

Magni Bronzebeard awaited them in the Hall of Explorers.

Anduin—who once had looked on, helpless to intervene, as the king was agonizingly transformed into gleaming stone—had thought he would be prepared to meet the awakened Magni.

He was not.

Magni stood beneath the pteradon skeleton with his back to the entrance, deep in conversation with Velen and High Explorer Muninn Magellas. Falstad and Muradin stood beside them, listening intently, their bushy eyebrows drawn together in concern.

High Tinker Gelbin Mekkatorque, the white-bearded leader of the gnomes whose cheerful demeanor belied his deep, quiet wisdom, also had been summoned. Anduin had scheduled a meeting with him for the next day. The gnomes had been invaluable against the Legion, and he wanted to make sure he had a chance to thank the physically smallest but perhaps intellectually greatest members of the Alliance. The presence of the high tinker's adviser, the gruff warrior Captain Tread Sparknozzle, whose black eye patch was testimony to his years of battlefield experience, indicated that this was no mere diplomatic visit on Magni's part.

When the glittering shape turned to Anduin, the young king felt as if he had been punched in the gut. A thing made of stone should not move so gracefully, nor should its diamond beard flutter with that movement. Magni was neither the dwarf he had been nor the statue he had become; he was both and neither, and the juxtaposition struck Anduin on a profound level. A heartbeat later, though, gratitude and joy flooded him at Magni's words.

“Anduin! My, ye've grown!”

The phrase loathed by children everywhere was transformed by the power of nostalgia and the inexorable arrival of adulthood. It was so ordinary a phrase, so real, that the illusion of

“other” was as shattered as Magni’s diamond prison had been. The voice was warm, living, and very definitely Magni’s. Anduin wondered whether the diamond “flesh” would be warm, too, if he were to touch the being who now strode toward him. But the spurs and shards that dotted the dwarf-shaped form precluded the enthusiastic handshakes and crushing hugs that Magni had been so prone to in his former incarnation.

Had Moira or Dagra found a way around that? Did Magni even wish to bestow the gestures he’d been so free with during his life as a being of flesh and blood? For the sake of all of them, Anduin hoped so. Moira had asked Belgrum to take care of Dagra, who had protested that he wanted to meet his grandfather. We’ll see, she said. Her face wasn’t hard, exactly, but it was concerned.

“Magni,” Anduin said. “It is so good to see you.”

“And ye and me daughter.” Magni turned his stone eyes to Moira. “I dare tae hope that once me duty’s done here, I might be able tae meet me grandson. But sadly, a visit’s nae what I’ve come about.”

Of course not. Magni spoke for Azeroth now, and that was a great and solemn duty. Anduin’s gaze flickered to the draenei. Velen was not a maudlin soul. He smiled easily and warmly and often laughed. But he had known so much pain that it was those lines his ancient visage remembered, cutting through his face as if they had been chiseled, and they were set in a grim expression now.

Magni regarded Moira, Anduin, and Velen seriously. “I’ve sought the three o’ ye out nae because all o’ ye are leaders o’ yer people but because ye are priests.”

Moira and Anduin exchanged surprised glances. Anduin was aware of this commonality, of course, but for some reason he hadn’t given much thought to it.

“She’s in terrible pain,” he said, his diamond face, seemingly so hard, furrowing easily into an empathetic wince. Anduin wondered if the rite that had so transformed Magni meant that he could now literally sense Azeroth’s pain. Anduin thought of the destruction of Silithus, of the almost inconceivable size of the sword now towering over the landscape. If Sargeras’s last attempt to destroy Azeroth had come close to succeeding, it was a terrifying thought.

“She needs healin’. An’ that’s what priests do. She made it clear that all must heal her or all will perish.”

Velen and Moira turned to each other. “I believe that the words your father has spoken are true,” the draenei said. “If we do not tend to our wounded world—as many of us as possible—then most assuredly we all will perish. There are others who must hear this message.”

“Aye,” Moira said, “and I think it’s time that the lad met the rest of us.”

And as one, the two turned to look directly at Anduin.

Anduin’s brow furrowed in confusion. “The rest of whom?”

“Other priests,” Moira said. “The Prophet and I have been working with a group you’re long overdue to get to know.”

And then Anduin understood. “The Conclave. In the Netherlight Temple.”

The very name seemed to set calm upon Anduin’s soul, almost in defiance of the temple’s history as the prison for Saraka, a void lord and a fallen naaru, and its location in the heart of the Twisting Nether. For eons, the draenei had studied the creature. Only recently had they been able to purify it. Now, as its true self, Saa’ra, the naaru lingered, embracing its former prison as a sanctuary it offered to others.

Anduin had heard about the struggle that had unfolded in the early days of the Legion’s invasion. And he knew that many who now walked its hallowed halls were, like the naaru itself,

those who had fallen into darkness but had been brought back into the Light. These priests, known as the Conclave, had reached out to others on Azeroth so they would join together to help stand against the onslaught of the Legion. Although the threat had ended, the Conclave still existed, offering help and compassion to all who would seek the Light.

“What the Conclave did and continues to do is so important,” Anduin said. During the war, they had roamed Azeroth, recruiting priests to tend to those who were on the front lines against the Legion. Now they still tended to those courageous fighters as they dealt with lasting injuries to body, mind, and spirit. Not all scars were physical. “I wish I could have assisted their efforts during the war.”

“Dear boy,” Velen said, “you have always been right where you needed to be. We have our own paths, our own struggles. My son’s fate was mine. Moira’s path is overcoming prejudice and championing the Dark Irons who believe in her. Yours was succeeding a great king and governing the people who have loved you since your birth. It is time to let go of regrets. There is no place for them in the Netherlight Temple. It is a site filled with only hope and determination to follow where the Light leads us and bring it into the dark places that so need its blessing.”

“The Prophet, as he usually is, is dead right,” Moira said. “Though I admit I’m pleased to finally be able to share this place with you. Despite the dire nature behind this visit now, I know you’ll find some balm for your soul there. It’s impossible not to.”

She spoke as one who herself had found such a balm. Anduin thought of the strange material safely inside his pocket. He had planned to show it to the Three Hammers after what was supposed to have been a pleasant walk. Now he realized that no one would be better able to identify the stone than Magni, who was still one with the earth.

“We will go, but not yet. I thank you for your message, Magni. And . . . there’s something I need to show you. All of you.” Briefly he summarized what he knew about the amber material, realizing as he spoke that it was precious little.

“We don’t know much,” he finished, “but I believe you can tell us more.”

He withdrew the handkerchief and folded it open. The little gem glowed its warm amber and blue hues.

Magni’s eyes filled with diamond tears. “Azerite,” he breathed.

Azerite. They had a name for it at last. “What is it?” Moira asked.

“Och,” Magni said softly, sadly, “I told ye she was hurtin’. Now ye can see it fer yerselves. This . . . is part o’ her. It’s . . . bah, ’tis so hard tae describe in words. Her essence, I suppose will do. More an’ more o’ it is comin’ tae th’ surface.”

“Can she not heal herself?” Mekkatorque wanted to know.

“Aye, she can and has,” Magni replied. “Ye’ve nae forgotten th’ Cataclysm, have ye? But that fel thing that bastard stuck her wi’ . . .” He shook his head, looking like someone who was losing his beloved. Anduin supposed he was.

“’Tis a good an’ noble effort she’s made, but one that’s destined tae fail. Azeroth canna do it by hersel’. Nae this time. That’s why she’s beggin’ fer our help!”

It all made sense. Perfect, devastating sense. Anduin passed the small sample of Azerite to Moira. As all did, she went wide-eyed with wonder at what she was feeling.

“We hear you,” he said to Magni, looking deep into the diamond eyes. “We will do all we can. But we also need to make sure that this . . . Azerite . . . isn’t used by the Horde.”

The Azerite pebble now rested in Muradin’s hands. He glowered. “Enough o’ this and ye could take down a whole city.”

“Enough o’ this,” Falstad said, “an’ we could shatter th’ Horde.”

“We’re not at war,” Anduin said. “For now, our task is twofold—and it’s clear. We need to heal Azeroth, and we need to keep this”—and he accepted the Azerite—“safely away from the Horde.”

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.”