of another strong wind pushing against her path, this one seeming to come through the doors at the opposite end of the bridge. Unlike the other one she’d had to face, however, this one didn’t seem to be solvable by getting nearer to the ground - as Kalina quickly discovered - but the good news was that it wasn’t dragging her out over the edge of anything either, meaning its only effect was making her exit take that much longer at the pace she was going.

As she did finally pass through into the hallway and shortly after, into the atrium, she found herself having to crouch down again, this time so as not to suffocate from the heavy, almost opaque smoke that now filled the smaller but still quite massive chamber. It was bad enough that, after a few moments of clawing for what little breath she could get near the floor, she found herself forced to let the spell hiding fall as all of her attention turned to simply getting a steady supply of oxygen.

All around her a cacophony of panicked voices called out for help and barked orders in regards to helping to contain the fire and try to evacuate people. Luckily, with all the disarray and the general inability to see more than a few feet, it didn’t seem like anyone was in a position to give two thoughts to a random naked girl covered in soot, and so Kalina wasn’t particularly worried about being caught. Her priority was finding a way up and out.

Like their interior counterparts, the guards that’d previously been stationed in front of the entrance to the archives were now preoccupied with keeping the doors open for the rapidly thickening stream of mages and runners rushing in and out, so slipping away from any observant eyes that might remember her face wasn’t particularly difficult. What was difficult was actually trying to find a way forward that didn’t lead downwards far quicker than she would’ve liked.

For all the Quel’dorei’s advancement in an innumerable number of fields, one thing they’d never quite gotten the hang of was guard railings - though in fairness that was a bit of a mischaracterization of the situation. The truth was that Quel’dorei architects knew perfectly well what guard railings were, they just didn’t care. In Quel’thalas, a lack of grace and poise in a highborne was seen as a severe personal flaw, enough to easily ostracize a person over. If someone without such qualities happened to die as a result, then the thought was that they’d been asking for it by behaving in such a manner, and that ultimately nothing of value was lost. Combine that willful disregard for architectural safety with a near total lack of visibility, and the pair made for a hazardous, deadly combination.

As if to illustrate the point, the noise of panic filling the atrium was further intensified by the sound of a sudden scream coming from high above, swiftly gaining in proximity before passing by Kalina’s floor very, very, quickly, followed in turn by the summary crack of a body hitting the ground below.

Taking that sound for the warning it was, she cautiously started forward, moving at a slow pace and staying low with a hand to the ground in front of her. It was maybe 30 seconds of careful advancement before her hand reached open air. Okay, that was good. Now she just had to hope some idiot didn’t accidentally knock her over the edge while she was looking for a way up.
After a few more moments of feeling around, her hand thankfully found a set of floating steps that seemed to lead upwards - that is unless the designer had made a higher up first step on a descending staircase, so as to trip the unwary user and send them plummeting to their deaths, which now that she thought about it she could actually almost see.

Regardless, the way forward was more likely than not her best option, and she didn’t exactly have all day. Placing her other hand on the first step, she reached out ahead and was thankful to find a second ascending step, confirming that she was on the right track.

Of course this presented a new problem. While the level she was on had an actual floor and thus an area where there was less smoke as said smoke rose higher, the staircase she was stepping out onto was suspended in the middle of the very, very deep atrium, meaning there was no such respite offered as she started out onto the steps.

After what was likely less than a second out in the open, she recoiled backwards to where there was more breathable air, coughing profusely at the sudden intake of smoke into her lungs, before, not seeing any other option ahead of her, taking as much of a breath as she could and starting forward again. The air felt scorching now, as if she was being not so slowly cooked alive - and it only grew worse as she forced herself to keep climbing.

It was… she didn’t even know how far up, only that she could no longer see the way back down - when she finally had to take another breath. Before she could stop herself, she opened her mouth and took in a deep breath of smoke, immediately descending into a coughing fit as she did so. What air she did get was too hot, to the point where it didn’t even feel breathable anymore, and that was without everything else in it.

She grabbed hold of the steps for support as her coughing intensified, which in turn only caused her to breathe in more smoke. This was it, she realized as she felt herself desperately wheezing for air. She’d die down here, slowly, in this light-forsaken house of nightmares, purely as a result of her own actions. She’d never see Sylvanas again, and it was all thanks to her own stupidity.

An armored hand suddenly took hold of her arm, immediately pulling her upwards to where she was just barely standing.

“Come on!” The source, a male voice, shouted in her ear over the chaos. “We’re not dead yet, and the portal zed’s not far, keep pushing!”

Portals. Of course there wouldn’t be a conventional way out.

Not one to question her potential salvation, she only nodded and started forward on two feet. The guard holding onto her seemed to know his way well enough to use only his feet without fear of falling, even if she herself didn’t.

“We’ll stop for air on the next landing, you’re doing great!”

Smoke aside, Kalina wasn’t even sure the room had much air anymore as the sensation of dizziness and nausea began to set in. She’d been strangled enough times by Rhalyf to know what suffocation felt like. The fire had probably devoured most of the air in the complex by now, meaning it’d die out before long, but so would anything else still inside.

As they finally reached the landing, the guard let go of Kalina, allowing her to drop the the ground - where there was at least a little breathable air left - and begin hyperventilating, her hair now hanging matted in front of her face.
She only had a few seconds to savor what little oxygen was left before the armored hand lifted her up again, a nonverbal command that they needed to keep going.

Up above now, she could see orbs of arcane light appearing one by one through the smoke, starting from the top of the atrium and aligning themselves so as to provide a clear indicator of the various ramps and stairs leading upwards.

According to the lights, they were about three quarters of the way up.

“Come on, we’re almost there!” The guard encouraged her between labored breaths as he now took most of the lead, breaking into a run up to the next set of steps without letting go of her as she did her best to keep up, the pair reaching the lit staircase soon after.

It was only as her savior’s face finally passed into the light that Kalina actually got a look at him, immediately causing her stomach to drop.

The guard escorting her upwards to safety and freedom was none other than one of the pair that had been guarding her cell.

Did he recognize her? No, her hair was in front of her face, and he wouldn’t be letting her move so freely if he did - or at all, likely.

But if he did realize it was her - that’d be it. Avina would figure out it’d been her that had set the archives ablaze, she’d be taken to community service, everyone she’d ever known would likely be put to death, everyone associated with those people would be - no, she couldn’t risk it.

“Wait…” she croaked weakly through a throat full of ash.

He stopped without hesitating and let go of her, immediately turning around and looking at her with what seemed to be genuine concern. “We’re almost there, I promise, we just need to keep mov-“

“I’m sorry.” Without waiting for him to register what she’d said, she summoned all her remaining strength and shoved him backwards.

He seemed to stumble for a moment, as his features dropped into a look of confusion and betrayal, before one wrong step in regaining his balance caused him to lose it forever as he went plummeting over the edge, the sound of a terrified howl following him before being instantly cut short.

‘I’m sorry…’ she mouthed again, no longer having the breath to say it aloud.

She wasn’t a villain, she told herself as she forced herself to continue upwards, one step after another. She’d just had to make some bad choices to survive.

As she got closer to the top, she was surprised but not at all unhappy to find the smoke thinning and the air more breathable. The silhouette of a guard came into view near the very top of the steps, standing off to the side and pointing forward with one arm while using the other to signal for people to keep moving. As Kalina passed him, she noticed a cloth hood wrapped around his entire head in place of a helmet, shielding most of his face, including both airways, from the smoke.

A moment later, she crested the top of the stairs, the ovular bright glowing rings of a set of portals becoming visible maybe 30 meters ahead of her as she did so, through which daylight filtered - a sight at that moment so beautiful to Kalina it was almost blinding.

‘Keep going, you’re almost there. Remember to breathe.’
As her lungs began to gradually take in breaths of still hazardous but now much less so air, she picked up in speed, her slow stagger increasing in pace until she neared the portals, where sets of mages in similar masks were holding the radiant gates of survival open.

Not caring which one she went for, she stumbled through, her feet immediately finding stone paving as fresh air forced its way into her lungs, making her acutely aware of how just much ash was in them now as she dropped to all fours and began coughing violently, before a metal boot mounted itself on her ribcage, kicking her sideways.

“Clear the drop off zone!” The voice of another guard barked at her as she went sprawling to the ground, now out of the way of the portal.

As Kalina began to get to her feet, she realized for the first time since the fire had started just how absolutely coated in soot, ash, and other fire byproducts she was. Good, she thought, that’d buy her a few extra seconds considering she was now out in the open and completely visible.

Careful to keep her hair in front of her face, she got to her feet and began to take in her surroundings. All around them, people were stopping to watch what was happening, only to be immediately rebuked by a rapid series of orders to disperse and move along.

This wasn’t Silvermoon, that much was readily apparent. It was far less ornate, though looking around, there certainly didn’t seem to be any less money in the place. As her eyes turned skyward, she almost instantly noticed the overwhelmingly disproportionate number of towers for a place that wasn’t Silvermoon.

It’d been a long time since she’d last been in Fairbreeze. Or - not long, especially by elf standards, but she liked to imagine it was long because of the new level of loathing she’d reached for the city since the war ended.

Whatever. At least that gave her a clear indication of where she needed to go. Not waiting for anyone to notice how emaciated she’d become since being taken prisoner and put two and two together, she started off towards the nearest concealment she could - which in this case happened to be a rather scenic looking alleyway.

“YOU!” The recognizable voice of Veric Proudsong half shrieked after her as she was almost there, causing her to break into a sprint, the sound of his boots hitting the cobblestone swiftly following after her.

The moment she was out of sight, she disappeared. It was only a few seconds later that Veric rounded the corner, followed by a pair of robed mages a few seconds behind him, only for both parties to stop short at her apparent absence.

“Veric? Did you see someone?” One of them asked, a look of curiosity more than anything else on his face.

The blond mage’s lips flattened, before he nodded in reply. “Just thought I saw someone I’ve been looking for all day.”

“Oh. Want us to help you look, see if they came out this end?”

He shrugged, seeming to resume his normal casual demeanor as he did so. “That’s alright. I’m sure she’ll turn up eventually.”

Even despite the new state of the buildings and paving around the city, the alleys were still full of easily disturbed rubble, and Kalina didn’t dare move a muscle until the three mages had safely left.
Once she was sure they were gone, she started back out of the alley once more. It was a long way to Silvermoon, and she needed to get supplies.

It was just after midnight a few days later that she rode through the gates of the grand Quel’dorei capital on a stolen horse, wearing a stolen robe, and running solely on stolen coffee.

While she could’ve just checked in with the local ranger battalion back in Fairbreeze, or even just sought shelter at her family’s tower in the city, she couldn’t risk the Royal Guard having eyes on either - especially considering Veric had already seen her there.

The result was that, under the covering hood that kept her features hidden from view, she looked like a mess. Her hair had only gotten worse; where once there was a silken waterfall of radiant white, it’d since given way to a storm of browns and greys from all the dirt and debris of the last few days.

Mentally, though, she was even worse. The week in darkness and solitude being chased by that thing had been bad enough, but then escaping the fire, and proceeding to survive on nothing but coffee and the occasional dinner roll with little to no sleep for almost two days straight of riding meant that ‘frayed’ did not do her mental state justice at this point. She had long since reached a point where frayed was the new normal, what she was now might one day be referred to as frayed squared.

It took her about 40 minutes to reach Farstriders’ Square, though by this point her sense of time was pretty much shot as well, so to her it felt more like moving in a dream - where she had little memory of the actual journey, and only the knowledge that she was here now and things were happening.

As she reached the main entrance to the otherwise infrastructurally protected district, she found a pair of rangers waiting in heavy armor, arrows nocked but kept low.

“Halt!” One of them, a recognizably male voice, called out, raising his hand. “Farstriders’ Square’s off limits. No one except rangers are allowed in or out.”

Right. Stupid. She’d forgotten that the military district was closed to the public after dark.

’Wait, no one except rangers?’

While the rangers made up the main force of Quel’thalas’ military industry, they certainly weren’t the only inhabitants of Farstriders’ Square. A wide variety of civilian artificers and craftsmen necessary to supporting a national military inhabited the area as well, and as a result they generally had the freedom to come and go at night same as any ranger might.

“What’s the reason?” She managed to string together, her speech slurring.

The sentry’s partner turned around before seeming to beckon to someone deeper within the district with his arm.

“That’s none of your concern. We’ve just been ordered to turn all incoming or outgoing civilians away until further notice. Area’s been magically warded and everything.”

More rangers appeared now, standing in the background, each one with their eyes trained on her. She recognized what this was. It was a very clear warning that if she wanted to make trouble over this, they could always pepper her with arrows at a moment’s notice. More than that, though, it was a statement that that was exactly what they were expecting to happen. Whatever they were hiding must’ve been worth keeping a secret to warrant such fierce deterrence.

She knew she couldn’t tell them she was a ranger. Besides the fact that she could still be intercepted
by the Royal Guard before she made it to Sylvanas, there was also the fact that she couldn’t just flat out couldn’t let Sylvanas see her like this. It was one thing for the woman to find her beaten and bloody or something to that effect, it would be another for her to see her looking downright haggard like some sort of monstrous undead. There was far more dignity in one than the other.

“Understood, thank you.” She quickly spoke again, before immediately turning her horse around and starting off down the street at a trot once more.

Only once she was sure she was out of sight did she finally dismount, shedding her robes and disposing of them in a nearby fire, before finally turning invisible.

It wasn’t essential to her use of her newfound tool that she be hidden, but letting the possibility of invisible enemies become known to the wrong people would be throwing away a tremendous tactical advantage.

It was only a moment later that she was standing on the roof of a nearby building, planning her entry. While she could simply walk through the front entrance, similar to how she’d escaped her Royal Guard cell, that left her open to the ever present risk of running into an arcane guardian - and while she was functionally invisible, and the great magical behemoths weren’t particularly common in Farstriders’ Square to begin with, the magisters did still occasionally like to flex their political might by having one or two assigned to the district - all in the name of national defense, of course. With that in mind, she really didn’t wanna test her luck against entities that specialized in seeking out hidden enemies and delivering upon them the might of Quel'thalas.

Decloaking once more, she started closer at a steady pace. While she’d slowly been finding it easier over the last few days to maintain the spell during greater levels of physical activity, she was still nowhere near the level of being able to go sprinting across the rooftops.

The bigger issue though was her feet. The loss of her ranger boots meant she was able to move far more quietly, on bare feet; but it came at the cost of the fact that she was now sprinting across roofs made of stone and ceramic in bare feet.

Whatever. That was a later problem. She could worry about her feet bleeding and hurting once she was safe at home and cleaned up. For now, she had to actually get there.

The events of the last few days had left Sylvanas nothing less than completely drained. It’d been a calm if tense morning of her waiting for Kalina to return - hopefully safe and sound - when the entire district had been thrown into chaos as a portal had spontaneously been opened in the middle of it - outside the legal zone to deploy one, a crime that was not punished lightly. What followed next had been a mess of smoke and heat followed by hundreds of what were clearly Royal Guard personnel flooding into the area, refusing to answer any questions or even acknowledge the existence of any non-officer present, other than to bark orders at them every now and then.

Even so, they had eventually been willing to admit that to the fact that they were Royal Guard - namely when it was time to start giving the aforementioned orders. On the orders given to them with the crown’s authority, the rangers had been forced to house and wait on the guard members in conditions far better than those they themselves were given. The result was that Farstriders’ Square was now full of posh, colorful tents with Quel’thalas’ Ranger Corps acting as valet for the king’s finest.

Worst of all was the fact that it’d been several days since Kalina was supposed to return, and Sylvanas hadn’t even been able to get any of her new guests to so much as acknowledge that Lord Veric Proudsong existed, let alone give her a way to find him or even just get in contact with him.
Lord Veric Proudsong existed, let alone give her a way to find him or even just get in contact with him.

Even if she wanted to take more drastic measures, she still wouldn’t have a good enough reason on paper to get her troops to follow her against the magisters; and even if they would, none of them could even move a finger now without some smug prick in official robes breathing down their necks - which altogether meant that Sylvanas was completely powerless to even inquire, let alone investigate or take any decisive action.

It was the early hours of the morning when she’d finally been able to get away from the condescension and backhanded psychological games long enough to finally get some rest. Light knew she’d need it if this was going to keep up much longer.

As she stepped into her quarters and closed the door, it took her a moment to remember a certain snow haired girl wasn’t there waiting for her. She’d gotten so used to her faithful ‘steward’ waiting there on their bed, ready to satisfy whatever desire the woman might have, that without her there now, her quarters felt empty. No, worse than that. They felt desolate.

It was only as she took in the silence of the room did her eyes catch notice of something that didn’t belong. She’d always run a tight ship when it came to keeping her room flawlessly clean - it was part of growing up in a military family - so it was with some degree of alarm that she noticed the thin trail of blood along the ground, starting near the window and tracing around the room in an erratic, almost disjointed pattern, before continuing off through an open doorway into her personal washroom.

She drew her swords, stepping slowly toward the side of the doorway for cover as she prepared to move in and strike, like a lynx circling its prey, muscles tensed and ready to pounce.

“Behin’ yuh…” A familiar voice slurred in her ear, just as she was about to rush in, causing Sylvanas - to her immediate embarrassment - to flinch in surprise, before relaxing as her expression broke into a relieved grin and she resheathed her swords.

“I was wondering when you’d re-“ she stopped short as she turned around, her breath being stolen from her throat the moment her gaze fell upon Kalina.

Where once had stood a vibrant, beautiful Quel’dorei girl, now stood but a haunting shadow, her body looking as though it hadn’t seen food in weeks, her hair hanging soaked and grey around her face, and her eyes… sunken, with only the barest twinkle of life.

“You look like a skeleton…” Sylvanas barely breathed as she watched her sway back and forth for balance.

Kalina smiled. It was a terrifying look. “I feel like a… a… Okay I… can’t think straight so I’m just going to sleep now good night.” Without another word, her legs buckled out from under her.

“Kali!” She instinctively exclaimed as she rushed forward and caught hold of her, her hand immediately going to the girl’s neck as she felt to make sure there was still a pulse. Her heart was slow, worryingly slow, but the pace was steady. She was alive.

Strengthening her hold on the girl, she lifted her into a bridal hold and began carrying her over to the nearby bed. She felt so light - so, horribly light - compared to the last time she’d picked her up.

“By the Sunwell, I’m so sorry.” She could only whisper.

She knelt down to lift the blankets with one arm, before sliding Kalina in and following after. A part of her wanted to wrap every limb she could around her lover to keep her as safe and secure as
possible, but another part was afraid that if she did, she’d break every bone in Kalina’s body.

She ultimately settled for draping an arm over the girl to keep a strong hold on her and make sure she was still there as she allowed herself to join her in unconsciousness.
Chapter 45

It was maybe four hours later that Kalina’s eyes shot open on instinct. The first thing she registered was that it was dark. That was bad, that was very, very bad, where was she, what was going on? She couldn’t move.

Frantically looking around for any sign of it getting close to her, her eyes came to rest upon the still open window leading out into Farstriders’ Square, and she allowed herself to relax with a sigh as she realized that she wasn’t in her cell anymore. It was just dark out.

It was at that point that she became aware of the rock hard arm wrapped around her receded abdomen like a snake, keeping her tightly affixed to its owner.

She smiled. It was as perfect a scenario to wake up in as any she could’ve possibly asked for. Looking back towards the window for a timecheck, she saw the faintest hints of orange beginning to tint the edge of the sky as the entire thing slowly started to brighten.

What that meant was that it was time to get up and get dressed. There was work to be done, and she had a lot of cooking to do if she wanted to make enough food to match Sylvanas’ appetite in time for breakfast.

As if to remind her of her current position, the blonde’s arm tightened fractionally just below her ribs. It wasn’t a problem. This certainly wasn’t the first time she’d had to extricate herself from Sylvanas’ grasp to get to work on time, but luckily for her, her love was a heavy sleeper, and all in all this particular instance ended up taking her about 15 minutes to escape.

The moment she was out, she crept over to the nearby closet to grab something to wear in lieu of her uniform, considering that hers was still scattered about the floor of the cell they’d kept her in.

Looking through the closet, she passed over several of her clothes, before stopping at the point where her section ended and Sylvanas’ began. She was about to go back and reevaluate her selection, when an interesting piece just over the border caught her eye.

It was an old, loose, dark grey and white robe that she’d seen the ranger-general wearing on occasion for cold weather exercise around Winter’s Veil and in preparation for potential foreign missions. It was short enough so as not to hinder movement, ending at the low thighs, while hosting a heavy degree of insulation and internal free space everywhere else. It even smelled like her.

Surely, she wouldn’t mind if Kalina borrowed it while she waited for the quartermaster to get her some new gear. After all, she only wore it when it was really cold and in Quel’thalas that was almost never.

Not waiting for a signal from fate to tell her otherwise, she silently but gleefully pulled the robe from where it hung, before haphazardly putting it on. It’d clearly been tailored for Sylvanas’ height and proportions, and the result was that on Kalina, it awkwardly ended around her upper calves, but she was able to make it work, which meant that she was ready to go downstairs and start getting breakfast ready!

It was only a few minutes later that she found herself standing in the kitchen, putting together all the ingredients she’d need to get started. The ranger kitchens were nothing short of massive. Whereas an ordinary ranger outpost would have to simply worry about cooking whatever they brought in to hunt, and an urban one might have to preoccupy themselves with keeping a single battalion regularly fed,
the kitchens in Farstriders’ Square were forced to deal with not only multiple stationed battalions, but trainees and command personnel as well.

The result was a gargantuan room where a small army of cooks within the rangers rushed around preparing mass quantities of food of varying levels of quality depending on the dish, though considering it was Silvermoon, everything was at least decent.

But none of that concerned Kalina as she stood off in the corner wearing the comfy robe she’d borrowed with an apron on top, working on Sylvanas’ food at a different pace.

A small perk of being the ranger-general’s personal steward was that when making food in the kitchen, she was happily exempted from the usual chaos and stress of the rush to get bulk amounts of food prepared on time - largely owing to the fact that she only had to make food for one person, and that person was the ranger-general.

She was halfway through chopping the peppers for the several omelettes she was making, when a pair of arms gently draped themselves over her shoulders from behind.

“You, are supposed to be resting.” Sylvanas whispered in her ear.

Continuing to chop, Kalina gave a suppressed giggle. “Since when?”

She could hear Sylvanas scoff as a smirk spread across her features. “Since you came back looking like a corpse.”

“I’m fiiiine.” She whined softly as she set down the knife and grabbed a waiting onion. “Nothing a few good meals won’t fix.”

“Uh huh.”

Before she could come up with a witty reply, Kalina suddenly felt herself being spun around - onion still in hand - to face the greater kitchen, Sylvanas’s hands now resting on her shoulders.

“You there, ranger.” The officer extended one arm to stop a passing cook.

He immediately stiffened and clicked his heels together. “Ma’am!”

“Does this look like the picture of perfect health to you?” She placed her hand under Kalina’s chin, as if she were showing her off at some sort of show.

The ranger seemed to hesitate as he looked Kalina up and down. “Permission to speak freely, ma’am?”

“Granted.”

“No.”

She could practically sense the blonde’s smirk widening at the answer.

“Thank you, ranger. You’re dismissed.” Sylvanas spoke again, before leaning in close and whispering into the girl’s ear, her voice practically dripping with smug satisfaction. “The people have spoken.”

“I’m fine.” Kalina insisted, turning and planting a kiss on Sylvanas’ cheek. “Just a bit sleep deprived.”
She realized her mistake too late as Sylvanas immediately lifted her up with what seemed like minimal effort and slung her over her shoulder triumphantly, like some sort of captured princess.

“Exactly!” She proudly proclaimed. “Which is precisely what you’re going to do, Lady Kali!” Before Kalina could protest further, she added “That’s an order!”

Immediately all resistance the girl had been putting up, up to that point, came to a grinding halt as, letting out a soft groan, Kalina found herself with no other option than to let herself be carried upstairs and gently laid down on the bed.

As Sylvanas stepped back to triumphantly observe the results of her handiwork, she seemed to blink twice before a look of realization came over her.

“Wait, is that my robe?”

Kalina only nodded sheepishly.

“You know if you want one, we could just get them to make one for you, right?”

The snow haired girl smiled again as she spread herself out on the bed. “Yeah but this one’s yours, which makes it so much better!”

Sylvanas blinked again. “...Alright then. Anyway, I’ll ask Nathanos to get some new gear for you from the quartermaster in the meantime.”

“He must hate me at this point with how much gear I go through.” Kalina giggled.

Sylvanas let out a laugh. “Oh believe me, he does. Anyway, don’t worry about getting food. I’ll bring you some at mealtimes.”

“You know I can go get all that stuff mys-“

“You are not leaving this room until I say otherwise.”

She held up her hands in a sign of acquiescence. “Alright. Yes ma’am.”

“Good. I’ll be back in a little while with some breakfast for you. I expect you to be in bed and resting.”

Kalina groaned as she sat up and began to disrobe. “Yes ma’am.”

As it turned out, going back to sleep was actually far more difficult than one might’ve thought. Every time she found herself nearing the edge, her sense of survival instantly kicked in and either jolted her awake on its own or tricked her into literally jolting herself awake. As a result, by the time Sylvanas returned with breakfast, she’d still not fallen asleep.

Even so, her lover had told her that she was supposed to be asleep, and so the sound of the door opening told her it was time to play dead. As the woman approached carrying a plate full of hot food and what smelled like some sort of tea, Kalina closed her eyes, slowed her breathing, and lay still.

A hand on her shoulder gently shook her. “Kalii!” Sylvanas whisper yelled, allowing the girl to slowly open her eyes as if she’d been sleeping.

Yawning, she sat up in bed and gave a tired smile. “Hey.”
The woman smirked with one side of her mouth. “Told you you needed rest. How’ve you been feeling?”

Giving a soft grin in return, Kalina stretched out her arms. “Exhausted.”

It wasn’t a lie. She was exhausted. She just couldn’t seem to translate that into sleep.

“Knew it. Here, I brought you some breakfast.” The woman briefly raised the plate that seemed to be stacked as high as the laws of physics would allow with breakfast food, before placing it on the bedside table. “You should try to eat so you can regain your strength.”

“Thanks.” Kalina whispered with a smile as she extended a hand and placed it in Sylvanas’, which now felt far warmer and stronger than her own.

Squeezing her hand, the woman leaned down and planted a gentle kiss on her forehead.

“I have to get back soon, but I’ll be up later with more food. Promise.”

“Okay.” Kalina replied sleepily. “I love you.”

Sylvanas chuckled. “Love you too, Kali. Sleep well.” She finished, before giving the girl’s hand one last squeeze and letting go as she turned and exited the room.

It was around midday that, after practically inhaling her breakfast and subsequently failing to fall asleep several more times, Kalina lay in bed, positively bored out of her mind. She wondered when Nathanos was going to bring her her new gear. While she doubted that Sylvanas would let her train much in her current state, she still felt far safer with a blade in reach as opposed to being naked and defenseless under a fluffy comforter - though, in fairness, she wasn’t completely defenseless anymore. Besides being able to effectively turn invisible, she could also cast basic arcane lightning for a short period - though admittedly that wasn’t the most comforting thought in the world. While it’d become far easier to cast the actual spell without semi-breaking down into a traumatized wreck, she still didn’t like the association it held in her mind. Above all else, she never wanted to become him.

The sound of the door opening again caused her to close her eyes once more and pretend to be asleep. As she settled into her unmoving performance, she could hear the sound of quiet footsteps approaching, meaning it was likely Sylvanas bringing her lunch. Light knew Nathanos wouldn’t bother trying to be quiet, and would probably just haphazardly drop her gear on the floor in the name of getting in and out as quickly as possible.

As the footsteps drew nearer, Kalina noticed that she couldn’t smell any food. Not unusual. Sylvanas was probably just coming to check up on her then, in which case she should definitely keep pretending to be asleep.

A moment later a second pair of footsteps entered the room, followed by a third, fourth, and fifth; followed in turn by the sound of magic igniting.

Her eyes shot open half a second before a heavy, armored body fell upon her, one arm wrapping around her torso and restricting her arms, while the other clapped a hand over her mouth. Her scream was muffled as she struggled with what little strength she had, immediately discharging an electric shock only to find it completely absorbed by the guard’s armor.

She knew it had been a long shot - there was a reason they’d earned the nickname ‘spellbreakers’.

“Get the wards down before the bitch gets back!” Veric Proudson’s voice hissed behind her.
‘Wards’, the word registered in her mind. The ranger-general’s quarters were warded against portals. Why hadn’t she expected that?

Her struggles died swiftly as the sudden reality of her situation hit her. Even if she did get free of the grip, she realized, she wouldn’t be able to do anything. Dealing with unarmed, magically capable enemies was exactly the type of direct action work the Royal Guard specialized in. If she did manage to get up, all she’d find facing her was an impenetrable shield wall that could cut through her like parchment.

“Kalina Dawnblade.” Veric spoke again, much closer now and with a tone that made it clear he was relishing the moment. “In the name of King Anasterian Sunstrider, you are hereby under arrest for high treason, evasion of justice, destruction of crown property, arson, I could go on. The point is that you, my dear, are officially done.”

Steam rose from the bowl in Sylvanas’ hands as she exited the mess area and started off toward her and Kalina’s quarters. Today was the girl’s lucky day, it seemed. They were serving her favorite for lunch - ribs. It was for that reason that the bowl she carried now held a lining of flatbread to handle the excess sauce while the rest of it was stacked as high as balance allowed with the succulent meat, and another piece of flatbread on top to keep them warm as she walked.

All in all, she couldn’t wait to see the girl’s eyes light up at the sight of the food.

“You four rangers! With me, arrows nocked!” A familiar voice barked behind her, turning a number of heads.

Sylvanas turned her own to see the jet black haired form of the Royal Guard officer from back in Fairbreeze, fully armored but without any weapons.

Of course, the group of rangers that’d been standing around chatting a moment ago immediately turned to face her, slightly taken aback. After a few exchanged looks, however, they obeyed, drawing their weapons and jogging to catch up to her as she started off in the direction of exactly who Sylvanas knew they were going after.

She placed the bowl on a nearby table and started after the woman, passing into a nearby hallway as she did so. “Is there somewhere you’re going with my rangers, lieutenant?” She called out, getting the slightly shorter woman’s attention.

The guard stopped, seeming to momentarily sigh based on her body language, before turning around and approaching the ranger-general.

“An asset of the crown has gone rogue and caused untold damage to the Royal Guard. We’re here to make an arrest.”

Sylvanas closed her eyes and smiled a little too sweetly. “Allow me to repeat myself.” She opened her eyes again. “Is there somewhere you’re going with my rangers, lieutenant?” She called out, getting the slightly shorter woman’s attention.

The guard made no attempt to match her polite expression. “They’ve been temporarily commandeered in the name of King Anasterian Sunstri-“

“Should I repeat myself a third time?”

At that, the woman’s hand shot out and took hold of Sylvanas’ forearm, immediately yanking her forward and down to where her adversary was now inches from her ear.
“It’s. Not. Her.” She hissed through gritted teeth, before letting go.

Sylvanas narrowed her eyes at her, her expression half relieved, half suspicious. “Then allow me to assist.”

“Fine.” The guard turned on her heel without waiting for any further reply and started forward again. “All Royal Guard personnel in the vicinity of the target other than myself are to be treated as hostile. That goes for all of you. Now move!”

The group took off at a sprint, Sylvanas drawing her bow and nocking three arrows between her fingers as she rushed up to the front of the formation. Even at the unexpected nature of the situation, a smile played on her lips. Killing Royal Guards for the benefit of Quel’thalas wasn’t, after all, a chance she got every day.

The moment the hostiles came into view - four of them, guarding the staircase up to her quarters - Sylvanas didn’t hesitate as she immediately put a broadhead through the narrowly unprotected eye of a particularly unlucky one before she could raise her shield.

The others, however, were both far quicker and far luckier. As the arrows glanced off their armor and other protection, the three remaining formed ranks into an evenly spaced line of shields, spanning the hallway, which began slowly advancing.

Two of the rangers’ immediate responses were to switch to their swords and rush forward to meet the enemy head on. As one ranger took a swing at the center guard, his first strike was blocked by the guard’s shield while his second was parried by one side of said guard’s warglaive - before the other side rapidly followed, arcing upwards and cutting through his arm like butter, severing it just below the elbow.

He screamed and fell to the ground, dropping his other sword and clutching at his arm - or lack thereof. His anguished respite was only momentary, however, as a heavy steel boot kicked him onto his back before, shortly after, the guard’s shield came down on his neck, stifling his cries.

His companion, meanwhile, tried to flank around the same guard while he was distracted, only to stop cold with a sharp intake of air as another of the guards’ blades cut into her torso, stopping halfway through a lung, before pulling out.

As the ranger dropped to the ground and began drowning in her own blood, Sylvanas saw an opportunity. Before the guard could retract his arm and return to position, an arrow found itself lodged between the gap in his armor where his inner elbow was.

Her glaive fell from her hand as Sylvanas rushed forward, blade already drawn as she dove into the newly created weak spot in the formation. The guard tried to turn to protect himself, but he wasn’t fast enough as the woman got behind his guard and drove her shortsword through the gap below his helmet and into his neck.

What remained of the spellbreakers’ formation now fell to pieces as, now flanked and vulnerable, the remaining pair each turned to face the closest threat to them, each one in turn getting overwhelmed from behind shortly after.

As the last guard hit the ground, blood pouring from his jugular like a fountain, Sylvanas wasted no time in commanding the remaining pair and the Royal Guard lieutenant forward. Said lieutenant didn’t seem to have any issue letting her take command as the group swiftly shattered the door protecting the stairs and rushed through to complete their mission.
The air crackled with dissipated, untamed magic, as the wards dampening the place fell to pieces and a moment later, the sound a portal splitting the air told Kalina it was all over.

“Portal’s open, my lord!” One of the guards called out.

“Well don’t just stand there, get her through!”

Immediately she felt the one holding her get up onto his knees, taking her with him, before standing up on top of the bed and starting towards the rift, even as she continued to struggle with what little strength she had.

Suddenly the wet thwack of an arrow hitting flesh sounded above her, and all at once both arms released her as blood began pouring down on her face, causing her to fall halfway through the portal and land on all fours.

Realizing the sudden precarious nature of her position, she swiftly scrambled backwards as a moment later, the one holding the portal open dropped to the ground, blood pouring from the laceration in his neck, in turn causing the gateway to snap shut with an audible crack.

She turned her head to see the last two guards in the room being flanked by a pair of rangers, before subsequently being hit with arrows from three sides and dropping to the ground.

As she glanced around the room, her gaze fell on her general, standing near the doorway, another arrow already nocked, next to - wait, Avina?

“Sylvanas!” She called out with a look of relief as she got to her feet and she started toward her love.

No sooner had she taken a single step, however, than the woman suddenly raised her bow and drew back, aimed squarely at her.

Kalina froze, her breath catching in her chest. She saw the woman’s eyes widen a split second, before the girl felt herself suddenly being jerked backwards by an arm around her chest, a blade now being pressed up under her jaw.

Sylvanas immediately drew down.

It was Avina who spoke first. “Let her go, Veric. It’s over.”

“How many times do I need to say that I didn’t do it?!” His voice cracked as he shouted at her. “I can prove it was her! I just need some fucking time!”

“The committee’s findings were conclusive. You’re guilty. Accept it and we can protect you from execution.”

The blade against Kalina’s neck tightened, forcing her to moderate her breathing to keep herself from testing its edge.

“Do you really think I don’t know what that means, Avina? I know exactly what sort of fate is in store for me if I let you take me!”

“You’ll still be serving Quel’thalas, just in a different role than before.” She stepped forward.

Kalina could feel rubies beading on the blade’s edge now as the thinnest section of skin was split by the increasingly aggressive piece of steel.

“Here’s a better idea.” His words were shaky now. “I take her and leave Quel’thalas so you don’t
have to deal with either of us. I prove that I’m innocent. Then I come back a fucking hero!”

As his robed arm tightened around where it now had her held at the ribcage, it was then that it hit Kalina. He wasn’t wearing any armor.

He wasn’t wearing armor.

Realizing her advantage, she immediately grabbed hold of his leg, before letting loose a current of arcane lightning. Every muscle in the mage’s body instantaneously froze before descending into jerky twitching, causing the dagger to fall from his grasp.

Kalina released the spell. Immediately, Veric crumpled to the ground, still twitching. Before either Avina or Sylvanas could start forward, however, she’d already gone for the knife, picking it up and turning around before getting down on her knees to straddle the blond’s chest. In two swift movements, she plunged the dagger into each of his biceps so he couldn’t fight back, before pressing it to his throat as the pair of officers circled around to cover him from all sides.

“You two.” Avina addressed the pair of rangers that were with them. “Wait outside.”

The pair looked to Sylvanas for guidance, before, at the woman’s nod of assent, quickly vacating the room.

“What was that thing in the cell?” Kalina hissed at Veric, her voice a raspy mix of fury and uncertainty.

He only smiled. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Lies!” She all but shrieked at him, coming very close to delivering another shock before stopping herself. She wasn’t her husband.

Veric’s smile turned to a smirk. “You know me and the guards had a bet on whether or not you’d go insane in there. When I went in and saw your gear scattered around, I thought it was part of some brilliant escape plan you’d made, but no, you really have just gone insane, haven’t you?” He scoffed. “Guess that means I won.”

Rage welled up inside her as she pulled the blade away from his throat, before stepping backwards and kneeling down again to place the tip atop a very particular area of his anatomy. “Tell the truth or I’ll make sure right here and now that you never hurt anyone else again.”

His eyes widened for a moment, before his entire expression descended into a look of contempt. “Fine by me.” He began, before jerking his head in Sylvanas’ direction. “The truth is that she let me take you. Even let me keep you. Didn’t so much as lift a finger to your aid.”

Time seemed to slow down for Kalina as she looked up at the woman she loved for confirmation, only to see a damning look of guilt adorning her features.

“We’ll talk about this later.” Sylvanas finally answered after a moment’s pause.

“I’d rather talk about it now.”

“Kali.” Sylvanas locked eyes with her. “Do you trust me?”

It took a moment of consideration, before Kalina slowly nodded, not breaking her gaze.

“I promise. I’ll explain everything later.”
She swallowed. “Alright.”

Veric chuckled as the room’s attention returned to him. “Always a loyal follower. No wonder Avina’s kept you around for so lo-“

“That’s enough.” Kalina cut him off, her voice now monotone as she plunged the blade downwards into his manhood, causing his face to contort into an expression of rage and agony while she simply stared into his eyes now, her gaze unblinking.

“Agh! You bitch!” He shrieked, instantly beginning to thrash as she slowly moved the blade around inside the wound, turning the entire area to mush.

“Stop struggling.” She repeated, not breaking her gaze. “It’ll only make this take longer.”

“That’s enough.” A gentle hand on her shoulder, and Kalina looked up to see Avina standing there, expression soft. “We can’t have him bleeding out here.”

The girl only sighed as she glanced back down at her handiwork, before nodding.

“Okay.” She spoke softly as she stood up. “He’s all yours.”

Avina squeezed her shoulder. “I promise you, we’ll make him pay for everything he’s done.”

Kalina nodded again. “I believe you. In the meantime, I’m gonna go do… anything.” Without looking back to where Sylvanas stood, she stepped over to the closet and grabbed the first thing her hand could find. A moment later she was gone.

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