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Dark Mirror

by Steve Danuser

Nathanos Marris closed his eyes and inhaled deeply through a nose that had been broken more times than he could count. A hint of autumn hung in the still, humid air, mingling with the aroma of wildflowers sprouting between the flagstones that marked the path. It was a good scent. Familiar, earthy. One he was determined never to relinquish.

The ranger-general's boots made no sound as she approached. As ever, Sylvanas Windrunner smelled of the rose gardens native to her high elven city. Nathanos would know that fragrance anywhere.

For a long while the human stood in silence, relishing her company. The only sounds were the birds celebrating the sinking sun, and the soft bleating of sheep grazing just beyond the short wooden fence he'd helped his father build when he was a boy.

He opened his eyes. From this small rise, the whole of the Marris stead stretched out before him. The house where he'd lived most all his life. The barns that needed shoring up before winter. The wheat soon ready for harvest.

Home.

Nathanos loved this view. Was proud of it. Perhaps that was why he let the moment linger a while before he did his best to ruin it.

"You shouldn't be here," he growled.

"A fine thing to say to your commander," Sylvanas answered, turning toward him. Despite the bemusement that played about her lips, there was a steeliness in her eyes that exuded authority. Dressed in dyed-blue leather and wearing an ornate bow slung across her back, she made him feel a fool in his ragged chore clothes and unkempt beard.

Nathanos shook his head. "You know full well what I mean, Sylvanas. There has been grumbling among the Farstriders ever since you promoted me to ranger lord. Your visits here have drawn notice, and your oh-so-noble rangers gossip like washwomen at a creek."

She pulled back her cerulean cowl to let her long pale-gold hair tumble free. "I never realized you cared what others thought of you." The high elf's words dripped with a sweet syrup of feigned sympathy that tested his resolve.

He clenched his jaw in frustration. It irked him that Sylvanas had grown so accustomed to his gruffness that she could dismiss it as a matter of course. "Let those rumormongers say what they will about me. But you are their leader and can ill afford to lose their respect."

Sylvanas brushed a few stray strands of auburn hair from Nathanos's eyes. "As ranger-general, I have a duty to receive reports from my scouts in the field. And since you sequester yourself here in the wilds of Lordaeron rather than serve in Quel'Thalas, I am obliged to check on you from time to time."

He shrugged. "It's better that I stay away. I've no patience for the intrigue of your city. I can think here... breathe. Simple pleasures I find impossible in the shadow of those ancient spires."

"Lor'themar says you hide yourself away because you are intimidated by elven archers," she said, arching a single eyebrow.

"Lor'themar Theron is a fool! He's better suited to politics than the life of a ranger. I'll match him shot for shot any day." Nathanos stopped his tongue from saying more. His irritation was amusing her, and he refused to give her further satisfaction.

"I am relieved to learn the reason for your isolation. I thought perhaps you had grown tired of my company." The setting sun illuminated the perfect symmetry of her features, her blue-gray eyes sparkling in the golden light. The effect was so well timed that he swore it must be a spell or charm she kept at the ready to steer a conversation or distract a rival.

It worked, of course. He was playing into her vanity before he could stop himself.

"It's not that I don't want you here, Sylvanas. But your people need their ranger-general close by. In these dark times more than ever."

The elf's brow furrowed. "You will get your wish soon enough. I am to meet with my sister Alleria. She believes the orcs have set their eyes upon Quel'Thalas and mean to attack our homeland. If her fears prove true, you may be called back to defend Silvermoon whether you want to be there or not."

He touched her arm, drawing her closer. "Sylvanas, you know I will do my duty and—"

Before he could say more, excited shouts rang out across the field. "Nathanos!" the boy called, startling the sheep as he dashed toward the flock with arms waving. When the child got within a dozen yards of the rangers, his gaze fixed on the high elf, and his mouth fell agape. He almost tumbled from the top of the wooden fence as he climbed over, coming to a stop a pace away from her.

"Ranger-General Sylvanas Windrunner," Nathanos began, "I present my cousin, Stephon Marris. He's only a boy of nine, but as you can plainly see, his lack of manners already rivals mine." Stephon blushed in response. Nathanos glared, lest he reveal a grin. He was

fond of the child, with hair and features so like his own. Stephon was a constant reminder of what it was like to live in a world where everything was wondrous and new.

"Nonsense, Nathanos," Sylvanas said, kneeling down to the child's height and flashing a warm smile. "I am sure he will grow up to be quite civilized, despite your influence."

"You... You're a ranger? Like my cousin?" Stephon stammered, his eyes impossibly wide.

"No, lad. Sylvanas is much more than that. She leads all the rangers in these lands," Nathanos said.

Stephon's glance flitted from one to the other, his little mind racing to find something to say.

The high elf leaned in toward the child, whispering as if sharing a secret. "Do you want to be a ranger when you grow up?"

Nathanos's cousin shook his head with the vigor of youth. "I want to be a knight, with shining armor and a huge sword and a castle all my own! I don't want to live in the woods or shoot arrows from trees." A look of panic struck him. "Not that rangers aren't... I mean to say... I'd be proud to work for you, General!"

A chuckle escaped Sylvanas's lips, soft and melodic. Nathanos sighed through gritted teeth. "It's getting late, Stephon. You'd best head on home and stop pestering my commander."

Before the boy could run off, Sylvanas reached out with catlike grace and took hold of his hand. "Keep this," she said, pressing a gold coin into his palm, "until your cousin decides you are old enough to buy your first sword."

Stephon's grin shone bright enough to light the darkening fields. "Thank you! Thank you!" He jumped up, clambered over the fence, and sprinted across the meadow, sending the sheep to bleating as they scurried out of his way. "I'm gonna get my own sword!" he called out to no one in particular.

"Well, now you've done it," Nathanos grumbled, rubbing his beard. "I'll never hear the end of that coin."

She stood and watched Stephon until he disappeared over the hillside. "He just needs someone to believe in him," she said. "As we all do, every now and again." The wistfulness in her voice made him wonder what Sylvanas had been like when she was young.

They were quiet for a while as the last rays of sunlight sank away. The hum of insects took the place of birdsong before another word passed between them.

"When will you leave?" he asked at last.

She granted him the slightest of smiles. "On the morrow, I should think. It is late, and you owe your ranger-general a meal... and your company." She began walking toward the house. As she passed, her fingertips brushed against the back of his hand.

He thought for a moment about the incessant politics of Silvermoon, the disapproving sneer of Lor'themar Theron, and the shadow of the encroaching Horde. Part of him longed for a quieter life, one spent working the land as his father and grandfather had before him. He could resign from the Farstriders and live out his days here at the stead. At home. But that would require sacrificing something far more precious to him than his position as ranger lord.

As his feet began to follow the well-worn path to the house and the warm hearth that awaited him inside, he knew his choice was decided. Damn the politics. Damn the world! He had made a promise to Sylvanas, and nothing would keep him from her side.

* * *

"Why do you hesitate, my champion?"

The grating impatience apparent in Sylvanas's voice tore Nathanos from the gauzy veil of memory. He so rarely thought of the past. That life belonged to another man, one dead these many years. All that had once defined him as human—his home, his family, his obligations—were distant, petty things, without meaning or value to the creature he had become. He was the Blightcaller. He was Forsaken. And he no longer served a high elven ranger-general.

He served the Banshee Queen.

"I fail to understand the purpose of it." For a fleeting instant he was shocked by the gravelly rasp of his own words echoing off the Royal Quarter's dark stone walls. He'd almost expected to hear a human voice emerging from his mouth. What a sentimental fool!

"The ritual will make you stronger," she answered. Her red eyes flared as she paced about the dais at the center of the immense circular chamber. "And with the Legion's incursions into Horde lands, I require my champion to be strong."

Nathanos turned his gaze from Sylvanas to the stoic Val'kyr hovering just behind her. The specter's outstretched wings nearly spanned the twenty paces between two of the massive columns framing the platform. Though the Undercity from which his queen ruled abounded with ghosts and ghoulish fiends, the presence of the Val'kyr, with their countenances ever shielded behind heavy helms, was the one thing that truly unsettled him. He'd heard it said that these imposing vrykul warrior maidens once served as keepers of the dead, charged with conveying worthy souls to honorable rest. But this

one, like her sisters, had been subjugated by the Lich King, commanded to forge an army for the very monster who had slain Sylvanas Windrunner and cursed her with undeath.

His wariness gave him pause. Had it been wise of the queen to conscript such creatures into her service after the Lich King's defeat? He quickly chided himself and pushed the doubt from his mind. The Val'kyr had proved their worth by raising new Forsaken to Sylvanas's cause. The Dark Lady knew best. Always.

Still, he could not resist provoking her just a little. "If you feel I'm not strong enough as I am, perhaps you should name another champion."

Sylvanas's eyes ignited into a blaze of crimson. "Why must you be so difficult?" Her voice rang with the barest hint of the force that her banshee wail could muster, and the tapestries on the walls shuddered in response.

He took pleasure in her aggravation, but was careful not to show it.

After a moment of silent seething, the Dark Lady regained her composure. "The power of the Val'kyr will preserve my body for ages to come. Your once-human form, like those of my other Forsaken, will not enjoy such longevity. I would prevent your decay, spare you the pain I experienced when..."

With a quick nod, he acknowledged the words left unsaid. To him alone had she entrusted the tale of the day after the Lich King's fall, when she'd felt her purpose on this world was fulfilled and sought to claim the eternal rest long denied her. But when she dashed her body upon the frozen rocks beneath Icecrown Citadel, only the relentless hunger of the void awaited her. Though she refused to say the words, he knew her well enough to recognize when true fear gripped her heart.

Her pact with the Val'kyr had saved her that day, a fact for which he was selfishly grateful. And yet, if his queen had been lost, there would be no reason for him to continue this mockery of a life. If she were condemned to an eternity of torment in the darkness, at least he could end his own existence and endure damnation at her side.

"Perhaps," he said, "it would be best to let me go."

The fire faded from her eyes. For an instant, he caught a glimmer of the blue-gray light that used to shine within them. But a moment later, they turned cold and demanding again. "Twice now I have summoned you to my service, Nathanos Blightcaller. You will not be released from it until I command it to be so!"

* * *

The world swam through a thick, smoky haze. There was no reason, no sense. Only hatred. A hatred rooted deep in the corners of his mind, its tendrils twisting, vinelike, through his fetid core. The man he'd been was murdered, his blood now salting the farmlands he had

once called home. This creature might inhabit the dead man's body, but it possessed no will of its own. It didn't need one. It existed only to serve the Lich King.

He turned back to the ground where the half-consumed corpse of his latest victim lay. A warm rush of strength flowed into his body as he ripped a mouthful of flesh from her throat. He remembered the ecstasy that had gripped him as her screams grew quiet, the terror that froze in her dead eyes as he devoured her. Craving that sensation again, he tore off another bite.

Had days or years passed since he'd been raised? It mattered not at all. Time was the burden of mortals, and the master's gift had freed him from it. A singular purpose now drove his every action, a compulsion to spread the plague of undeath through the fallen kingdom of Lordaeron. To ravage the very lands his human soul had loved. Were there room for aught but malice in his heart, he would have laughed long and loud at the irony.

He stopped feasting and waited. He waited because it was his master's will that he do so.

A moment passed before he sensed it. The unholy magic that had reanimated his own lifeless body now caused hers to stir. He watched in rapturous wonder as the corpse that had been his victim arose a Scourge, as driven to end life as he was. She looked at him, the fear gone from her undead eyes, replaced by smoldering rage.

She might have been smiling were her ruined jaw not dangling by scant strips of flesh. He might have smiled back but for the shock of arrows that came crashing into her skull. The body of his new companion crumpled into a heap, headless and twitching.

He spun to face her attackers. Three cloaked figures loomed before him. Some part of him recognized their weapons and knew how deadly a bow could be, but those memories were vague and fleeting. He didn't care about the useless notions still lingering in the dead man's mind. Hatred welled up, demanding to be unleashed.

As he tensed to leap forward, the middle target barked out an order. In unison, the flanking pair took aim and sent a rain of heavy, blunted arrows thumping into his legs. He fell hard to the ground. Each time he tried to rise, more arrows pummeled him back down. Damnable creatures! He did not pause to reason why the cloaked figures hadn't ended him as they had the woman. He only longed to sink his teeth into the bits of flesh exposed between the pieces of their dark armor. When they rose as Scourge beside him, their bows would be unnecessary. Hatred would become their weapon, as it had become his.

He sniffed the air to stoke his hunger, but the scent confused him. His foes were neither humans nor elves. They weren't living at all—they were as dead as he was. Why would such creatures stop him from fulfilling the master's will? The fear and frustration of a beaten animal gripped him as shot after shot kept him on his knees.

"Nathanos!"

A female voice called out his name. No. That name was dead, left to fester upon the plagued soil of the Marris stead. How dare this creature evoke its memory! Rage roiled in his gut, hot and thrashing. He would kill the interloper. Feed upon her flesh. Sate his hunger for death.

But something in the cloaked woman's voice held him fast. His name had become a command, and with that single word, she reached down into the fury that had taken the place of his soul and caught him tight in her grip.

No. The hatred. The master's will. If these three would not serve, they would be destroyed!

"Nathanos!" she called again, this time in the wailing voice his master's banshees used in battle. The intensity of it startled him. Had she been sent here by the Lich King's command?

"Nathanos!" With the third sounding of his name, recognition skittered across his mind and chased the cloud of fury away.

That voice. Of course.

Sylvanas.

As she pulled back her hood, the sickly yellow light of the Plaguelands illuminated her elven features. Skin once fair and full of life had turned ashen. Hair that had shone like spun gold looked dull, lusterless. Her bracing blue-gray eyes now smoldered red. A swell of sorrow choked his throat as he realized that Sylvanas, too, had fallen. But his heartbreak gave way to awe at the terrible majesty her new form held. In life, he'd always thought she had the bearing of a queen. In undeath, she radiated the might of a goddess.

His eyes drifted down to the mottled skin of his gnarled fingers, stained deep red by his recent kill. A rush of shame banished the thrill of his reunion with Sylvanas. The thought that she would see him like this, a decrepit, nightmarish mockery of his former self, filled him with disgust. Almost of its own volition, his forearm rose to hide his rotting face.

"Sylvanas," he rasped through parched lips. His voice sounded foreign, and he realized it was the first word he'd spoken since his death. Conscripted to the Lich King's service had never required him to speak—only to kill.

"I have come for you, Nathanos, to call you back to my side."

He was not worthy to stand with her. To even look upon her. Yet her strength, her power, enthralled him, compelling his arm to fall away so his eyes could meet hers. "You see what I... have become," he growled. "Why would you want such a monster to serve you?"

Sylvanas waved her hand as if dismissing the bits of pulpy corpse strewn about the ground. "I am building a new kingdom, Nathanos, made up of the Forsaken dead freed from the Lich King's thrall. You will become my champion, and together we will call down a blight of suffering upon him. Arthas will answer for his crimes!"

A wicked sneer twisted his fallow lips. The insidious fog of control was gone, and he clenched his fists at the thought of taking revenge upon his former master. Anger and hatred still consumed his heart, but his will was again his own.

No. Not his own.

It was hers, just as it had always been.

The dark rangers attending Sylvanas tensed as Nathanos rose to his feet. He took a step forward, then bowed his head. "I am yours, Dark Lady. For all my days."

* * *

Nathanos looked down at his left hand. There was enough skin and sinew remaining to grasp a bow, and to teach even the clumsiest of his pupils how to nock an arrow. But he could tell that his strength had waned. His undead flesh continued its inevitable decay, and there would come a day when this hand would be rendered useless or rot away altogether. What good would he be to her then?

He might be a decomposing husk, he told himself, but he still knew the meaning of duty. "Tell me what you command, my queen."

Sylvanas nodded. "Arthas once forced the Val'kyr to raise death knights for his army. That was a much more potent ritual than the one with which they now transform fresh corpses into Forsaken. They can use their powers to reshape your body and make it stronger, more... enduring."

"Could the Val'kyr not do this for all our people?" he asked.

Sylvanas glanced at the implacable visage of the ghostly battle maiden. "It is an arduous endeavor, one they are reluctant to undertake. Without the Lich King's energies feeding them, I believe it requires a portion of their own essence to succeed." She turned toward him. "But it is my desire, so it will be done."

He stepped closer to the Banshee Queen and watched her expression. He told himself it was for the delight of provoking her again. But that was a lie. He wanted something more. "If the Val'kyr can only do this once... why choose me?"

Was it pain that flashed in her eyes? If so, it lasted only an instant, replaced by resolve and a will of unbending iron. "I told you. The Legion threatens to consume us all. I require my champion at my side."

It was doubtless petty, this satisfaction that he sought. But something raced within him whenever she addressed him by that title.

"Then tell this creature to hurry up," Nathanos snarled. "I have rangers to train."

Sylvanas granted him the faintest of smiles before facing the Val'kyr and nodding. The maiden turned and approached an alcove in the throne room's wall. The queen whispered an incantation and the stones parted, revealing a darkened hallway. It was one of the many routes she used for moving about the city in secret, and he suspected there were a few such passageways she kept even from him.

They followed a maze of straightaways and switchbacks designed to befuddle would-be assassins. The Val'kyr seemed to know the way, drawn, perhaps, by the veins of dark power pulsing through the Magic Quarter. After a while, the energies became so palpable that even he could sense them.

They rounded one last corner and came to a dead end. With a word and a gesture from Sylvanas, the way opened and they stepped forward.

The room's walls were lined with shelves of tomes and magical implements that glinted in the lamplight. Two huge stone slabs rested upon altars at the center of the chamber. One lay empty. The other held a human clad only in smallclothes, gagged and struggling against bindings of thick leather. Beside the figure were pieces of fine golden armor, a warhammer, and a shield. Nathanos noted the sigil of the Argent Crusade emblazoned upon the armaments. Though clearly helpless, the captive did not appear broken or maimed. Nathanos clucked his tongue. He'd captured or killed countless paladins in his day, but had left few of them as intact as this one seemed to be.

Gesturing at the man, the Blightcaller turned to his queen. "What is *this*?"

"Fuel," answered the icy voice of the Val'kyr.

Sylvanas strolled around the occupied altar. "A sacrifice is required for the ritual. Flesh that is... akin to your own." She stopped near the paladin's head and fixed her gaze upon Nathanos.

What manner of test was this? What did she expect him to see? Nathanos drew closer, studying the human's features. There was something familiar about the serious brow, the firm jaw, the look of determination as this mortal strained to break free.

It struck him that the paladin resembled what he could recall of his own human form. It had been so long since his awakening that he'd assumed all such memories were lost, but seeing this human now was like peering into a reflection of his past.

His past...

At that moment, the human's eyes locked onto his own. They held no fear—only contempt, and recognition.

Nathanos leaned in and removed the captive's gag. "Hello, cousin."

Revulsion washed over Stephon's face. "I prayed to the Light that you were truly dead. That your soul had found rest." There was sorrow in the words, but bitterness as well.

Nathanos chuckled. "Tell me, did you ever spend the gold coin the ranger-general gave you?"

"I kept it," the paladin answered, his voice defiant. "I kept it for years after Stratholme fell, after the Scourge ravaged Lordaeron, hoping that somehow my cousin had survived. I often asked what became of you, only to be met by shrugs and awkward silences. Then I began hearing stories of a horror called the Blightcaller haunting the Marris stead, hunting down heroes of the Alliance who sought to restore peace. I feared this was the creature that murdered Nathanos, and I vowed to take its head. It was only when I overheard two refugees of Darrowshire whisper the fiend's true name that I learned what you had become."

Stephon let his words hang in the air. "And on that day, I threw the coin into the river." He spat upon the stone floor.

Nathanos stood silent. There was no reason to deny the truth. He had lingered at the farm on orders from his queen, luring her enemies to the slaughter. He'd taken special delight in tormenting the high elf rangers of the northern foothills, the very Farstriders he'd once served alongside and commanded. Their haughty outrage bled away as they died, or twisted into a garish grimace upon those raised into undeath. And through all of it, no matter how noble the hero or how close a friend his victim might have been, Nathanos felt neither pity nor remorse. He felt nothing. He had done his duty, one to which he was well suited. His victories had earned the Dark Lady's favor. There was nothing else he could ever conceive of wanting.

Sylvanas patted her captive on the shoulder, causing Stephon to recoil against her touch. "I'm told that since taking his knightly oath, your dear cousin has patrolled the Plaguelands near that old farm of yours. He took down no small number of our people in the process." Her voice turned to ice as she leaned in closer to her prisoner. "I could have ordered my dark rangers to end his life, of course, but it's fortunate I never got around to that. Now this paladin will serve... a greater purpose."

"I'll never join you!" Stephon swore through gritted teeth.

"Not to worry, cousin," Nathanos said, his words dark and heavy. "That's not what she has in mind."

The Banshee Queen smiled. "Not exactly." Sylvanas said no more as she sauntered away.

As he peered down at his cousin, helpless before him, a wave of something unfamiliar rose up in Nathanos's chest. Pity? No, he knew he was incapable of that. But he didn't hate the paladin, not the way he hated other living men. It was pride, he realized. Part of

him was actually *proud* that Stephon had fulfilled the dream he'd clung to as a boy. Even if that dream was about to be undone.

Nathanos looked up at Sylvanas and met her gaze. Was this the true test? Did she suspect that love for his cousin might move him to betray her? Did she wonder if he, in the moment of decision, might give up everything in one final, desperate glimmer of humanity?

But of course there was no choice. The whims of a man long dead could not sway Nathanos Blightcaller from his oath.

"Let us be about it, then," he barked as he made his way to the empty altar.

"The Light will save me!" Stephon called out, but the desperation creeping into his voice made him a liar.

"The Light cannot find you here, boy," Nathanos answered, eyes fixed upon his queen. "Together, we will embrace the darkness."

Soundlessly, the Val'kyr glided to a halt between the struggling human and the taciturn undead. Nathanos glared up at the maiden, his grim visage a mask concealing the pangs of hesitation curdling inside him. With wings spread wide and arms raised, the Val'kyr seemed to fill the entire chamber. She chanted guttural words in an ancient tongue, her voice a harrowing dirge that still echoed with the Lich King's power. The specter loomed over the stone slabs, flashes of blue and gold pulsing from her hands. With his teeth bared, Nathanos's world exploded in a cacophony of fire and pain.

So much pain.

* * *

When the tide of agony receded and his wits returned, Nathanos's eyes flickered open and the room took shape.

The Val'kyr knelt in one corner. The creature, who had seemed so immense and implacable, now appeared small and defenseless.

The Dark Lady stood near him. "How do you feel, Blightcaller?"

"Dead," he answered dryly. "Though not quite so much as I was."

He spoke with a stranger's voice. The sound was neither the grinding frailty of half-paralyzed vocal cords nor the vibrant tone of a living man. Not a banshee's voice, though it rang with a bit of that command.

Sylvanas's eyes shone bright. "Rise, champion!"

He swung his legs off the side of the stone ritual table. A slight gasp escaped his lips as he stood, steadying himself on limbs that didn't quite feel his own. Like a child unwrapping a gift, he yanked the glove from his left hand and stared in awe as he flexed his fingers.

There was no protruding bone. No dangling flesh or torn muscles. Not a living hand, but it was whole and strong.

A hand worthy of the queen's champion, Nathanos decided.

He reached up and touched his cheek. Instead of the desiccated, paper-thin skin that had hung loosely from his skull, he found plumper flesh. His fingertips explored a jawline adorned with wiry whiskers. Nathanos marveled at the sensation. It felt almost like touching a human.

Almost.

He turned to Sylvanas. "How do I look?" He tried to sound as if the question meant nothing to him. But it did.

"Such vanity, Blightcaller!" Amusement laced her voice, but he sensed delight in it as well. Was she pleased that the mighty Val'kyr had been bent to her will, or was she simply relishing the acquisition of a new toy? She guided him toward a large oval mirror that hung in an ornate frame upon the wall. "See for yourself."

As ranger-general of Silvermoon, Sylvanas had indulged a fondness for mirrors. And why not? Even by high elven standards, the second of the three Windrunner sisters had been a rare beauty. Lords from countless noble houses had sought her hand. Even Prince Sunstrider was said to have desired it.

But the dead had little use for reflections. They served only to remind the Forsaken of their gruesome appearance, the decayed flesh that made the other races convulse in disgust. The undead personified the inescapable fate that awaited all the living—that one day their bodies would lie rotting in the ground... unless called into the Banshee Queen's service.

Sylvanas still kept a few mirrors in her halls, of course. Though the classic elegance she once possessed had been lost in death, her undead form held a dark allure that Nathanos found captivating. Even among her hated rivals in the mortal kingdoms, he knew full well there were hypocrites who, while publicly decrying her reign and scorning the Forsaken, in private exchanged fascinated whispers about the Dark Lady. And though she would never allow them to see it, he suspected some long-buried part of her relished such attention.

Nathanos stared into the mirror. His face was yellowed and gaunt, but the flesh appeared intact. For the first time since his death, he stood straight and tall, not

hunched and stooped like some decrepit elder. If not for the crimson glow of his eyes, the dim light of the Undercity might have allowed him to be mistaken for a human.

It pleased him, this transfiguration, but he saw no reason to let Sylvanas know. "It will do, I suppose." He watched her smile fade for a moment, replaced by a flash of anger, and then the return of satisfaction.

"You will vanquish a thousand demons in your queen's name!" she proclaimed.

His instincts told him she was right. His newfound strength would serve her well in the war to come. And after their victory, if he was very, very lucky, they would die their true deaths and welcome damnation together.

Then it struck him that the visage he looked upon was not entirely his own. He turned toward the second ritual table, empty save for a bit of ash and a few stains of oily residue. The paladin's armaments, once diligently polished, lay scuffed and strewn about the floor. Nathanos told himself they were merely the detritus of a fallen enemy. Only that and nothing more.

"You've clung to the tattered vestments of your former life long enough," the Dark Lady pronounced, and he knew it to be true. Why had he kept the same filthy uniform he'd worn as a man... as a Scourge? Was it that he simply didn't care enough to be bothered with donning new armor? Or had he taken comfort in a remnant of his past?

Sylvanas gestured toward a shadowed corner, and for the first time he noticed the dark ranger stationed at the periphery of the chamber. The Banshee Queen was clever, keeping an archer at hand to put him down had the Val'kyr's spell gone awry. "Anya, escort my champion to the armory and see that he is outfitted in a manner that befits his station."

The dark ranger silently obeyed, gesturing for Nathanos to lead the way. He nodded to Sylvanas as he left the room, her features caressed by the faint glow of lamplight.

After winding back through the secret tunnels, the pair traversed a long corridor that opened into the outer ring encircling the Undercity. Entering the common area, Nathanos soon recognized a disadvantage of his new form. Like his other faculties, his sense of smell had grown stronger. As a group of three Forsaken approached, the stench of their rotted flesh brought him near to retching. He hadn't noticed the scent of death after waking from the ritual, but out here, among thousands of undead, the odor pummeled him in waves.

Nathanos steeled himself until the trio passed, then swore a silent oath that he would never allow himself to be caught off guard that way again.

If Anya perceived his weakness, she made no mention of it when she spoke. "I haven't seen the Dark Lady this pleased in a long while. The moment she realized the Val'kyr were capable of such a ritual, she called for you."

"Our queen is wise," he answered with a nod. "This body better allows me to serve her."

Anya chuckled, a sound that raised the hackles on his neck.

"You disagree?" he snapped. At least his temper hadn't been altered by the Val'kyr.

"It's not that." She shrugged.

"What, then?" He all but shouted the words, for the dark ranger seemed far too pleased with herself for his liking.

She sighed. "Yes, the queen now has a mightier champion. But that wasn't what she most desired."

He stopped walking and faced her. Nathanos narrowed his eyes, infuriated by her evasiveness. "Say what you mean."

The corners of Anya's lips rose in a brazen curl. "Sylvanas defied a kingdom to name you ranger lord. She scoured the Plaguelands to reclaim you from the Scourge. And today she drew upon her most precious resource to restore your strength. Think upon these things, Blightcaller, and tell me how someone so cunning can be blind to the simplest of truths."

Nathanos glared hard at her, his jaw clenched tight. Within moments, the bemusement retreated from her face. Foolish ranger! The queen did not entertain such trifling notions.

Nor did he. Whatever emotion his mortal heart might have held, now it had room only for rage and contempt. He was Nathanos Blightcaller, Champion of the Banshee Queen. He almost smiled at the thought of the chaos he would unleash upon her foes.

He resumed walking, Anya following in admonished silence.

The distant clash of steel against steel grew into a cacophonous din as they entered the War Quarter. Trainers barked at a fresh batch of newly raised recruits hacking away at target dummies—and the occasional Alliance prisoner. Nathanos had spent countless hours transforming such neophytes into hardened soldiers, and it took him no more than a glance to judge this crop to be particularly pathetic. He scowled, vowing to correct their incompetence, then continued to the outfitter's hall.

The chamber's stone walls were lined with rows of tall racks, each stacked high with equipment and weaponry. Nathanos sought out a mix of mail and leather that would afford ample protection without hindering his movements. He chose pieces of green and gray to conceal himself in both forest and shadow.

As he turned to leave, the glinting of lamplight on polished metal drew his eye to a cluttered armor rack. He moved a few pieces aside to reveal a finely wrought

breastplate that was clean and well-maintained. His thoughts drifted back to the ritual, to the empty altar next to his. To a choice.

For the briefest of moments, he felt the touch of something foreign, unsettling. A sensation absent since the day he died. A weakness of mortality that had imperceptibly stalked him and had, at long last, found his throat.

Nathanos felt regret.