

Sylvanas Windrunner reclined on a tanned hide in the large tepee on Spirit Rise. Nathanos sat beside her. He looked uncomfortable sitting cross-legged on the ground, but if she was not allowed to sit in a chair or stand, she wouldn't let him do it, either. A blood elf mage, Arandis Sunfire, had accompanied her as well so that she could make a quick exit if things grew too dull or if an emergency called her away. He stood stiffly to the left of the pair, looking as if he wished he were anywhere but here. On Sylvanas's right was one of her rangers, Cyndia, whose perfect stillness made Arandis's rigidity look energetic.

Sylvanas leaned over to Nathanos and whispered in his ear, "I am so weary of drums." To her, it was the unifying sound of the "old Horde"—the orcs, the trolls, and the tauren, of course, seemed to be willing to happily bang on the drums at any time. Now, at least, they were not the thuddingly loud war drums of the orcs but soft, steady drumming as Archdruid Hamuul Runetotem droned on about the "tragedy of Silithus."

As far as Sylvanas was concerned, what had happened wasn't really tragic at all. In her opinion, a crazed titan plunging a sword into the world had been a gift. She was keeping Gallywix's discovery quiet until she was certain about how the peculiar material could be properly utilized for maximum benefit to the Horde. Gallywix had told her he had "people on that, too."

Also, what was in Silithus, really, but giant bugs and Twilight cultists, both of which the world was better without? But the tauren in particular, whose people had given the Horde its original druids and who had lost several members of the Cenarion Circle, had been devastated at the loss of life.

Sylvanas had graciously sat through a ritual to honor and soothe their troubled spirits. And now she was listening to—and expected to approve—plans to send more shaman and druids to Silithus to investigate, all because Hamuul Runetotem had had a terrible dream.

“The spirits cry out,” Hamuul was saying. “They died in an effort to protect the land, and now only death inhabits that place. Death and pain. We must not fail our Earth Mother. We must re-create the Cenarion Hold.”

Baine was watching her closely. Some days she wished he would just follow his big, bleeding heart and turn the tauren to the Alliance. But her disdain for the tauren’s gentleness did not eclipse her need of them. As long as Baine remained loyal—and thus far he was, where it counted—she would use him and his people to the Horde’s advantage.

With Baine was a troll representative, the elderly Master Gadrin. The warchief wasn’t looking forward to that conversation, either. There was a power vacuum in the troll hierarchy right now, and the trolls were a chaotic people. Only now, belatedly, had she realized just how calm and centered an individual Vol’jin had been. Certainly, she hadn’t realized how effortless he made leading the Horde appear. The trolls would demand a visit, too, no doubt, so they could put forth their various suggestions for a leader.

Runetotem had finished his appeal. They were all looking at her now, all those furry, horned heads turned in her direction.

As she was pondering her answer, one of Baine’s Longwalkers, Perith Stormhoof, arrived. He was panting heavily as he bent and whispered into his high chieftain’s ear. Baine’s eyes widened slightly, and his tail swished. He asked a question in Taur-ahe, to which the runner nodded. Everyone’s attention was now on the tauren leader.

Solemn-visaged, he rose to speak. "I have just been informed that we will soon be having a guest. He wishes to speak with you, Warchief, of what has happened in Silithus."

Sylvanas tensed slightly but was outwardly calm. "Who is this visitor?"

Baine was quiet for a moment, then replied, "Magni Bronzebeard. The Speaker for Azeroth. He asks that you send a mage; he is too heavy for the lift to bear him safely."

Everyone started talking at once except for Sylvanas. She and Nathanos exchanged glances. Her mind was racing a thousand leagues a second. Magni couldn't have anything to say that she would appreciate hearing. He was the world's champion, and right now, the deep fissures in that world were yielding a spectacular treasure. She had to stop this, but how?

All she could do, she realized, was try to minimize the damage. "I know that Magni Bronzebeard is no longer truly a dwarf," she said. "But he once was. And I know that to you, High Chieftain, the thought of formally hosting a former leader of an Alliance race must be awkward, if not outright repellent. I will relieve you of the decision whether to welcome him. I am the warchief of the Horde. Anything he has to say, he can say to me alone."

Baine's nostrils flared. "I would think that you of all people would understand how a physical transformation can change one's views, Warchief. You once were a member of the Alliance. Now you lead the Horde. Magni is no longer even flesh."

It was not an insult in any way, yet somehow it stung. But she could not counter the logic. "Very well. If you think it is safe, High Chieftain."

The tauren and the trolls continued looking at her, and it took her a moment to realize that they were expecting her to offer the use of her mage. She pressed her lips together for a moment, then turned to Arandis. "Will you accompany Perith to where the Speaker is awaiting us?"

"Of course, Warchief," he said promptly.

In the awkward minutes before all heard the hum of the portal, Sylvanas's brain was working on how best to handle the imminent conversation.

When Magni appeared, the myriad facets of his diamond body reflecting the firelight, Baine greeted him warmly. "We are honored by your presence, Speaker."

"Yes, we are," Sylvanas said immediately. "I am told you asked to see me."

Magni nodded at Baine, accepting the welcome, before he squared his shoulders as he faced Sylvanas. He stabbed a diamond forefinger in her direction. "I did," he said, "an' there's much tae say. First, ye've got tae get rid o' yer little green men. They're just makin' a bad thing worse."

Sylvanas had expected that. "They are investigating the area," she said, keeping her voice calm and mild.

"Nae, they're not. They're pokin' and proddin', and Azeroth doesn't like it. She needs tae heal—or she's goin' tae die."

All present listened intently as the Speaker explained that Azeroth was in agony, racked by pain that was slowly destroying her. Her very essence was seeping to the surface, and this essence was powerful beyond imagining.

The last part Sylvanas already knew. The first was troubling. "We've got tae help 'er," Magni said, his voice ragged, and this time she did not correct him.

"Of course we must," she said. This revelation could undo everything. "I assume you will speak to the Alliance."

"Already done," Magni said, clearly hoping to reassure her. "Young Anduin and th' Explorers' League, th' Cenarion Circle, and th' Earthen Ring are goin' tae be sending out teams

tae Silithus soon.” The Magni Bronzebeard who once had ruled Ironforge would never have revealed what this Speaker of Azeroth just had. This was valuable information.

“Good,” said Baine. “We stand ready to do the same.”

He should not have spoken before his warchief, but Sylvanas was starting to get an idea.

“High Chieftain Baine speaks for us all. What you have shared is grave news indeed, Speaker. Of course, we will do what we can to help. In fact,” she continued, “I would like to ask the tauren to organize the Horde response.”

Baine blinked twice but otherwise gave no indication of how surprised he doubtless was. “It will be an honor,” he said, and brought his fist to his heart in a salute.

“Thank you for your warning, Speaker. We all exist on this precious world. And as recent events have brought home to all of us, there are not many places left for us to flee to should we destroy this one,” Sylvanas said.

“That’s . . . mighty enlightened o’ ye,” Magni allowed. “Right, then. Me task is far from over. I know th’ members o’ the Horde and the Alliance both have trouble imaginin’ that they aren’t the only people in the world. But there are many other races I must warn. As ye say, Warchief, we all exist on this precious world. Call off yer goblins. Or else we might be tryin’ tae find an entirely new world tae call home.”

Sylvanas did not promise she would, but she smiled. “Please let us save you some time as you execute this task. Where may Arandis send you next?”

“Desolace, I think,” Magni mused. “Need tae tell th’ centaur. Thank ye, lassie.”

Sylvanas kept the pleasant smile on her face even as she seethed at the too-familiar, condescending term. All were quiet as Arandis conjured a portal that opened up onto the bare, ugly land, and Magni stepped through it and vanished.

Hamuul sighed deeply. “It is worse even than I feared,” he said. “We must begin work as soon as we can. High Chieftain, we need all those who have worked with the Alliance before to—”

“No.”

The warchief’s voice cut off the conversation with the efficiency of a blade lopping off a head.

“Warchief,” Baine said calmly, “we all heard the words of the Speaker. Azeroth is badly wounded. Have we forgotten the lessons of the Cataclysm already?”

Tails swished. Ears were lowered and flicked. The trolls looked down and shook their heads. Oh, yes, they all remembered the Cataclysm.

“Such a thing cannot be permitted to happen a second time.”

I should have done this a long time ago, Sylvanas thought. She rose fluidly and went to the tauren leader. “I have words for your ears only, High Chieftain,” she said, her voice a purr.

“Walk with me.”