



WORLD
WARCRAFT
BATTLE FOR AZEROTH



ELEGY

by Christie Golden



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By the moons' glow, listen.

Beside the river, listen.

Holding those you love, listen:

To the cries of the dying,

To the whisper of the wind over the silent dead,

To the song my broken heart will ever sing

Of the story of the Tree of the World

And the death of all the dreams

It once cradled in its mighty boughs.

PART ONE:
IN THE IVORY TOWER

In purity, all things are born.

The eldest tree was once a tender sapling,

And even the stars were young.

O Lady Elune,

Weep tears so sweet

At the thought of the innocence

That once was ours.

Clang!

The martial music of swordplay rang out as the two blades clashed. The combatants sprang apart, circling. The older man, hair and beard as white as moonlight, fainted, then brought his weapon arcing up and around. But the younger man was quick and deftly blocked the blow. Sparks flew, and the colliding blades glinted in the sunlight.

“Nicely done,” Genn Greymane grunted even as he lunged. Again, the youth parried. “But one of these days, you’ll have to go on the—”

Greymane barely got his sword up in time to prevent King Anduin Wrynn’s blow.

“Offensive?” Anduin grinned. He bore down with the weapon, feeling the older man’s blade straining against it. His sun-colored hair had come loose and was falling into his eyes, and he grimaced as he realized Greymane had noticed.

The Gilnean king abruptly pulled back. Caught off balance, Anduin stumbled forward. Greymane whipped his blade around with a speed almost equal to that of the young king’s, turning his hand at the last minute to ensure that only the flat of the weapon would strike Anduin’s body. Growling with effort, Anduin managed to block the blow. His father’s sword, Shalamayne, caught it, but the impact jarred his hand. Shalamayne fell to the grass of Stormwind Keep’s garden area.

“Before you say anything,” Anduin said, panting as he bent to pick up the sword, “I’ll be wearing a helm in battle.”

“Under ideal circumstances, yes,” Greymane said. He smirked. His cheeks warm with embarrassment as much as exertion, Anduin didn’t begrudge him a little gloating. “In the meantime,”

Genn continued, “I suggest you get a trim. There are enough things to worry about in battle without being blinded by your own golden locks.”

Anduin laughed. “I’ll be fine,” he said. “I’ll secure it better the next time we spar.”

“You Wrynn men and your predilection for long hair,” Greymane said, shaking his head. “Never understood it.”

One of the Stormwind guards approached, saluting smartly. “Your Majesty,” he said. “Spymaster Shaw has returned with news.”

Anduin tensed and glanced at Greymane. Little sobered both men like hearing that Mathias Shaw awaited an audience. “Urgent?” Anduin asked.

“At Your Majesty’s pleasure,” the guard replied.

The young king relaxed slightly. “That’s a relief,” he said. “Give him refreshment and tell him King Greymane and I will meet him in the map room shortly.”



Genn and Anduin, wearing fresh clothes and smelling better than they had half an hour earlier, strode into the room where Mathias Shaw regarded the large map of Stormwind with a practiced eye.

Anduin conducted most of his meetings here. As a small boy, he used to sneak into the room and play with the figures representing units of soldiers, supplies, and weapons. Now, though, this room symbolized the heaviest of a king’s duties—the creation of battle strategies.

Shaw turned and bowed as the two entered.

“It’s nice to see you when you aren’t bringing dire tidings,” Anduin quipped.

Genn grunted in amusement, but Shaw didn’t crack a smile. “It is a pleasant change of pace,” was all the spymaster said. “Per our conversation, Majesty, I have all but saturated Orgrimmar with my agents.”

After Anduin’s recent encounter with Sylvanas Windrunner in the Arathi Highlands, when he had witnessed how low she would stoop for her own ends, he had been both heartbroken and furious. He had told Genn and Mathias that, while he would not start a war without provocation, he was no longer willing to give the Horde’s leader the benefit of the doubt.

I want her, and the Blightcaller, and Saurfang—anyone of import or position in Orgrimmar—under constant surveillance. And I want them to know it, the king had said. I want them to believe they cannot order a drink at a tavern without the Alliance knowing the color of the ale.

Shaw had raised an eyebrow. *An interesting approach*, he had said, but he did not offer a protest.

Now, Anduin asked, “Are we seeing results?”

“My spies are ... enjoying the challenge,” Shaw said, in a voice that indicated he, personally, was not.

“Casualties?”

“Significantly fewer than expected.”

“Good,” Anduin said. “Send more.”

Genn nodded his white head in approval.

Shaw’s bushy red brows drew together in disapproval. “If I send any more spies, no one in Orgrimmar will be able to walk through the street without jostling a dozen of them.”

“Let them be jostled, then,” Anduin said. “I assume they continue to provide useful information?”

“Indeed. The latest reports indicate that Warchief Sylvanas and her high overlord are at odds—and that the Blightcaller isn’t taking it well.”

Genn and Anduin exchanged glances. “That could be excellent news for us,” Anduin said. “My father spoke well of Varok Saurfang, and I myself heard him testify at Garrosh Hellscream’s trial. He has long had a reputation for honorable conduct. Perhaps he is beginning to see Sylvanas as we do.” He wondered if Saurfang had been informed of the ignoble choices Sylvanas had made in the Arathi Highlands, and if so, whether they had troubled the high overlord. One could hope.

Anduin’s voice hardened. “He’s no fool, and the Banshee Queen believes in power over honor.”

“Don’t sentimentalize the old orc yet,” Shaw warned. “He is a veteran of the First War, when Stormwind was sacked and your grandfather was assassinated.”

Anduin inclined his head. “Point taken. Nonetheless, I will take an orc with honor over a banshee with none. And if Saurfang and Nathanos Blightcaller are truly in conflict as well, I find that all to the good.”

“What *exactly* is getting under Blightcaller’s rotting skin?” Genn asked Shaw.

“Martial plans.”

“Which are?”

“In flux,” Shaw replied. “Hence the clash between the warchief and her high overlord. But a single word has slipped.”

Anduin arched a blond eyebrow. “And that word is?”

Shaw replied grimly, “Silithus.”



When Cordressa Briarbow, followed by two other Sentinels and three dwarves, finally trudged within sight of the Temple of the Moon, she almost wept. The recently promoted captain had sent word ahead, and Tyrande Whisperwind had left instructions that the Sentinel and those she escorted be treated to a hero’s welcome.

“Well, now,” said Gavin Stoutarm, leader of the Explorers’ League expedition, as they made their way toward the temple. “That’s almost as lovely a use o’ stone as Ironforge.”

Cordressa smiled wearily. She had grown fond of the dwarves over the last few weeks. Magni Bronzebeard, Speaker for Azeroth, had warned the Alliance leaders that the world had begged for healing. The Explorers’ League had answered the call by sending a team to Silithus to explore the strange new material known as Azerite. The substance, the very essence of Azeroth, had come to the surface when the fallen titan Sargeras had brutally plunged a massive sword into the world. Azerite’s properties were remarkable, and the Alliance had done very little study of it as of yet. Given the danger from the goblins at the site, Tyrande had assigned Cordressa and other Sentinels to protect the group.

Cordressa had heard descriptions of dwarves, of course—that they were short, drunken loudmouths with thick accents and thicker heads. They supposedly did nothing but unearth things best left hidden, and only turned their faces up to the sun or the moons when they had to. But her prejudices had been quickly disabused once she had gotten to know them.

To the Sentinel’s everlasting regret, everyone—including her—had underestimated the numbers, ferocity, and brashness of the goblins near the gargantuan sword. In a single night, the Sentinels and the expedition had suffered several casualties. Riddled with guilt, Cordressa had made it her personal mission to get the rest of the team to safety.

Gavin’s comment about the great night elven temple might have sounded deprecating to others’ ears, but not to Cordressa’s. She heard the awe and respect in Gavin’s booming voice, and so she smiled.

“I am sure Ironforge is glorious,” she said, “but we have something that you do not. I think you will find it most welcome.”

“Oh? An’ what might that be?” asked Inge Ironfist.

“Moonwells.”

“I’ve visited a moonwell in Greenwarden’s Grove,” Arwis Blackstone piped up. “Very pretty an’ quite restorative!”

Moonwells were precious and sacred things, filled with healing waters and blessed by priestesses. They were all “very pretty,” but there was nothing like the moonwell in Darnassus. Cordressa would enjoy watching the dwarves’ reactions.

As they entered the Temple of the Moon, the dwarves fell silent. After the brutal, nearly lifeless landscape of Silithus, the greenery of the temple was jarring. The dwarves looked around with their mouths slightly open and then stared, transfixed, at the giant statue in the temple’s center.

“This is Haidene,” Cordressa explained. “The first high priestess of Elune.” Most first-time visitors to the Temple of the Moon believed that the white, gleaming statue of a night elf female, bearing aloft a basin of flowing water, was Elune herself. In parts of the temple, elf bards played music as soft as Elune’s light and as soothing as the gentle splash of falling water.

One of the priestesses, Astarii Starseeker, stepped up and embraced Cordressa. “Word of your coming reached us,” she said. She turned her kind visage on the dwarves, who stared up at her with wide eyes. “Your journey has been long and dangerous. We are so sorry for your loss. Please, allow us to do what we can to heal and refresh you. There is plenty of food, as well as water from the moonwell. But we find the most efficacious use of the sacred waters is bathing in them. We have some robes for you to change into, should you wish to do so.”

Gavvin frowned. “Well, it’s nae that I dinna have a fine physique, ye ken, but I dinna want tae offend ye lovely ladies.” His already ruddy cheeks blushed redder than Cordressa had yet seen them.

Astarii smiled. “There are private rooms for changing.”

“Er ... oh.” Gavvin harrumphed, turning an even brighter shade of red. “Well. In that case ... thank ye.”

There was plenty of room for all of them in the temple pool. Almost better than feeling her own pain, weariness, and grief eased by the cool waters was watching the astonishment on the faces of her friends. *Yes. Friends. They are not merely my charges anymore.* She undid her hair and let her midnight-blue tresses flow behind her as she sank down, murmuring a prayer of gratitude.

The water muffled sounds, but the Sentinel still heard her name being called. Reluctantly, she opened her eyes. A familiar face smiled down at her. “Delaryn!” Cordressa exclaimed, sitting upright in the water.

Lieutenant Delaryn Summermoon was perched atop one of the low walls of the pool. She was a fellow Sentinel, though younger than Cordressa and below her in rank. Cordressa had mentored her since the Cataclysm had ripped through Azeroth, and they had become close. Delaryn's pinkish skin glowed beneath her dark blue hair; she still had not chosen her facial markings. *I know they do not always have to mark a rite of passage, she had told Cordressa once. But I feel they should. And there is nothing that has made enough of a mark on me yet to choose their form.*

"I heard you had returned," Delaryn said. She turned her radiant gaze to the dwarves who sat in the pool, their heads only just above water, expressions of bliss on their faces. "I am glad you brought them home."

"Would that I had brought them all," Cordressa said. Pain stole into her heart even through the moonwell's waters. "I sent a letter detailing the events to Lady Tyrande."

Delaryn did not press. Instead, she said, "Our lady has asked for you to report to her in person."

"I shall see her now, then." Cordressa started to rise.

Her friend placed a hand on her shoulder and, gently but firmly, pressed her back down into the water. "When you are healed," she said. "She stated that very plainly."

"I will serve at any instant that I am called," Cordressa replied. "But I confess ... I am pleased to have a few more moments."



A short while later, Cordressa and Delaryn thanked the priestesses and bade them farewell. Cordressa envied them—her softer sisters, whose paths had brought them to a temple instead of a battlefield. Such a path had never been for her, nor for Delaryn.

Tyrande Whisperwind, high priestess of Elune and founder of the Sentinels, was working in a small, private room on another level of the temple. She was writing a missive when the two Sentinels arrived. She looked up as they entered.

Cordressa saluted. "Lady Tyrande, I have come as requested. I take full responsibility for my failure in Silithus."

The high priestess did not speak. She rose, moved to her friend, and embraced her. Tyrande drew back and regarded Cordressa kindly. "Sentinel Cordressa," she said, her voice warm, "I have reviewed your report. I understand your emotions. It is hard to lose those entrusted to us. But it is clear that all of us—I, Malfurion, King Anduin, and his advisors—underestimated the goblin threat

in Silithus. It is easy to take them too lightly, and we paid the price for that. As for your part in this—you brought the survivors home through treacherous territory, while also returning to us with valuable information. That cannot be viewed as a failure.”

She touched Cordressa’s cheek, smiling, then stepped back. “I have almost finished writing a response to King Anduin about some troubling new intelligence his spies have received.”

“Shall I leave, my lady?” asked Delaryn.

“You may stay, Sentinel,” Tyrande said. “This will soon become common knowledge.”

Delaryn inclined her head.

Tyrande resumed her seat. “After the tragedy of the Arathi Highlands, King Anduin has reinforced the number of eyes on the Horde’s leaders in their capital city. It appears that the warchief and her favorite, Nathanos Blightcaller, disagree with High Overlord Saurfang about the movement of troops.” She looked at Cordressa. “Your encounter with the goblins in Silithus was troubling enough. But now, it appears, Saurfang wishes to send several hundred Horde soldiers there.”

Cordressa frowned. “May I speak freely?”

“Always.”

“Several hundred is nothing to worry about.”

Tyrande replied, her face grim, “It is when that number is simply a scouting party sent to determine the best path for a future army. King Anduin believes—as do I—that the Horde has found a lethal use for Azerite and that Saurfang’s intention is to cut off all Alliance access to it. This could drastically shift the balance of power to the Horde.”

Cordressa’s gut clenched. Anduin Wrynn had visited Darnassus a few months ago. He, Malfurion, and Tyrande had discussed this exact scenario. The night elves and the draenei were the only Alliance bastions on the continent who could offer a swift counter to a Horde incursion into Silithus, and the draenei’s resources had been depleted during the war against the Legion. Tyrande had since been overseeing a slow but steady buildup of an army that could be dispatched to the site of Sargeras’s evil sword, should the need arise.

“I see,” Cordressa replied. “Unfortunately, I have witnessed the peril that already faces the Explorers’ League. They are incapable of withstanding an army—as are our priests and druids.”

“Are the moonwells having any impact?” asked Delaryn.

In other times, in different areas of the world, the night elves had created moonwells at sites troubled by fel or similar energies. Priests and druids worked together to harness nature’s power and the blessings of Elune, and the sacred waters often calmed and purified the uneasy land. Several groups

had been sent to Silithus in the hopes that this healing magic would work there as well. It was a more peaceful method of combating the damage done by the sword of Sargeras and the greed of goblins.

“It is too early to tell,” Tyrande replied. “We have pledged to help the healers in their efforts to care for Azeroth. If the Horde does move on the sword of Sargeras, we will defend them. We must begin preparations to do so.” She gestured at the letter she had been writing. “I have written to Shandris Feathermoon to have her soldiers on high alert. Over the next few weeks, I will be dispatching troops, one or two ships at a time so as not to attract attention. Once our fleet has assembled at Feralas, they will be ready to march on the sword when I give the order.”

Shandris Feathermoon was almost as legendary as Tyrande herself. Orphaned as an adolescent when her family was slain by the Burning Legion, she had found a second mother in Tyrande. Shandris was one of the first Sentinels and remained their general to this day. Currently, she oversaw night elf forces in the lush green land of Feralas and a place called Trueshot Lodge, where she worked with hunters of all races.

“If this Horde army does get the support of the warchief,” Tyrande continued, “it will need time to prepare. And it will need time to arrive. We will have ample opportunity to give High Overlord Saurfang a warm welcome.”

Tyrande Whisperwind smiled.



Renzik sometimes grew tired of being *the* boots-on-the-ground member of SI:7 in Orgrimmar. He understood the reasons. Practically every other member of the organization belonged to an easily recognizable Alliance race, which meant that eighty percent of the time, they had to remain unseen. The other twenty percent of the time, they had to rely on magic or truly superb disguises. Obviously, their opportunities for going undercover were limited.

Renzik was second-in-command, and he was a goblin. That was why Mathias Shaw repeatedly assured him he was trusted above all others to get the *real* story deep inside Horde territory.

That was all fine and good and flattering, but it did get a little old. He was a spy and a rogue, and truth be told, he cared very little for interacting with others. But the pay was good, and he was one of probably only a handful of goblins who could honestly say they were highly respected. It didn't hurt that he despised what the goblins had become under the leadership, if one could even use that word, of Trade Prince Jastor Gallywix.

Besides, he had the tiniest of soft spots for the Alliance way of looking at things—which he would admit to no one, lest he tarnish his hard-won reputation.

He'd been in the Horde's capital city since day one of the "Sword in the Sand" debacle, posing as a merchant of odds and ends. He was the one all the Alliance spies reported to—indirectly, of course. Only a few knew who he really was, and that was just fine with Renzik.

The assignment had been pretty boring, especially as, with the persona of a merchant, Renzik's chances to skulk in the darkness were slim. On the plus side, no one heard as much gossip as a merchant. Either people spilled their guts to the stranger with pretty objects or they ignored him and talked as if he weren't standing right in front of them.

He'd set up his traveling stall near Grommash Hold. He was far enough away not to be considered a threat, but close enough that he could observe who went in and out ... and how they looked when they left.

It had been peculiarly satisfying to watch the daily ritual of Varok Saurfang trudging into the hold for his meeting with the warchief. He looked frustrated when he entered and was usually glowering by the time he left. Even better was when the warchief herself chose to leave the keep for a hard ride on her skeletal steed. The Banshee Queen didn't show a lot of emotion, so when her eyes were narrowed, her lips were pressed together, and she spoke harshly, it was equivalent to an orc having a total meltdown.

In other words ... the job was getting interesting.

It was about that time. Sure enough, Saurfang emerged from the darkness of Grommash Hold into the glaring Durotar afternoon with an expression that was becoming more routine with each passing day.

Renzik mopped his sweaty, bald pate. His spies had reported that Nathanos was also not happy with the high overlord's plans or with his attitude. *Love-struck puppy*, Renzik thought, pondering the idea of a deader—as he referred to Forsaken—in love.

Creepy.

Even as he was thinking about the Dark Lady's champion, a voice shouted in anger.

"Saurfang!" The voice sounded almost human, but not quite—just as Nathanos, even with his shiny new body, was almost but not quite human.

Saurfang didn't bat an eye. He kept striding toward Orgrimmar's great gate.

"*Varok Saurfang!*" Oh, Nathanos was really mad now. This was going to be interesting. He didn't break into a run as he emerged from the hold, but you could tell he wanted to. "Guards! Stop him!"

All movement had come to a halt. Everyone's attention was on the scene unfolding in front of them. Renzik didn't even have to keep one eye on his wares—though he did so out of habit.

For a moment, the two guards didn't move. Then, while they didn't exactly stop Saurfang, they stepped—or rather, meandered, looking furtive and worried—into his path. They didn't raise their weapons.

Boy, I'd hate to be them today. Whatever they do, they're going to tick off somebody powerful.

Saurfang slowed, stopped. He stared at one guard, then the other. Neither met his gaze, looking elsewhere and doubtless quaking in their boots. Slowly, the high overlord turned.

Orcs were much bigger than Forsaken, and much hardier. This orc, in particular, was very big and very hardy. Nathanos, in his fresh human suit, was dwarfed—*bab!*—by the towering green figure.

"You were not dismissed," Nathanos snapped.

"*You* weren't at the meeting."

Silence. As a fellow eavesdropper, Renzik knew exactly what that meant. Saurfang apparently did, too, for he slitted his eyes and rumbled deep in his chest.

"You should not interfere in matters that do not concern you, Blightcaller. You are Sylvanas's champion, not her high overlord."

"I was a ranger in life," Nathanos said. "The only human to be so honored. I served the lady Sylvanas then, and I serve her now, and I know more about most things than you could possibly imagine."

"I do not trust imagination. I trust facts. Numbers. Strategy. Weapons. I know these things, Blightcaller, and I was fighting wars while you still bleated like a besotted mooncalf."

If he had still been human, Nathanos would no doubt have either flushed purple or turned pale as milk. As it was, he simply stood, frozen, his glowing crimson eyes fixed on Saurfang.

Renzik noticed a goblin in breeches, a vest, and a cap standing nearby, taking gold and writing tickets. The rogue chuckled raspily. If there was a quick copper to be made, trust a goblin to find a way. He returned his gaze to the escalating argument, sidling a few steps in the bookie's direction.

"A hundred gold on the Blightcaller," he said. Everyone else was sure to be betting on the orc. Renzik, though, had spent enough time in human company to understand that they often came through against the greatest odds, especially when their pride—or their heart—was on the line. In the Blightcaller's case, Renzik suspected he was still human enough that both were involved.

“There is a certain amount of respect I owe you, *elder*,” Nathanos was saying. “Which is why I am exercising restraint and giving you a warning. *Never* leave my lady’s presence without her permission again—or you will answer to me.”

Saurfang did the most incendiary thing he could possibly do in this moment. He laughed.

Then he began to clap, slowly. “I show restraint as well, puppy,” he said. “By not ripping your too-human head off. Here’s a lesson for you. Respect is earned, and you have yet to earn mine.”

“Perhaps I will earn your respect when your blood makes mud of the sands of Orgrimmar.”

Saurfang straightened as best as his curved, orcish spine would permit and opened his arms wide as if to embrace the Forsaken.

“You are welcome to try! The warchief will have to find a new toy if you do.”

Nathanos Blightcaller let out an uncharacteristic roar of fury that surprised—and heartened—Renzik.

I’m gonna make a killing on this one, he thought, rubbing his hands in anticipation as the Forsaken champion charged the high overlord.



“A fight,” Tyrande repeated, as disbelieving as Anduin was about the news. Her aide, the Sentinel Cordressa, managed to keep her face stoic. Mostly.

“A fight,” Shaw assured them. “This report comes directly from my second-in-command.”

Anduin looked at those gathered around the table in the royal garden area. It was inevitable that at some point they would relocate to Stormwind Keep’s map room during the head-of-state visit from High Priestess Tyrande Whisperwind and the draenei Prophet Velen. But for now, the grim topic of war strategy would at least be discussed under an open sky, surrounded by green, living things. Tyrande and Cordressa would appreciate the gesture, he was sure. He was anxious to perform all the duties of a good host and responsible king—though he had never anticipated that discussing a fistfight between High Overlord Saurfang and Nathanos Blightcaller would be part of those duties.

The last time Anduin had met Tyrande had been in Darnassus. He had gone to thank the night elves for their aid against the Legion—and to discuss how to handle the newly discovered Azerite. All were painfully aware that Teldrassil and the *Exodar* were the last Alliance bastions on the continent of Kalimdor, and both Velen and Tyrande had agreed that vigilance was necessary regarding the sword of Sargeras and the substance now coming to the surface in the area.

“Who won the fight?” That, of course, was Genn Greymane.

“Saurfang. Although by my agent’s account, it was closer than one might imagine,” Shaw said. “According to him, both participants all but crawled away.”

“Does your agent know if Saurfang was punished?” Anduin said.

“Quite the opposite,” Shaw replied. “Nathanos was the one who was reprimanded.”

Anduin said, quietly, “Then it’s happened.”

All heads turned to him. “What’s happened?” Genn asked.

The young king looked at them each in turn. “The decision has been made. Sylvanas is siding with Saurfang over her champion. He’ll be on the march soon. From all that your spies have told us, Shaw, Nathanos has been protesting this. According to him, it’s a waste of resources. Were those not the words you used?”

“They were,” Shaw confirmed.

“This was likely the final straw, then. The Horde’s troops will be heading to Silithus.”

“This sudden urgency,” Velen said, frowning. “It does not make sense. Magni informed all of us—Horde and Alliance alike—about Azerite and its true nature some time ago. Why move now? What does Saurfang know that we do not?”

“It could be as simple as an old warrior looking for a fight,” Greymane said.

“No,” Tyrande said. “Saurfang is no fool, nor would he waste resources and soldiers merely to satisfy his ego. If he is pushing this hard, there is a reason.”

“I’ll bet they’ve found a way to make weapons out of Azerite,” Greymane said.

“I would not bet against you, King Greymane.” Tyrande turned her glowing gaze to Anduin. “You are right, King Anduin. Things *are* escalating. When I received your last missive, I sent orders to General Feathermoon to be prepared to receive soldiers. If we are all in agreement on this, I stand ready to dispatch them immediately. They can reach Silithus before the Horde does.”

A chill swept through Anduin, leaving a coldness in the pit of his stomach. Despite all he had seen in his young life, all he had endured and lost, he had never been where he was now: on the crumbling precipice of full-fledged war in all its brutal horror. Weaponry, troops, soldiers, rogues, bombs, poison, slaughter ... These were terrible enough on their own, but with Azerite thrown into the mix, who knew what horrifying changes would be wrought? Tens—perhaps hundreds—of thousands could die if this war erupted.

Anduin swallowed hard and realized that all eyes were on him. He didn't know whether to be grateful for Tyrande or to curse her. She, a veteran of millennia of warfare, had not spoken the awful three-letter word herself. *I stand ready to dispatch them*, she had said, and with her turn of phrase—which was as precise and deliberate as her aim in battle—Tyrande Whisperwind was waiting for Anduin to issue the command.

To take the first steps toward certain war—for Anduin could not fathom a situation where Varok Saurfang marched his troops and refused to use them.

Could that be why the old orc and the Dark Lady's champion had come to blows? Because Sylvanas did not want a war with the Alliance? Even as he had the thought, he dismissed it as the hopeful yearning of a child who longed for peace. Sylvanas Windrunner had proved, time and again—so adamantly that her attitude could not be mistaken—that she ached for war against the Alliance.

He licked lips suddenly gone dry, and took a deep breath. *Light, I pray you, guide me in this.*

“Move your troops, High Priestess,” Anduin told the night elf leader. To his surprise, his voice was sonorous and strong. The Light was indeed guiding him, and the words came clearly and easily. “Send them to protect the Alliance. If the Horde truly intends to claim Silithus, we will already have a foothold. I trust your judgment on how to use them. I would prefer reconnaissance and deterrence.”

“As would I, King Anduin. War is a dreadful thing.” Tyrande's voice trembled as she spoke, not from fear—not from her—but from a deeper understanding of horrors that Anduin, even if he lived to be a hundred, would never fully comprehend.

She turned to look at Velen, lifting an aqua brow in question. Anduin felt sympathy for him. The draenei, perhaps more than even Tyrande, had seen so very much of war.

Velen sighed deeply. “I had hoped for a breath of peace after the Legion was defeated. But I agree with you both. Send the troops, High Priestess. Send them, and let us pray they will not be needed.”

It was done.

PART TWO:
THE CALL TO BATTLE

The huntress's horn has sounded!

To battle, it calls us now,

To the defense of all we hold dear:

This city,

This well of the moon,

This soft song of the evening breeze.

It calls us,

And we answer.



Cordressa walked beside Archdruid Malfurion Stormrage through the Temple Gardens. Tyrande had elected to remain in Stormwind, working with Velen, Anduin Wrynn, and Genn Greymane in crafting war strategies for the long term. The high priestess had instructed Cordressa to return to Darnassus to inform Malfurion of the latest turn of events.

Although the great archdruid had returned to his people a few years ago from his sojourn in the Emerald Dream, his presence still took getting used to.

Malfurion Stormrage was unique—the greatest druid the night elves had ever produced. So deep was his affinity with nature that his very body proclaimed the connection. A stag's antlers adorned his head, feathers lined his powerfully muscled arms like wings, and his feet were like those of a great cat.

Like nature itself, the mighty *shan'do*—honored teacher—was both gentle and fierce. But as a sentient being with a powerful mind and a strong will, he was in full command of which aspect of himself he manifested.

Now, he spoke in a soft voice as they walked together, gathering herbs. “You have recently returned from Silithus.” Malfurion bent over a silverleaf bush and plucked a leaf, crushing it between his fingers and inhaling the clean, revitalizing aroma. As he did so, he brushed the plant with his other hand, murmuring his thanks. Three leaves burst from the stem; Malfurion had repaid the plant threefold for its sacrifice.

Cordressa, too, crushed a leaf and breathed in the scent, smiling as calm and clarity descended. Sentinels enjoyed a life that took them throughout Azeroth, but Cordressa had seldom left Darnassus,

and she liked it that way. She would never shirk her duty nor shrink from battle, and there had been times when she had been stationed away from her people for years on end. But her home was here, with Tyrande and Malfurion, in Darnassus. When she was away, she craved the peace of its temple and gardens.

She plucked a mageroyal blossom, regarding the deep pink hue of the flower as she spoke. “As I told my lady and the others in Stormwind, I have personally observed nothing to warrant the Horde’s focus on Silithus—certainly nothing that would explain Saurfang’s willingness to push hard against his warchief. All I saw were goblins, a goodly number of them, who were intent on mining Azerite and killing intruders.”

“No sudden buildup of the goblins’ numbers?”

“Not that I observed. They attack, of course, but they do so in a cowardly fashion, and I never saw a significant increase in weaponry or personnel—nothing to signal that the Horde would send an army there. Of course, if my lady and the king of Stormwind are correct in their belief that the Horde has learned to make weapons out of Azerite, this move makes perfect sense.”

Malfurion stopped in front of a flowering patch of peacebloom and gazed at its white flowers. “I will see that Tyrande’s orders to send soldiers to Silithus are carried out. To that end, I will recall many Sentinels, and others who can fight, from local assignments to fill the army’s ranks.”

“Understood, Shan’do.”

He smiled sadly. “You will be among those reassigned, Sentinel Briarbow. I fear I must ask you to return to Silithus. We need those familiar with the territory to accompany the troops.”

All too brief a stay. “Of course,” Cordressa replied. “When do you wish me to leave?”

“I want you on the first ship.”

She nodded. A thought occurred to her. “I have fought in battle alongside Sentinel Summermoon many times before. I would be glad to have her with me again. May I inquire if you are reassigning her as well?”

“I am,” the great archdruid said, “but not to Silithus. Many posts in Ashenvale will become vacant once the ships begin sailing, and I will ask Sentinel Summermoon and others to fill those vacancies.”

I barely got to see her, Cordressa thought; then she resigned herself. *Such is the life of a Sentinel.* “Is there time for me to say farewell to the Explorers’ League members?”

“Of course. But do not tarry too long,” Malfurion said.

It was more than Cordressa had expected, and she inclined her head in gratitude.
“Thank you, Shan’do.”

Malfurion handed her a leather scroll carrier. “Ask your dwarf friends if they are amenable to traveling to Stormwind before going on to Ironforge. They can deliver these missives to Tyrande and Anduin for me. Thank you, Sentinel. May the blessing of Elune be upon you.”

Upon us all, Cordressa thought, if we are about to head into war with the Horde.



The two Sentinels walked in silence toward a green, secluded area next to the temple, where the city’s Highborne elves, the only practitioners of arcane magic in Darnassus, dwelt. Portals were precious gifts, and the recent, cautious admittance of the kaldorei’s Highborne brethren meant that small groups—like the survivors of the Explorers’ League expedition, who had already suffered so much—could be spared lengthy sea voyages.

It also meant that important information could be conveyed quickly. In a time of war, that could mean everything.

“I had hoped to spend more time with you, old friend,” Cordressa said to Delaryn as they walked, “but it seems that our leaders have other plans.”

Delaryn shrugged. “We go where we may best serve.”

The dwarves had been entertained while waiting. Chief Archaeologist Greywhisker, a fellow member of the Explorers’ League, engaged in animated conversation with his colleagues while three magi—Tarelvir, Dyrhara, and Maelir—watched and smiled indulgently. Cordressa was pleased to see the expressions of peace on the dwarves’ faces.

“Gavvin Stoutarm, Inge Ironfist, and Arwis Blackstone,” she said, “it is my everlasting regret that I was not able to bring your companions home. I apologize for my failure.”

Gavvin looked at her with kind eyes. “Lass,” he said gently, “it’s a rough world out there. Ye and I know that. Everyone who joins the Explorers’ League knows it. If we didna want tae face danger, we would stay safe at home, in chairs by the fire, wi’ a pint o’ brew in our hands. They knew th’ risks. An’ wi’out ye Sentinels, we all might have met our ends on those nasty sands.”

“I thank you. I had hoped to escort you back to your beautiful city and see it for myself, but I have been instructed to return as soon as possible to Silithus. It is our hope that your group will be the last to suffer there at the hands of the Horde.”

Gavvin looked stunned. “They’re sending ye back? Just like that, eh?”

“There are quite a few goblins who need to be reminded of the might of the Alliance,” Delaryn said, and Gavvin smiled.

“I have a favor to ask, if I may?” Cordressa said.

“Name it, dearie, an’ it’ll be done,” Gavvin said.

Cordressa handed the dwarf leader the scroll carrier Malfurion had given her. “Our shan’do, Malfurion Stormrage, has asked if you would carry these letters to Stormwind before you return to Ironforge. They are for Lady Tyrande and King Anduin, who will likely have information of their own that they would have you pass on to your Three Hammers.”

Gavvin took the scrolls carefully. “T’will be an honor tae be courier fer the likes o’ them.” He peered up at her from under his bushy brows and harrumphed. “Well.” He reached up and patted her arm awkwardly. “Take good care o’ yerself, ye brave lassie. And give those goblins a punch or three from Gavvin Stoutarm, mind.”

Cordressa smiled. “You have shown great courage. It has been an honor to fight beside you.” She brought her fist to her shoulder in a salute.

The slender mage Dyrhara fluttered her hands expertly, and a circle of light appeared. An image of Stormwind shimmered within.

“Elune light your path,” Cordressa said.

“May yer beer always flow freely,” Gavvin replied.

Cordressa let out a short, surprised laugh, and Gavvin winked. One by one, the dwarves stepped into the portal and disappeared.

“Thank you,” Cordressa said to the mage, and then she smiled at the archaeologist Greywhisker, who tipped his hat. She nodded to Delaryn, and together they stepped out onto the white stone that wound through the great city.

“When do you leave?” Delaryn asked.

Cordressa smiled sadly. “*We both* need to depart within a few hours. I will meet my shipmates at the harbor for our voyage to Feralas—and you will meet yours for Darkshore and thence to Ashenvale.”

The younger night elf’s face fell. “I see. Let me guess—the higher-ranking Sentinels are being asked to report to Silithus, and the rest of us will be filling their positions.”

“Precisely.”

Delaryn sighed. “Cordressa, I envy you.”

“Do not. Silithus is not a pleasant place.”

“At least you will be doing something. Ashenvale is virtually exile.”

Cordressa smiled. “It is beautiful and peaceful—”

“And dull.”

“Anaris Windwood is the commander of the area now, remember,” said Cordressa. “You will have a chance to learn from the best.”

Delaryn brightened at the name. Anaris Windwood was a genuine war hero many times over, most recently during the Cataclysm. Silverwind Refuge, which had been a major outpost in Ashenvale along with Astranaar, had once lived up to its name—a welcoming place with a comparatively luxurious inn. But the upheaval of the natural order caused by the Cataclysm—and an influx of orcs—had changed everything.

The orcs had slaughtered Sentinels and civilians alike. Cordressa had not seen it with her own eyes, but the orcs had reportedly hunted down those who tried to flee, letting their bodies rot in the road as a brutal warning to anyone who would try to retake Silverwind Refuge.

It wasn't until Anaris arrived with a small army of Sentinels that Silverwind Refuge was reclaimed for the night elves. Now, it once again served as a center of Ashenvale's Sentinel presence.

“Anaris Windwood,” Delaryn murmured, her voice soft with awe. “I did not know she stayed on after her victory! I am sure she has much to teach me. Regardless, I will train hard in your absence, Cordressa. Perhaps by the time the final ship has left for Feralas, the archdruid and the high priestess will deem me worthy to sail aboard it. We may fight together yet!”

Cordressa smiled at her friend's enthusiasm, but her joy ebbed quickly. “It may not take even that long before we need you. Silithus may be the first front of a new war.”

“A fresh outbreak of an old one, you mean,” Delaryn said, rapidly becoming as somber as her friend. “Be safe.”

They embraced tightly for a moment; then Cordressa drew back. “I have little enough to pack,” she said. “I will take the long way to the dock, I think. I want to remember greenery, the flow of water, and tranquility if I must face that awful desert again.”

With a final nod to her friend, Cordressa turned, heading toward the Tradesmen's Terrace rather than directly to the hippogryph master.



Delaryn watched Cordressa go.

They were Sentinels, hardened veterans of more battles and even wars than most of the younger races could remember. Some members of the Alliance and the Horde thought that, because the kaldorei were long-lived, death was nothing to them. As if one could have “enough” of life—of joy, of laughter, of love, of ritual and wonder. Of simply being kaldorei.

The answer, of course, was that one could not. And it made every battle, every blow, all that more important. Because in the end, even elves were not excluded from the odds of death. Each battle, each blow, that did not claim a soldier’s life was one closer to the inevitable one that would.

But even in a soldier’s life, there was joy, friendship with one’s comrades-in-arms. Love, or adequate substitutes thereof, for those who crossed one’s path for a night, a year, a decade—but too seldom forever.

And heroes to admire and emulate.

Delaryn Summermoon was about to meet one of the latter.

One should never get to meet one’s heroes, Delaryn thought as she strode beneath the sheltering trees of Ashenvale.

Yesterday, Sentinel Vannara had said, pitching her voice softly, “I remember hearing someone say, ‘Anaris is as good as Shandris Feathermoon at shooting and as bad as a satyr at inspiring.’”

“Whoever said that was being generous,” Delaryn had retorted. While the title of commander of Ashenvale was definitely an honor, Delaryn had wondered why Anaris Windwood had never been sent to fight elsewhere. She had never gone to the Broken Shore to battle the Legion nor been sent into Horde territory at all. Even now, with all that was going on, she wasn’t being sent to Silithus. Why?

Delaryn now understood.

Commander Windwood certainly looked the part. She was one of the tallest, most physically powerful Sentinels Delaryn had ever encountered. She had purple hair and pale blue skin, but her most arresting feature was her face.

Night elf females commonly marked their faces when they had achieved a significant rite of passage. Stylized claw marks were a typical marking, but Anaris Windwood had no need for stylized scars. A troll’s raptor had attacked her and given her real scars instead. The gashes ran the length of her face, from just below her hairline to her chin. By the grace of Elune, the raptor had not gouged out an eye. Anaris had chosen not to have them healed. Rather, she embraced what she called the “true mark of the soul” with pride.

What Anaris lacked in physical beauty, she made up for in ferocity—and, Delaryn thought, in her attitude toward others.

Delaryn had made the mistake of staring at the puckered scars—the raptor’s best effort at separating Anaris Windwood’s head from her shoulders. Delaryn had heard the story, but it was startling—and unsettling—to see it for herself. Before she could hide her reaction, her eyes had widened, and she’d made a soft sound of sympathy. She wasn’t the only one to do so, judging by the way the commander’s gaze flitted from face to face.

Her mangled lip curled up in a sneer. “Fresh from Darnassus, eh?”

Delaryn and the others had exchanged glances, surprised at the tenor of their greeting. “For the moment, yes, but many of us have served elsewhere,” Delaryn had begun.

Anaris cut her off with an irritated gesture. “The archdruid has selected you, so you must be able to fight. No one becomes a Sentinel without shedding blood in battle.” Her tone expressed her clear opinion, though—that those who’d had duty in the comfort and beauty of Darnassus were lesser than those who had not. “You, Lieutenant Delaryn Summermoon. Looks like you are my second-in-command.”

“I have served with—”

“All that matters is that you now serve with me. You will obey me and keep those under you *in line*.” Anaris eyed them all. “This assignment is going to be tougher than you think it is. The orders from Darnassus have cut the number of Sentinels assigned to Ashenvale in half. This extreme reduction will embolden those who mean us harm—thieves and cutthroats will see opportunities to attack our populace and isolated travelers on the road. We are here to protect them. Every civilian is our responsibility. I have to trust that you all will be up to the task.”

Delaryn had attempted to summon the peace of the temple at that awkward and difficult moment—and failed.

She was not much more successful later. The nights and days dragged on in endless and humiliating tests, drills, and practice. The Darnassus Sentinels—individuals who had been charged with protecting the very soul and heart of the kaldorei—were put through their paces as though they were fresh-faced, green recruits.

It was all ridiculous. The messages they rushed from place to place were trivial; the recipients told them so. Even the civilians they had been sent to protect looked on the newcomers with pity, and that was something that Delaryn couldn’t stomach.

But she had to, because a Sentinel was a soldier, and soldiers obeyed orders. If they didn't, chaos could result. Delaryn thought longingly of her initial training, of her first few battles, of Cordressa and Shandris and Tyrande. Then she bit her tongue and did what was asked of her.

She strode back to Silverwind Refuge from Stardust Spire. The rain came down heavily, and her boots sank a little with each step. Her dark blue hair was plastered to her skull, and she shivered, craving something hot to drink. Nestled close to her heart, safe from the deluge as she herself was not, was a perfectly ordinary report detailing absolutely nothing of interest.

Delaryn heard a low growl and a whuffing noise behind her. She froze.

Night elves were usually able to coexist with the animals they had come to regard as wild kin, and so Delaryn spoke soothingly and respectfully as she turned around. "Brother bear, I greet you. We—*Ferryn?*"

The bear sank back on his ursine haunches, and the strange, almost bleating sound he made was unmistakably laughter. He shifted his shape, and an instant later, there sat a tall, pale blue night elf with long, wild hair the color of moss. He, too, was drenched.

"Ah, Del," Ferryn said in a warm, rich voice, regarding her with bright, dancing eyes, "you fall for that every time."

Delaryn sighed in annoyance. "One of these times, I will shoot first."

He regarded her with mock horror. "You? Violate protocol? Never."

She turned around and continued back to Silverwind Refuge. Ferryn fell into easy step beside her. They were silent in all ways; they did not speak, and their footfalls were softened by mud and grass. *How easy it is to walk beside him even after years apart.*

But that was how it had always been between them.

She felt the tentative brush of his fingers against hers, ready to draw back if she did not respond. But she did. Of course she did. Delaryn could not envision a time when she would not. Their duties—and, truth be told, their natures—kept them apart, but Elune saw to it that they always reconnected.

So Delaryn entwined her gloved hand in his, and they walked together.

"What brings you here?" she asked.

"I could ask the same of you," Ferryn replied.

"Reassignment," she said, uncertain about what he knew and how much she could tell him.

“Me too,” he said. “I was called from Felwood to here. Many of my brothers and sisters are heading south.” He eyed her. “To a sandy place.”

Delaryn relaxed. He knew already. “Ah,” she said. “I do not like sand.”

“Nor do I. It gets in fur *and* feathers.”

“And armor.”

“Were you disappointed?”

By Elune, he knew her too well. “Cordressa went. I unfortunately was stationed here instead.”

“I was unhappy about my orders at first, too. Now, though, as far as I am concerned . . . it has turned out not to be unfortunate after all.”

How long had it been since Ferryn had helped fight back the fel energies disrupting a once-beautiful part of Ashenvale? Ten years? A dozen? A decade, at least, since they had kissed goodbye for the hundredth—or thousandth—time.

Delaryn’s tension eased for the first time since she had arrived. Ferryn was right. It was not so unfortunate, after all.



Several days later, Delaryn and Ferryn drowsed languidly in each other’s arms in a secluded nook they had discovered, with the sun filtering through the trees.

Ferryn heard a branch creak above them. He changed into a nightsaber with a single thought. His heightened sense of smell led him to spring straight up toward the reek of goblin that almost made his eyes water.

The squat, ugly green thing wore little armor and no shirt; clearly, he had relied on his skin tone for camouflage among the dense foliage. It was a bold choice, but it did not help him now. Ferryn batted away the assassin’s twin blades with a casual swipe of his paw and ripped out the would-be killer’s throat with his two long, sharp front teeth.

At the same instant, Delaryn’s arrow appeared in the goblin’s skull. Ferryn wondered who had killed the wretch first. The druid sprang to the ground and followed Delaryn, who was already racing toward Silverwind Refuge. He swiveled an ear toward the soft thump as the twice-dead goblin hit the earth. He glanced at Delaryn when he caught up with her, their eyes meeting for a fraction of an instant. Delaryn’s face held the same horror that gripped his own heart.

They were halfway back when the disquieting, silver song of the horn sounded.

They were too late. The refuge was under attack.

They came across the bodies of great nightsabers—beautiful creatures that served the kaldorei as devoted mounts—sprawled on churned-up grass. Closer to the refuge, they found kaldorei corpses ... and Horde.

Delaryn sucked in a sharp breath, the only sign of how many of the murdered she had counted as friends. Many of the night elf bodies bore no visible signs of injury, but the blades still clutched in the hands of their killers—some of them black with poison—told the awful story.

The goblin Ferryn had slain had not been alone.



Together, Delaryn and Ferryn raced into the inn. More bodies lay on the floor. Some were still twitching as healers tended frantically to them. Perched on a railing was a blue-black storm crow.

Delaryn stiffened as Vannara approached. Her expression was bleak.

“This druid bore a message from Raynewood Retreat,” Vannara said, nodding toward the storm crow. “They also came under attack. Stardust, too. The Horde assassins attacked simultaneously, but it has been quiet since they were defeated. Whatever it was appears to be over.” She hesitated. “Del ... what is *happening*?”

“I do not know,” Delaryn said, as baffled and pained as Vannara. “Where is the commander?”

“Out on a training patrol with a dozen Sentinels.”

“How long have they been gone?”

“Since midnight.”

Their eyes met. A sudden wave of loathing washed over Delaryn. Routine patrols typically consisted of a handful, usually four or five. If Anaris Windwood had not been so intent on humbling the Darnassus Sentinels, there might have been enough present here to have saved lives. She bit back uncharitable words; they would not bring back the dead. “Where?”

“She did not say.”

Ferryn’s feline head butted against Delaryn’s arm. Of course. He could track Anaris.

Delaryn gave him a grateful look. “Stay on the alert for a second wave of attacks. Keep tending the wounded. Ferryn and I will find her.”

She ran to the commander's quarters and seized a linen shirt. The druid caught the scent, then crouched low and peered up at her. For an instant, Delaryn hesitated. Druids were not animals. They usually did not allow themselves to be ridden like beasts. But he knew, and so did she, that the rogues had killed the nightsabers so that any survivors would be on foot—and there was no time for that.

“Thank you,” Delaryn said, humbled, then climbed atop the blue-black cat. She hung on tightly as Ferryn, his ears flat against his skull in fury, followed the scent of Commander Anaris Windwood.

They found the group a few miles from camp. To Delaryn's astonishment, they were not even patrolling. Anaris was barking orders for them to march, demanding perfect synchronization. Sentinels were consummate soldiers, in peak physical condition, but it was clear that they were weary and had not been allowed to rest. *She has taken her best warriors and bounded them to exhaustion, while those she swore to protect died in agony.*

“Commander!” Delaryn shouted. “Commander! We have come under attack!”

Anaris whirled, her mangled face darkening with anger. Her gaze flitted to Ferryn. “Explain.”

The Sentinels stopped, their weariness fleeing in the face of true peril to their people, listening with their whole bodies as Delaryn spoke.

“Horde rogues,” Delaryn said. “Several of them. They killed our nightsabers first to keep the word from spreading. Many are dead. Vannara says that reports have come in from other outposts in Ashenvale, citing the same thing.”

For a moment, Anaris just stared at her; then she whirled to the Sentinels. “Why are you just standing there? You, run to Silverwing Grove! See if—”

Ferryn let out a throaty, furious snarl, but it came too late. Feeling Ferryn tense, Delaryn leaped off him, but a Forsaken had already dropped down from an overhanging branch.

He landed directly on Anaris's back, stabbing with his twin blades as she fell. Swifter than a dead thing ought to be able to move, the assassin rolled to his feet. One of his daggers made a clean, swift strike across Marua's throat, almost severing her head from her body.

With a yowl of fury, Ferryn sprang toward the Forsaken, while—too slowly—Delaryn drew an arrow and nocked it to her bow. There was a blur, and then another rogue was there, a blood elf, slashing out with his own blades, long golden hair flying behind him like a cloak. In what seemed like the span of a single heartbeat, half a dozen night elves were left bleeding out or spasming in torment on the verdant forest floor.

Finally, the Sentinels rallied. The blood elf vanished at once, but no matter. They would catch him as he fled like the coward he was. They sent a rain of arrows toward the gaps in the trees, but hit nothing. The sin'dorei had eluded them.

The Forsaken was not so lucky. Eriadnar surged toward him, drawing her sword. She sliced a furrow across the killer's torso and lopped off one of his arms. Ferryn pounced, pinning him to the ground, exercising remarkable restraint in not tearing out his throat.

Anaris Windwood lay on the forest floor, her eyes open but their glow extinguished. "Commander?" Eriadnar said.

"She is dead," Delaryn replied harshly; she was still furious with Windwood, though the commander was far beyond her anger now.

"Delaryn," Eriadnar said quietly, "you are commander now."

So she was. How strange it sounded. Delaryn shook herself and moved toward the prisoner. Her eyes fell on the daggers he had dropped, covered with Anaris's blood. She picked one up carefully, then nodded to Ferryn. He stepped back, growling menacingly at the Forsaken.

She stared down at him, channeling her pain and fury as she spat out, "Talk to me, Forsaken, and perhaps I will let you live."

"Live?" he grunted, in that awful, hollow tone so distinctive of his race. "I have not *lived* in some time, elf."

"You enjoy word games? Let us play a counting game instead." She gestured at him. "You are minus one arm. I can make it two. Or better yet, I will start small. You still have five fingers. Tell me something I can use, corpse, or I shall make it four."

When he didn't reply, she knelt, grabbed his hand by the wrist, and brought his blade close.

He hissed angrily. "I'll speak!"

So the blade is poisoned. Even though he is dying, he does not want that level of pain.

"Tell me your orders."

Dead lips curled back from yellowed teeth. Foul breath struck Delaryn full in the face as he laughed. Her stomach rebelled, but she willed herself not to wince.

"I would have thought they were obvious," he said. "Were the intelligent ones the first to die? Oh wait, there *are* no intelligent night elves. A troll got another commander's ears, you know. He's wearing them now."

It was, she knew, quite possibly true. But Delaryn did not rise to the bait. “There is no Val’kyr to bring you back if I shove this through your throat.”

Delaryn eyed the blade.

“What kind of poison did you use?” she asked casually. “I would guess it is a painful one—you Forsaken like those. If you do not tell me something useful soon, I will conclude you are stalling for time and therefore have nothing *to* tell me.” Her voice was cold.

“What prisoner would not stall for time? Existence is precious. Even we know that.”

It was true. The night elves harbored a deep respect for life. They did not torture prisoners, nor did they take delight in unnecessary casualties.

But they had little use for the abominations that were the Forsaken.

Something inside her turned hard as stone. Delaryn brought the blade to within a fraction of an inch of his index finger. “Do not. Test. Me.”

The cruel glee faded from his rotting features as he realized she was not making an idle threat. “You cannot win,” he said. “We are everywhere. Have you not yet grasped that it’s *all* of your posts that are under attack? Dozens like me have descended upon them with our painful poisons. And your clever hunters, your vaunted Sentinels, your slinking druids—none had the slightest idea.”

Delaryn thought of the druid who had flown to Silverwind Refuge with his message. Some outposts had indeed reported a surprise attack. But there was something in the Forsaken’s words that felt forced.

“You are bluffing,” Delaryn snapped. “What is your plan? The Horde was marching on Silithus. Why divert to Ashenv—”

And then the answer presented itself, so blindingly obvious that she felt as though she’d been stabbed in the gut.

The night elven fleet was en route to Feralas.

Tyrande was in Stormwind.

“You are clearing a path,” she murmured, horrified.

The Forsaken made no answer but laughed again. Delaryn raised the dagger, but the rogue’s laughter turned to a coughing wheeze. Goey liquid spewed from his throat, and then he lay still. He had cheated her; his wounds had claimed his unlife before she could.

Delaryn wasted no energy in frustration at the Forsaken’s final jest or the precious minutes she had spent interrogating him. She’d lost enough time.

She sprang to her feet. "Eriadnar, are you injured?"

"No, Commander."

"Then run, sister," she said. "Run as fast as you can to Darnassus. Do not fight. Do not stop. Hide if you must. But get this message to Darnassus. Tell Malfurion an army is coming."

Ferryn shifted back to his kaldorei form. "I can fly faster than she can run," he offered.

Delaryn shook her head. "I have another task for you. Go, Eriadnar. May Elune guide your path."

The Sentinel nodded, wide-eyed, and leaped to obey as swiftly as an arrow shot from a bow.

Delaryn turned to Ferryn. "Make for the Barrens. The Horde is coming. We need to know how much time we have before they arrive. Keep going until you see them. Do not engage unless you must. Stay alive, and report back."

He nodded. They looked at one another for a moment. There was no need for words. They had gone into battle countless times before, sometimes together, sometimes on their own. Now, they had been plunged into it yet again.

At the same moment, they reached for each other, kissed deeply, and then turned to their duties.

Ferryn didn't know, but whenever the two of them parted, Delaryn prayed to Elune that he would be safe. She asked for that favor again now, and for the first time, she had the faintest fluttering that, in this battle, the beautiful, loving moon goddess might not answer that prayer.



Ferryn liked to fight. He was good at it. But Delaryn had made it clear that she did not need more soldiers to attack—she needed information about *how* to attack.

Even so, he was more than ready for combat should it come his way.

He moved swiftly in his favorite form, that of a nightsaber, leaping from branch to branch high in the trees, heading southeast from Silverwind Refuge. His heart grew both sickened and angry at what he beheld as he entered the Nightsong Woods.

Both Silverwing Grove and Silverwing Outpost were quiet as he approached, but the smell of blood reached his nostrils. Ferryn opened his mouth in a silent snarl and pressed on.

Mor'shan Rampart, once an orcish outpost but reclaimed after the death of the monstrous Garrosh Hellscream, had fallen, too. Ferryn had expected that, but intermingled with the smell of

kaldorei blood was the stench of goblin and orc. He slowed and moved forward cautiously, almost invisible. An orc guffawed, then lifted his voice in a raucous song. Ferryn dropped to a lower branch and peered. A single orc and goblin were looting the bodies, taking weapons and trinkets. The goblin grunted as he tried to tug off a hunter's ring, pulling so hard on the hand that the corpse bobbed about.

Only two. He could take them out. Ferryn burned with anger but refused to yield to his rage. He would scout and return with information. Those were the orders. Delaryn was commander of Ashenvale now, and he would obey her.

You are lucky I care for Del so much, he thought sourly, and sneaked past the two who deserved death a hundred times over.

Ferryn's sense of smell was keener than theirs even when he was in night elf form. Now, it was even stronger. Nonetheless, they could smell him, too, if he wasn't careful. He made sure he was downwind before maneuvering past the fortifications.

Once clear, he shifted into the form of a storm crow. His powerful wings beat the air, and he was borne aloft. It was midday; the Horde had struck when they knew the night elves would be at their most vulnerable. The sun beat down mercilessly, made even brighter by the stark reddish-yellow of the aptly named Barrens. What Ferryn saw in its light stopped him cold.

His heart contracted in his chest. So. Many. Thousands—perhaps tens of thousands—too many to count. Spread out, a stain upon the land. Caravans drawn by kodos clustered around one of the few oases in the area to rest and drink in preparation to enter Ashenvale. Siege engines loomed over the landscape by the dozens.

They would move much more slowly than a kaldorei druid could. Ferryn debated whether to risk gathering more information. He was worried not so much for his own life as that the Horde might realize the storm crow above them was a druid, and thus they would know they had been discovered.

They had sent a coordinated attack by assassins, though. They must know that, by now, the kaldorei were aware of the threat. So, Ferryn ventured on, soaring as high as he could while still able to clearly see the figures below. It was a true Horde army. Not just orcs—though there were plenty of the vile things—but every race was represented.

Alliance spies had reported that Saurfang was leading this army personally. Was the warchief here, too? Was she leading this army, not Saurfang?

He amended the thought to a certainty. Of course, she would be here. Her arrogance would not permit anyone else to take the glory. Besides, Sylvanas Windrunner was arguably the most powerful member of the Horde.

You calculating, cowardly banshee, Ferryn thought. You would never have dared attack had our lady been here as well as our lord. She will come, though. She and the shan'do will have your head for this.

Ferryn did not see any sign of Sylvanas, but he did see a massive orc with long white braids dismount from a cart. His armor was superior to that of the others, and as he strode among the troops, they displayed deference to him. Old as he was, he moved with authority. Age had not diminished his strength.

For a long moment, the druid hovered, wings beating steadily, absorbing as many details as he could. Then, his heartsickness replaced by anger and a burning need to act, he circled back and headed north as fast as his wings would carry him.



As soon as word reached Malfurion of the Sentinel's arrival, he went to the moonwell to meet her. She had already been attended to by the priestesses, three of whom were gathered around her, offering food, which she accepted gratefully.

"Sentinel Eriadnar," Malfurion said, moving toward her.

She sat on the edge of the pool, her slumping form revealing that she was still worn from her travels, but she got to her feet at his words.

"No, Sentinel, you have earned the right to sit. What grim news do you bear?"

She sank back wearily. "I come from Silverwind Refuge. Almost all of our outposts suffered a coordinated attack by the Horde. Anaris Windwood is dead. Delaryn Summermoon commands in her stead. She sent me to tell you—" For the briefest of instants, it seemed as if the Sentinel could not bring herself to utter the words. Then she spoke, in a voice that cracked. "To tell you that an army is coming."

For so long, Malfurion had lived in expectation of this news—that one day, the Horde would rouse and turn its cruel eye toward Darnassus. It had finally happened.

He and Tyrande had fallen for a ruse. They had sent their fleet south, toward Silithus, exactly as the Horde had wished them to. The kaldorei had never been more vulnerable.

But the Horde would not win. They did not appreciate what they had roused in this brazen attack on night elven territory. They did not understand that they would be fighting more than the inhabitants of Ashenvale. By the respectful but commanding hands of Malfurion Stormrage and the druids he had trained, the Horde would come under attack from Ashenvale itself.

Doubtless, the warrior Saurfang would be prepared for battle. And he and his forces might well win against other warriors, but not against what those warriors protected.

The resolution settled inside him, and Malfurion stood even taller, already preparing his mind and spirit for what was to come.

The Sentinel had sensed the change in him, and seemed reassured, if a little unnerved, by it.

“Thank you for your haste,” he told her, calmly. “When you are rested, I have another task I would ask of you.”



Reports came in from more and more outposts. Not all had been attacked. Those that were unharmed dispatched soldiers to Silverwind Refuge upon receiving Delaryn’s warning. Others, like Astranaar, had suffered losses but had routed and slain the rogues. Still others remained ominously silent.

Aid came in almost by the minute, and Delaryn tried to be heartened by it. “Most of us survived,” she said to the new arrivals, and reminded them that the element of surprise had been lost. “They are invading our home. We know every inch of these forests, and we work in harmony with the land. The Horde has neither advantage. We are the first line of defense, and we have the terrain—”

A storm crow darted inside the Silverwind Refuge inn, where her lieutenants were gathered. Ferryn shifted shape in midair and dropped lithely to his feet, panting slightly from exertion.

Delaryn and the others listened in perfect silence as he described what he had seen, *whom* he had seen ... and who he believed was also present. She forced her expression to remain neutral, but every word he uttered felt like an arrow.

There was no denying it now. The Horde had sent an army to attack Darnassus, led by High Overlord Varok Saurfang and, more than likely, the warchief as well. They had brought personnel, supplies, and equipment to do the job.

“How outnumbered are we, do you think?” she asked, quietly.

Ferryn hesitated. “Seven, eight to one,” he replied at last.

The silence was as thick and heavy as a blanket.

So many. Too many. Without the fleet—

No. She would not let herself even hold the thought in her head.

She looked out onto Mystral Lake. Recent rains had raised the water's level so that the small building on the little island in its center was but a few feet away from being flooded.

"The rain," she said suddenly. "They are riding kodos. Bringing caravans. Terribly heavy equipment. The roads are still soft. Caravans will get stuck. And a swollen, rushing river will be harder to cross."

Her eyes flashed with anger.

"Especially if we burn the bridges."

PART THREE:
THE ONSLAUGHT

*The first have fallen,
The vanguard of this battle,
Preceding us
To the realm of wisps and shadows.
We yet have blood to shed.
Theirs. Ours.
It is the price
For time to save our shining city
Cradled in a tree of dreams and starlight.*

Anduin Wrynn, Tyrande Whisperwind, Velen, and Genn Greymane stood together at the Lion's Rest memorial. Anduin felt a hitch in his chest, as always, as he regarded the carved stone image of his father. Even now, months later, it was difficult to believe he was gone. Sometimes, when Anduin came here at twilight, in that pause of breath between day and night, he could almost convince himself his father was present, standing just out of sight.

"This is a peaceful place," Tyrande said. "I am glad to see this."

She and the other Alliance leaders had come shortly after Varian's death, when a symbolic but empty coffin lay in state. This tomb, too, was empty; there had been nothing left of Varian to bury. Even so, Anduin felt closer to him here than anywhere else.

"The citizens of Stormwind are very understanding," Anduin said. "When I come here, no one disturbs me. There's a beautiful view of the harbor behind it."

They were descending the steps when one of the Stormwind guards raced toward them. Anduin ran lightly down the rest of the way to meet him. The others followed.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

The guard caught his breath, but when he spoke, it was not to his king. "Lady Tyrande—there's been an attack—evacuations—beginning. Refugees—coming through portals."

Tyrande went very still. For a moment, she looked like a statue, even more beautiful than Haidene in the Temple of the Moon. Only the vein beating rapidly at her throat broke the illusion. Then: “Take me to them.”

There were already a dozen refugees gathered by the time the four leaders reached the Wizard’s Sanctum. Archmage Malin held open portals for even more. They were civilians—blacksmiths, tailors, bakers. A lone Sentinel had accompanied them, and upon Tyrande’s appearance, she strode forward, knelt, and extended a scroll.

Anduin recognized the seal. This was from Malfurion Stormrage. Tyrande’s eyes widened as she read, and her mouth set in a grim line. Despite the nature of the discussions held in the map room, Anduin had been enjoying her visit. Now, though, as if watching a transformation subtler but every bit as significant as that of Genn turning into his worgen form, he beheld the change in the kaldorei leader from priestess to warrior.

She lifted her head, and when she spoke, her voice was calm and steady. “The Horde is attacking Ashenvale.”

“Ashenvale?” Anduin repeated, dumbfounded.

“But Silithus is—” Genn started to say.

And then they fell silent as terrible comprehension burst over them. The news struck Anduin as viciously as a punch to the stomach. The massive Horde army Saurfang had assembled had never been intended for Silithus. Ashenvale did not have the power to stand against an army as large as the one Anduin’s spies had reported.

And Ashenvale was all that stood between the Horde and Darnassus.

He was angry, stung that, despite all his efforts, Sylvanas Windrunner had once again played him—played them all—like an instrument. This time, Alliance blood would be the price.

Genn smacked a fist into his hand, breaking the stunned stillness. His face was flushed, his eyes bright with fury. “Sylvanas *tricked* us! Shaw’s so-called spies—”

“Reported what they saw,” Anduin said, heavily, his own guilt clawing at him. “That’s what spies do. We cannot blame them. Both Saurfang and Sylvanas are brilliant tacticians and old hands at war.” He took a deep breath. “The failure is mine. I should have known the Horde would make a move the instant they saw an opening.”

“Older heads than yours did not expect this,” Velen reassured him. Despite his comforting words, Velen’s brows were knit together in deep concern.

“There will be plenty of time to blame—and plenty of blame to share later,” Tyrande said. Her voice was clipped, controlled, countering Genn’s heated outburst with cold rage and a brilliant mind of her own. “For now, listen.”

She continued reading, translating and summarizing for them as she did so. “There was a coordinated attack on several outposts and patrols, including Silverwind Refuge, Astranaar, Stardust Spire, and Mor’shan Rampart.”

Her voice never trembled. Anduin marveled. To him, every name was like a blow.

“As of now, the Horde is likely stymied. Malfurion believes the current commander of Ashenvale”—Tyrande’s eyes widened slightly; then she resumed—“Delaryn Summermoon, will attempt to hold them off at the Falfarren River. It is a natural barrier and currently swollen from recent rains.”

Anduin thought back to the spy reports. Heart-rendingly inaccurate when it came to the army’s destination, the spies had nonetheless diligently recorded the weaponry. “The Horde has siege engines. It will be difficult for them to cross.”

Tyrande nodded. “Malfurion has recalled the navy that is en route to Feralas. Delaying the Horde at the Falfarren could buy precious time.”

No one asked the question—*would it be enough?* Anduin looked at the frightened faces of the refugees. If the Horde made it to Darnassus with that kind of weaponry—

He swallowed and took a deep breath, asking the Light to help him clear his head and focus. “Stormwind will send reinforcements immediately,” he said.

Tyrande nodded. She knew, as they all knew, that one could not move armies through portals as one did handfuls of individuals. He could send all the reinforcements in Azeroth, and like the army the Alliance had so smugly assembled for just this purpose, they would arrive too late to do much good.

Or maybe not. Perhaps Elune—the Light—would be with them. “This is your people’s territory, Lady Tyrande. I know the kaldorei will make the Horde fight for every inch. The terrain is on your side, not theirs—and you understand it on all levels. These heavy weapons could spell the army’s doom.”

To the Sentinel, he said, “Shan’do Malfurion has done the right thing. Let him know what you have heard here—and that Stormwind is prepared to host evacuees. All who can come will find shelter with us. You have my word.”

He turned to Velen. "I entrust you with the care of the refugees," he said. "Will you escort them to the cathedral and see to their needs?"

"Of course," the Prophet replied. "It will be an honor. Please," he said to the refugees, "come with me, my friends." He inclined his head to Tyrande, who managed a strained smile.

"There are many Gilneans still in Darnassus," Genn said to Anduin as the group of refugees followed Velen down the carpeted ramp. "I'd like to go and bring them back here. My people need to see they're not forgotten by their leader."

Anduin shook his head. "At this moment, I need your experience and advice... if worst comes to worst."

"Do not worry," Tyrande assured Genn. "My people will make sure that yours reach safety."

"I thank you, but I can't just abandon them. They need to see a familiar face!"

Anduin understood. Fond as the night elves were of the Gilneans, Genn's people would still feel lost and frightened without someone they knew and trusted to take charge. "Perhaps Tess?" he suggested.

"I'd send her if I knew where to find her," Genn growled. He paused, thinking, as the portals continued to hum and more night elves stepped through. "Mia," he said. "No one knows how to calm people better than she does. Besides, she spends half her time there."

Queen Mia Greymane was indeed a frequent visitor to the Howling Oak encampment in Darnassus. Anduin was very fond of her and had to agree—with her quick wits and kind heart, the petite but strong-willed Mia was the perfect choice.

"King Anduin?" It was the Sentinel—Eriadnar, Anduin thought her name was. "This is only the beginning. Shan'do Malfurion has issued orders for a complete evacuation—not only of the city, but of the surrounding area of Darkshore."

Then he believes there is no hope. No one said it, but he could see that everyone present shared his thoughts.

His mind raced with several things at once: Evaluating where to host the night elves, once the cathedral could take no more; they were not a populous people, but Darnassus was a major city. What this would do to them as a people—to their culture. How in the world he could get anything to the combatants—weapons, soldiers, other supplies—in the needed time frame.

"I'll send a unit of Stormwind guards to assist with the evacuations in Howling Oak and wherever else in Darnassus they can. Archmage Malin, get a message to Dalaran. Tell them the

situation and ask if they would be willing to join us here in Stormwind—to get more refugees through portals.”

Malin nodded.

“As for Ashenvale, I’ll dispatch what forces I can at once. Velen will have whatever he needs and whatever public space we can find to house the refugees. I’ll send someone to the Netherlight Temple and ask the Conclave priests to aid us. I’m certain Archbishop Faol will be glad to help.”

Tyrande had remained silent for a time. Now, she spoke to Sentinel Eriadnar. “I will return with you. I will join Malfurion in this fight to defend our city.”

The Sentinel went to her knees. She spoke in Darnassian, not Common, and so Anduin caught only some of what she said. Whatever it was, it was clearly from the heart and, equally clearly, moved Lady Tyrande deeply. She knelt and embraced Eriadnar for a long moment, then rose and went to the refugees. They reached to touch her, shyly yet hungrily, and Anduin saw the concern on their faces.

Tyrande slipped an arm around a mother carrying an infant. When she spoke, her voice trembled for the first time since this horrifying ordeal had begun. “I long to return and fight beside my husband. But my people need to know that someone is here for them when they come through. And so... I will stay.”

Her eyes flashed. “For now.”



Queen Mia Greymane was preparing to depart for Darnassus before her husband was halfway done asking her—as he had known she would. They had been together for so long, and endured so much, that they almost didn’t need words to communicate fluently. Even so, Genn couldn’t help reminding her to get in and out as quickly as possible. Mia promised she would return within a few hours.

After a full and loving kiss for her husband and a long, compassionate hug for Tyrande—Mia understood better than most how much her decision to stay in Stormwind had cost the high priestess—she stepped through the portal only half an hour after Sentinel Eriadnar’s arrival in Stormwind. With the assurance that Stormwind guards would arrive shortly with food and first aid supplies, she and Eriadnar emerged in one of Mia’s favorite places in all of Azeroth: the Temple of the Moon.

Normally, the temple was serene and airy. It was crowded now, though still orderly, and the murmur of quiet but anxious voices drowned out the soothing splash of the fountain.

“Queen Mia!” exclaimed the mage who had held open the portal for her and Eriadnar. “We were not expecting you!”

“Don’t look so surprised,” Mia replied, stepping out of the way so that the patiently waiting night elves could go through to Stormwind. She nodded reassuringly at them, projecting her usual cheerful, take-charge confidence.

“I am not surprised,” said Astarii Starseeker, approaching them with a warm smile. “Of course you would come.”

The two women embraced. The queen didn’t like to have favorites, but there was something special about this soft-spoken, green-haired priestess. They had always had a rapport.

Quietly, Mia asked her, “How is everyone holding up?”

“We are kaldorei,” Astarii said simply.

Mia developed a lump in her throat. Genn seldom kept secrets from her, and the news he’d shared was frightening. He had asked her to make sure all the Gilneans in Darnassus made it safely to Stormwind—and for her to return as soon as that task was complete. She made a decision on the spot. Not for the first time, Mia Greymane would do what her heart felt was right, no matter what anyone—including her husband—wanted her to do.

“I’ll be here for a while,” she said. “Once my people are safe, I’ll stay to help yours.”

“Queen Mia, I do not think King Genn—”

Mia waved Astarii to silence. “You leave Genn to me.”

Even in the midst of the tension, Astarii’s lips twitched in a ghost of a smile. “You know him best, Your Majesty.”

“That I do. Now.” She turned to the mage. “Maelir, is it?”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“Will you come to the Howling Oak and assist with the evacuations there?”

“Of course,” he said. “It will be an honor to aid the Gilneans.”



Aid continued to trickle in to Silverwind Refuge. Delaryn harbored no illusions that enough would come—or even *could* come—in time to defeat the Horde here. But the Falfarren

was the perfect place to slow them and send some of the orcs, trolls, and other Horde members to meet their ancestors.

A druid, exhausted from flying all the way from Darnassus, arrived with a letter from Malfurion. Eriadnar had reached him, he told Delaryn. Tyrande was with King Anduin, who had pledged to help with the evacuation and send reinforcements. For his part, Malfurion had dispatched several groups of druids to assist Delaryn.

“They will arrive shortly.” Despite the druid’s exhaustion, he offered reassurance. “The woods and waters are our friends. The more we can work with nature, which has nourished us so profoundly, the more our enemies will despair.”

“Thank you,” Delaryn said. “Your skills will be invaluable here. Ashenvale is grateful—as am I.”

She ordered that food and drink be brought to the weary druid. Then she unfolded the letter. It was good that evacuations were beginning, but Delaryn was concerned. Like the Explorers’ League dwarves, most travelers would go through the portals one by one—by twos or threes at the most. It was a marvelous way for an individual to quickly get from one place to another, but not to evacuate an entire city.

Nor to transport an army.

We will hold the Horde as long as we can, she had told her troops. Every step they make on our land will be dearly bought.

She fervently hoped that Malfurion was offering suggestions as to how to make that statement true.

I have sent a message to General Feathermoon, the archdruid had written. The fleet, bearing the general’s soldiers, is to return immediately. I have authorized magi to assist you as well, and will be making my own way to Ashenvale shortly.

Have courage, Commander Summermoon. You are not alone.

Elune will be with us.

When a portal whirled open, the normally reserved night elves cheered. The magi who stepped through, who until this moment had only cautiously been made welcome in Darnassus, smiled in surprise. The cheers swelled when they each opened another portal—and reached a crescendo as, over the course of several minutes (and with not a few interruptions), a dozen bears, birds, and nightsabers came through.

Thank you, Shan’do.

“We will need your fire,” Delaryn said to two of the magi, who had introduced themselves as Sarvonis and Ralara. “We have things to burn.”

The bridges over the Falfarren River—exquisitely crafted arches of wood and inlaid stone—would, of course, be the first to go. Delaryn had sent troops across them, ten to twenty at a time.

They, too, had orders involving fire.

Ferryn had reported that the Horde had siege engines. If the invading army could get them from Mor’shan Rampart to the river, they could cause severe damage. And if they *crossed* the river—

The thought of the Horde in Darnassus, crawling over its beautiful, white stone walkways, defacing its temple, looting its precious artifacts, and even trampling the green, living spaces that had been so carefully interwoven throughout the city... Delaryn could not permit herself to contemplate it. The more siege engines and weaponry they could sabotage here, now, the fewer there would be on the sands of Darkshore, attacking her home.

All who could walk were pressed into service. Even those generally regarded as civilians—tailors, food merchants, innkeepers—had learned over centuries how to fight well enough to defend themselves. Those few who could not—mothers with infant children, the wounded—had been portaled to Stormwind when the magi arrived.

Delaryn watched, feeling wretched, as those she had ostensibly been sent here to protect joined their Sentinel sisters in racing silently across the bridges, armed with bows and daggers.

She felt, rather than heard, Ferryn step beside her. He placed a hand, warm and strong, on her shoulder, and for the briefest moment, Delaryn would have given anything to lie with him again as they had this morning, before the quiet of their forest had been shattered. Or better yet, to walk with him in a Darnassus that was safe and calm.

The magi stood, awaiting the order.

Delaryn took a deep breath. “Burn them.”

Sarvonis cupped each of his hands and moved them around one another. Delaryn was absurdly reminded of how she’d once made a snowball on the top of a mountain and flung it at an unsuspecting Ferryn. The memory quirked her lips in the ghost of a smile.

There was a tiny flicker of light in the mage’s palm, which grew into a small ball of orange flame. The ball sprang from Sarvonis’s hands, soaring toward the bridge. The beautiful construction burst into flames, filling the night with a loud, angry crackling.

The faint sounds of shouting reached Delaryn's ears, and a thin trail of smoke climbed upward from the distant trees. One siege engine was already destroyed, then—one fewer machine to rain stones upon a city that had endured so much in its short life.

And then... the pounding of drums.

She tensed beneath Ferryn's hand.

"Tell me what you need from me," he said.

To survive, she thought. What she said was, "You have worked with these druids before? The ones who came through the portals?"

"A few, yes," he said. "We make a good team."

"Then take that team, and make the Horde think that our numbers are greater than they anticipated."

Ferryn looked at the river, which now bore away small chunks of charred wood. His gaze followed the blackened pieces of the bridge downstream; then he looked upstream. His eyes narrowed.

"I believe we can do exactly that," Ferryn said. He pulled Delaryn to him and kissed her, softly this time, then pressed his lips to her forehead. For her ears only, he whispered, "I know you are afraid. And I know that your fear is for our people, not your own safety. But do not despair. We are not done yet. And we *will* make every death count."

He touched her cheek and was gone.

Delaryn looked back across the river. She pressed her lips together tightly. "Come," she said to Sentinel Vannara. "Let us harry them beyond their imaginations."

We will destroy as many of their weapons as we can. We will make them think our numbers are greater than they believed. We will pepper them with arrows, trip them and strangle them with the very trees of these woods. We will show them a ferocity that will shock and dismay them.

We will hold the line.



It had been years since Ferryn had been to Ashenvale, but he remembered it well. The Falfarren River aided them now, but it could only buy time. The massive army that he had beheld would cross it eventually, even if it was on the backs of their dead.

Which, he mused darkly, *I would not mind at all.*

He did not know how well the enemy knew the terrain of Ashenvale, but it would not do to underestimate either Saurfang or the Dark Lady. The Horde had invaded—and occupied—parts of Ashenvale ere now. Saurfang would know, as Ferryn did, that the narrowest point of the Falfarren was to the north, just below the ruins of Xavian. The Horde would head to that area.

Ferryn's plan was simple. Per his commander's order, he called all the assembled druids to him and explained it quickly. "They have greater numbers, and they know it. Our task is to make them doubt that knowledge. They will bring the siege engines over soon, looking for ways to cross. Commander Summermoon is taking the fight to them on the far side of the river. Others are patrolling to stop the Horde from crossing. They will sound the horns whenever the Horde makes a push.

"We will be ready for them at the pools near Xavian and in other areas as well—where we are needed, when we are needed."

They looked at one another, confused. "How will we do that?" one of the druids asked.

Ferryn grinned and, for answer, pointed upward.



After the first round of sabotaging the Horde's siege engines, Delaryn called her forces back to the western bank of the Falfarren. They had done what they could, but now, the Horde was coming to them. And Delaryn let them.

The night elves were equipped with horns. Any time the Horde gathered on the opposite side of the river and began to swim across, the kaldorei fired their arrows, clogging the river with Horde bodies. When an enemy made it to shore, the night elves descended upon their luckless foes, surrounding and butchering them, retrieving the arrows that had ended their lives, then turning on the next Horde members who had the misfortune to have slogged forward.

Ferryn's plan—to have clusters of druids moving through the trees each time they heard the call to fight—was working brilliantly. But it could not last. The horns seemed to be sounding their incongruously sweet notes every moment.

She had not sought the role of commander, but she would not shirk it. Now she jumped into the fray, fighting furiously alongside her comrades, using arrows for long-distance kills and the moonglaive for closer battle.

A group of six—three trolls, two tauren, and a blood elf—climbed onto shore. Their warriors, the tauren and two of the trolls, had made a shield wall and were deflecting the worst of the showers of arrows. Delaryn slowed her breathing, took aim, and waited.

There—three inches of space. She let her arrow fly.

There was a swirl of violet at the corner of her eye. Vannara, who had been standing beside her, crumpled to the ground. An arrow fletched with striped feathers, its slender shaft adorned with metal bands and beads, protruded from her throat.

Delaryn's instincts and centuries of training were all that saved her as she jerked aside in the barest nick of time. A second arrow sang in frustration as it sped past and embedded itself in a tree trunk.

She leaped, flipping and firing at the same time. As she landed, two small points of red glinted in the shadows of the trees across the river—a face partially obscured by a red cowl.

That face was a shade of gray-blue, but not the healthy, Elune-blessed color of night elf skin. This face had undertones of green, reminding anyone who saw it of the rot that lay behind it. The markings on her face were black, and her eyes glowed crimson.

Sylvanas Windrunner.

The Dark Lady, warchief of the Horde. Slaughterer of thousands. Everything that was anathema to the night elves—contempt for nature, hatred of life, reckless action—was embodied in this single, monstrous banshee. And she was here.

If their warchief fell, the army would be flung into chaos. Cut off the head, and the body would fall.

In the space of half a heartbeat, Delaryn had drawn and fired.

Sylvanas was not there.

No! Delaryn could not suppress a short, harsh cry. *I could have ended it all, right here—*

A fresh bombardment of arrows descended with shrill cries. Delaryn fought back crippling despair. It would only serve to strengthen the enemy. She would not give up hope.

Elune, protect your children. Protect them from these monsters. Give us strength to fight this battle and keep our people safe.

And, as if in answer to that prayer, several nightsabers bellowed behind her. Huntresses from Astranaar had come to join the fray. The weary combatants cheered.

One huntress rode up to Delaryn. The commander kept firing, but strained to listen to her tidings: “The shan’do is coming!”

Malfurion Stormrage was almost here, as he had promised. It was time to fall back and begin the next phase. “Find me a druid,” she ordered the huntress. “The shan’do needs to know that the warchief is here.”



The horns sounded from the south, announcing a fresh wave of Horde who had unwittingly volunteered to die. The muzzle of a nightsaber was not built for smiling, but even so, hot delight tugged at the muscles around Ferryn’s great fangs.

The plan had been brilliant. Every time they dropped from above, in the forms of nightsabers or great birds, the Horde members gaped stupidly as death descended upon them—if they looked up at all, which was infrequent. The sixteen druids navigating the canopy of Ashenvale were swift, silent, and careful. With so many of them in the branches, it would be easy for a bough to give way. But Ferryn’s “pack,” as it were, had centuries of experience in these forms, and calculated risks so rapidly that they didn’t even notice they did so.

From branch to branch they sprang, as silent as death, moving in perfect rhythm, in time with their breaths and the beating of their hearts. At one point, a sound made one of Ferryn’s ears swivel in that direction. He turned his great head and sniffed, but there was no scent, and he saw nothing. He had just landed on another branch when, behind him, two of the great birds shrieked in agony. One plummeted toward the soft grass below, while the other slammed full force into a tree.

When the next shurikens sliced through the air, Ferryn heard them and leaped sideways, twisting his feline body, reversing direction with his remaining brethren to kill the killer. One of his companions was not so fortunate, yowling and tumbling from the branch.

The cruel wind that had kept him from scenting the blood elf shifted, and the stink filled Ferryn’s nostrils. But he could not pinpoint the rogue’s location. Then—*there!* The foolish sin’dorei had betrayed himself, leaping through a pale moonbeam, landing on one tree branch and springing off it to the next. Ferryn and the others gave chase.

The rogue’s direction—away from the battle lines—was deliberate, that much was certain. But he did not fully appreciate that he was in *their* world now, not his shiny, red-and-gold capital. The very roots and twigs and leaves obeyed a druid who had shifted into kaldorei form, allowing her to harness the anger of the violated forest.

The trees were awakening, their leaves trembling, preparing to seize the interloper.

Two more shurikens whirred through the air. Ferryn and the others twisted and dodged, only their mastery of these forms enabling them to land on branches or fly into open air. Shenda, sleek and blue-gray and infuriated, pounced at the blood elf. Her claws extended, her foot-long fangs bared—

And Ferryn watched in horror as Shenda's throat was suddenly open, blood flowing like a river as she tumbled toward the ground.

Up ahead, a cluster of Ferryn's brothers and sisters, their focus too intent upon their taunting prey, landed on the same jutting bough simultaneously. But the rogue was not there. The branch gave way with a terrible crack, augmented by the shrieks of the nightsabers before they landed with devastating thuds.

It was too late. Ferryn knew it as soon as they fell. The rogue would kill them before they could recover to defend themselves. Those druids still in the trees flew or leaped from branch to branch to help. Ferryn gathered himself to follow.

A heartbeat later, the powerful sound of a gunshot echoed.

The rogue had a friend. Good. Ferryn, in his grief and rage, was ready to kill more than—

“Go,” came the single whispered word.

Other ears would think they heard only the wind sighing in the leaves, but Ferryn knew the voice of his shan'do.

Malfurion Stormrage.

Ferryn could not see his teacher, but Malfurion could see him—not just him, but his furious, breaking heart. As he so often did, the archdruid spoke exactly what Ferryn did not want to hear—but needed to.

Ferryn clung to the tree tightly in protest. His vision was red with fury, and his taut, feline muscles strained to disobey. But the shan'do was right. The rogue and the hunter would be no match for the archdruid, and Ferryn could live to continue the fight.

He felt a brush of healing energy, refreshing his limbs and enlivening his senses, though not soothing his spirit. Below him, the rogue, the hunter, and his pet were executing Ferryn's brethren. He heard their cries, smelled their blood.

And still, he had to leave.

With a snarl of anguish, Ferryn gathered himself, whirled, and headed back to the river.

As naturally as breathing, he leaped from branch to branch, channeling his rage into movement. Following the Falfarren south, Ferryn had almost reached the area where Delaryn was fighting when he heard a terrible, creaking, groaning sound.

He had fought in Northrend; he had heard the sounds of ice and snow. He had witnessed glaciers cracking as huge chunks of frozen seawater, all shades of blue and green, sheared off and toppled with deep rumbles into the frigid depths.

And he knew this sound, too. This was the sound of ice being magically created.

They were freezing the Falfarren.

How did we not foresee this? Ferryn thought despairingly, his muscles bunching and releasing ever more rapidly as he sped through the thick branches. He squeezed his eyes shut against a sudden, orange brightness. One of the Horde's magi had created illumination for their comrades. Ferryn dug his claws into the branches to keep from falling as his brethren had.

They were shouting now, chanting in one of their ugly languages. After a precious few heartbeats, Ferryn shook his head, opened his eyes, and resumed racing along the upper branches.

As the druid and his pack had run up and down the river, attacking those Horde soldiers who tried to push onto the bank, they had been joined by other night elves. The druids had learned that all the Highborne magi were gone. They had helped immeasurably in the early stages, setting aflame so many of the bridges and siege engines, but Sylvanas's archers—and perhaps the Dark Lady herself—had homed in on them as targets to be eliminated as quickly as possible. And so, there were no magi to melt the ice that had once been a swollen river.

The magical illumination had disappeared. Night had fallen again, and that was the kaldorei's time. Most of the Horde races were lovers of the sun; nightfall was a challenge to eyes more used to the bright glare of deserts than the shade of the forest. Ferryn also had the augmented vision of the great cat whose form he had taken.

He glanced through the foliage to the ice below, glittering in shards of moonlight. The first wave of the Horde's onslaught had made it to the shore now. Some of them slipped and fell in their eagerness to reach the loathed enemy, but most of their wounds were only to their pride. A significant number had already crossed at this juncture. Doubtless, more had crossed at other places along the Falfarren's path.

And the high overlord was among them.

Ferryn's hackles rose. He filtered out the cacophony of battle, the clash of steel on steel and hammers crunching bone, the cheers of the victors and the screams of the dying—the smell of blood,

so jarring when breathed along with the fertile green scents of Ashenvale. Ferryn focused entirely upon the running orc.

If I can take him out now—

A few more branches, another leap—then the white-haired orc, wielding his axe with the skill and fury of a master, was one spring away. In the dim light, his attention focused on the press of battle, Saurfang would never see the druid.

Not even as he died.

Ferryn sprang, jaws wide, claws extended, his heart slamming against his chest.

Another brightness—a mage's spell again.

Saurfang's eyes met Ferryn's.

The druid was too far away. He felt the rush of air as the orc brought his axe down. So strong was the blow, so sharp was the weapon's edge, that for the next few brief increments of time, Ferryn was confused at what he saw as his severed head hurtled through the air.

But he had enough time to understand his failure before there was nothing.



The fleet had run into dangerous weather as it made its way toward Feralas. Storms had driven several vessels off-course, and now they were behind schedule. Though she pressed her crew to top speed, Cordressa was in no rush to experience the harsh sun and burning sand of Silithus.

She and Shandris Feathermoon had known of one another, of course, devoted as each was to Lady Tyrande. But Cordressa had never served directly beneath the general of the Sentinels. She'd played it calm and cool when she had discussed her assignment with Delaryn, happy that her younger friend would get a chance to serve with Commander Windwood. But Anaris Windwood was merely famous. Shandris Feathermoon was a legend, and Cordressa secretly shook in her boots at the thought of meeting her.

She needn't have worried. Shandris's deep friendship with Tyrande was rooted in similarities, and the nigh-mythic archer and general turned out to be warm and accessible. Shandris led almost without effort, acknowledging efficiency and dedication with praise and inspiring her soldiers to improve. There were rules, but they made sense; there was discipline, but never punishment, and even admonishments were little more than a well-placed word.

More often than not, Cordressa was invited to share the general's table in her cabin while storms raged outside. Wine was uncorked, stories were told, and each day blended into the next.

They were discussing the best fletching choices for arrows when Shandris spotted a shape in the night sky. Cordressa followed her general's gaze and went cold.

It was a bird—larger than any seagull, and flying at night.

A storm crow.

That could only mean one thing. Cordressa and Shandris surged from their chairs as the storm crow who was not a storm crow landed on the deck, changing into her elven shape. The druid trembled from exhaustion. She looked very young. *Where are all the other druids, that Malfurion is forced to utilize those barely into their training?*

"No, little sister," Shandris said as the druid struggled to rise, "do not tire yourself further, but speak. What has happened?"

Cordressa poured the girl some water, and Shandris knelt to offer it to her.

"Horde," the druid said after draining the cup. "The army—it turned. It is heading for Darnassus, not Silithus. Malfurion sent me. You all have to come back."

Horror crashed over Cordressa as if she'd been doused with ice water. "No," she breathed. Not Darnassus. Not the shining city they had sacrificed so much to create. And Del...

She was right in the path of the oncoming army.

Shandris, she of a thousand battles, recovered more quickly than Cordressa. "It was a brilliant plan," she murmured. "Every step." Her eyes were distant, thoughtful. "But they did not bargain that we would travel so slowly. Did you find me first?"

"Yes, General," the druid said. "I was to tell you before all others."

"I regret asking you, but... are you strong enough to carry this message to the rest of the ships? Those behind us?" Tyrande had sent them out staggered to deceive the Horde—futilely, it turned out.

"Of course," said the young druid.

Cordressa wasn't so sure, but there was nothing for it.

"Do so," Shandris ordered. "Tell them to have their druids command nature to bring us wind. We need to return to Darkshore immediately. Do you understand?"

The druid, haggard and pale, nodded gamely.

Shandris smiled and squeezed her shoulder. "Give us just a little more. Then you can rest. What is your name?"

"Teshara."

“Teshara,” Shandris said, gravely, “you may have just saved your people.”

Through her weariness and fear, the young druid brightened.



Delaryn did not recognize the strange groaning as the river freezing over until it was too late. And indeed, shortly thereafter, there was another sound—the roar of victorious, bloodthirsty Horde soldiers who were now able to cross.

She had never expected to stop the Horde at the Falfarren—just delay them to enable as many innocents to flee as possible and allow every fighting kaldorei to join the fray. Even so, this was a blow. The Horde was one step closer to their goal, after so many had died trying to stop them.

Then, sweet as music, a runner brought the words she had been waiting to hear. “Malfurion is coming.” Druids had told the young messenger that they had seen the white stag gleaming like Malorne, kissed by the moons. “He ordered some to stay and assist him but said that most of us should retreat to find you.”

Thank you, Elune.

“Sylvanas is with the army,” Delaryn told the runner.

His eyes widened, and he remained silent.

I should not have told him. What could he possibly do if he were to see the Dark Lady... except die? She asked, “What is your name?”

“Tavar.”

“What are your skills, Tavar?”

The insecurity vanished. He gave her a quick grin as he stepped into shadows... and disappeared.

She hadn’t the time to be amazed, yet she was. He was very good, for one so young. She thought of the Forsaken who had killed Anaris, of his leering face—of all those who had died by poisoned blades in the attack that no one had seen coming.

Anger fueled her. She harnessed it, a nascent idea plucking at the corners of her mind. “I have need of such skills. Find the druids you spoke with. Gather a team. Then come with me, Tavar. If Malfurion wishes us to buy time, we should not disobey.”

The sounds of combat followed Delaryn's company as they ran through the forest, their footfalls steady as they left defeat at the Falfarren and raced toward the next goal—and possible victory.



Anduin couldn't sleep. Ever since the battle in Ashenvale had begun, he had only been able to rest for brief, fitful moments here and there.

He threw on some clothes, lit a candle, and padded to the map room. There, he lit a few of the standing candelabra, placed his own candle carefully on the table, and regarded the world laid out before him.

Ashenvale.

He recalled the ever more dire missives that had managed to reach him and Tyrande.

We have lost the Falfarren.

Sylvanas is here.

Panic in Darnassus.

"You can't sleep either, I see."

Genn's normally hard face was softened by the glow of the single candle he carried.

The young king turned his gaze back to the map. "Any word from the queen?" The Gilneans from the Howling Oak encampment had come through shortly after Mia left. The queen had stayed longer to coordinate efforts in Darnassus, and Anduin was uneasy about that choice.

"She sends letters," Genn said. "Damn stubborn woman. She'll send every last rabbit through before she'll come herself."

"Which of you learned stubbornness from the other?" Anduin said, trying to smile.

Genn grunted. "We've been together so long I don't even remember." He pretended not to be concerned, but when it came to his family, Genn Greymane was more transparent than he liked to believe. "What about you, my boy?"

Anduin was silent for a moment. He gestured to the map. "We don't have enough figures to even represent an army this size," he said, and his voice cracked. "Genn... they're going to lose Darnassus."

"I know." The old man's voice was kind as he stepped beside Anduin. "It's a brilliant strategy, I'll give the Horde that."

Anduin winced. "First Theramore, now Darnassus. They'll have all of Kalimdor, except for Azuremyst. And mark my words, we'll be evacuating draenei soon." The draenei were hardly in a position to assist the beleaguered night elves, though some brave souls had traveled to do so. Once Darnassus fell, the hungry Horde would doubtless turn their attention to Azuremyst.

"Possibly."

The young king rubbed at his tired eyes. "The strategy is more brilliant than you know."

"Eh?" Genn frowned. "How is that?"

"The Horde will never conquer an Alliance that truly is one. When we are unified, we are unstoppable, even *without* a navy," he said, referring to the terrible beating ships from both factions had taken on the Broken Shore during the first stage of the war against the Burning Legion. "But if they divide us, they can pick us off one by one."

"That day will never come."

Anduin faced the gruff warrior who had become both mentor and friend. "Will it not?" he asked, quietly. "What will happen when the kaldorei lose their World Tree?"

"We retaliate. We march on the Undercity."

"They will hold Darnassus hostage against our doing that. Try though we might, we'll never get everyone through a portal before the city falls. It's just not possible. If we attack the Undercity or Silvermoon, the Horde will destroy the World Tree and whatever prisoners they take in this battle. Do you think the night elves would tolerate that?"

Genn's frown deepened. He didn't reply.

Anduin continued, his voice was so soft it was barely above a whisper. "And what of Gilneas? What will you say to me if I choose to help the kaldorei first?"

Which he would, especially if the Horde threatened thousands of prisoners. And Genn knew it.

"I cannot act if the Alliance is divided," Anduin said. "That's what this action is intended to do, Genn. Not just to take Darnassus. But to use it against us, striking at the very heart of what makes our kingdoms the Alliance. Sylvanas is going to turn us against one another. *That's* the grand plan." He shook his head, his eyes on the small figures on the table. "I was a fool not to see it earlier."

Genn was silent for a long time. "When did you learn so much about strategy?"

Anduin laughed humorlessly. "I was reading when I should have been sparring."

“Well, you *are* a fool.” Anduin turned to regard him, surprised by the words. “A fool to think for a moment that I would withdraw my support because you are helping the kaldorei. Do I want my kingdom back? My people to return to their homes? Of *course* I do! Do I want it badly enough to allow innocent night elves to suffer, when they so generously have helped the Gilneans these last few years? When they mitigated the worgen curse, so we could hang on to ourselves and not get lost in madness? When they fed us, sheltered us, and offered us their home when we had *nothing*?”

Genn made a dismissive noise, somewhere between a huff and a snarl. “No. I would never betray that kindness by turning my back on them now. Sylvanas doesn’t understand that about the living. And she certainly doesn’t understand the Alliance. She is in for a rude awakening, and you can mark *my* words.”

For a moment, Anduin simply stared in shock. Then, for the first time in what felt like aeons, he smiled with true pleasure. In the midst of all the bleakness, all the fear and apprehension and horror, here was something good and strong and true to hold on to. And Genn Greymane—he of the quick temper and sullen stubbornness, who had once turned away from the Alliance and lived behind a wall to indulge his own self-interest—he had gifted it to Anduin.

“I mark your words, Genn Greymane, and my heart is full to hear them. They are a beacon in a time of terrible darkness.”

Both men turned to see Tyrande standing in the doorway, still dressed in her priestess’s robes. Though her face was drawn with pain, there was a softness, a lightness to it that Anduin had not seen for days. She stepped toward them, holding a rolled-up scroll in one hand.

“I came to deliver bad news. I did not know that I would hear something to restore my very soul while doing so. Thank you for that.”

She lifted a hand and murmured something. Anduin could not possibly have felt a forest breeze stirring his blond hair, but he did; he smelled summer and living things, and his exhaustion was blown away like floating seeds blown from a windflower.

“We shall *not* be divided. Even if my city falls.” She closed her eyes in pain. “They are making a stand at Astranaar.”

PART FOUR:
THE LAST STAND

*The jewel of our city
Lies within their craven grasp.
One last time, we shall stand.
One final act, we shall perform.
By the light of the moons,
By the flash of our blades,
By the song of our arrows,
We shall triumph—
Or we shall fall.*

Come back now. The Horde is surging into Ashenvale, and they're heading for the World Tree. Come back before you can't.

Mia thanked the courier, who had much more important duties than running letters from Genn Greymane to his wife. She folded up the missive and tucked it next to her heart. The words were blunt. They might have seemed dispassionate or even bullying to another, but after decades of marriage, Mia knew exactly what this terse letter meant. Her husband was worried sick about her.

He was right to be.

But she was also right to stay here for as long as she could.

It had not taken more than an hour or two to send all the Gilneans to Stormwind, but Mia loved the people of Darnassus and would stay until the last possible moment. She had become the ambassador of Stormwind by default. She stood on the rim of the moonwell in the Temple of the Moon so she could be seen, directing the flow of increasingly distressed night elves and assuring them they would find support and safety in the human kingdom.

Astarii came beside her during a rare lull. "My heart is torn," the priestess said. "I wish you were away in Stormwind, but I am also glad you are here. They trust what you tell them—and you and your people have earned that trust. If you say that we will be safe in Stormwind, we know it to be true."

The kind words brought unexpected tears to Mia's eyes. "My husband stands ready to receive them on the other side. Everyone will be evacuated." *Somehow*, she thought but did not say.

"Say not that," Astarii said softly, for Mia's ears alone. "For that, at least, is untrue."

Mia's heart lurched to hear the words, for she knew the truth in them. "You shame me, my friend."

"I did not intend to."

"I know. You are right." She turned to look again on the crowd. "We will find shelter for all who arrive in Stormwind. We will send soldiers to liberate those who do not." She lifted her chin defiantly. "And my husband will lead the charge."

Astarii smiled then, warmly. "This," she said, "I *do* believe."



Ferryn was not among the druids that Tavar had rounded up.

Fear closed an icy hand around Delaryn's heart, but she forced it away. If he lived, he was fighting for their people elsewhere. If he was slain, there was nothing she could do. So many were dead. More would soon join their ranks, maybe even Delaryn herself. She had accepted that possibility long ago when she first became a Sentinel. Her life's mission was to protect the kaldorei, and right now, she was doing all in her power to buy time for them.

As for the dead... they were in Elune's grace. Their bodies would return to the earth. They would continue to exist, albeit in a different form.

When she proposed her plan, it was met with horror, as she had expected.

"These are our friends! Our families!" Mareela, one of the Astranaar huntresses, said, her voice a snarl of outrage. "They have already given everything!"

"Their spirits have departed," Delaryn replied. "And yes. Of course their bodies should be given reverently back to the earth. But we have no time to tend to them—not if we wish to save the thousands who are now desperately trying to flee. Those who died are *gone*, Mareela. They gave of themselves to save innocent lives. And they will do so... one last time."

Delaryn did not wish to make it an explicit order. She was as ravaged by the thought as those she led. Could she do this if it were Cordressa lying here?

If it were Ferryn?

And the answer came, as surely as if their bodies lay beside her: Yes. She could do it... because every night elf would wish to do whatever they could to keep the Horde from befouling their shining city.

“We will remember them,” Delaryn said as the others, wincing, nonetheless left silently to obey her.

Delaryn had received dark inspiration from the stories of when the Horde had occupied Silverwind Refuge years earlier—hunting down those who fled and leaving their bodies to rot as a warning.

The night elves selected the bodies with care, searching close to Astranaar for those who had fallen in battle. The corpses, oftentimes wearing the faces of friends, were examined to see if their wounds could be concealed by swords, capes, or other items of clothing.

Delaryn also ordered that the areas deeper in the forest be scoured as well, hoping to recover those who had been killed by the rogues who had sprung from the shadows... how many days ago? Delaryn had lost count. Too many, spent in fighting, snatching moments of sleep here and mouthfuls of food there, trying to stay a step ahead of the two most brilliant minds of the Horde and an army that outnumbered the night elves eight to one. More now, perhaps.

She turned to the heartbreaking task. For some reason, she had kept the blade of the Forsaken who had killed Anaris. She removed it from her belt, examining it to make sure the lethal toxin lingered. It was still there, though obscured now with the dried blood of the former Ashenvale commander. After striding to a Sentinel who had been slain by a ranger’s arrow, Delaryn knelt beside the fallen night elf, pulled the shaft loose... and plunged the poisoned blade into the wound.

Some of the others gasped softly behind her, and her own heart ached. *Forgive me. You will, I pray, save more lives today.*

As she withdrew the blade, she angled it so the black, tar-like smear of poison was visible on the wound’s mouth. Then she went to the next corpse. Eventually, the rest of the Sentinels imitated her. She loved them fiercely in that moment, for she understood exactly what it cost them... and what a gesture of trust they were displaying in her leadership.

Tavar had volunteered several vials of poison to the grim duty. Delaryn thanked the young rogue, hating herself for what she was about to ask.

“You are very skilled, and very talented,” she said.

Color rose in his cheeks, and he bowed. “I am honored you think so.”

“Do not be honored; be concerned,” Delaryn replied. “I am about to ask you to do something that may, quite likely, get you killed.”

He sobered and gestured to the corpses surrounding them. “If so, I will join them and be proud to do so.”

His courage made her want to weep. But she could not. Elune knew there would be time enough for tears, for elegies sung to honor the fallen, if any of them survived to sing or weep.

“You work well with the shadows. How are you at killing?”

He smiled almost cruelly and, for a moment, did not look young. “Very good.”

“And disguises?”

“Superlative.”

She almost laughed. “One would think there is nothing you cannot do, Tavar.” Then, more seriously, she said, “Do not answer to impress me. Answer me truthfully. We cannot afford to fail now.”

“I can take lives, and I have,” he said, matching her mood. “And I do excel at disguises.”

“Show me.”

Tavar hesitated. “Now?”

“We have time to prepare you with appropriate clothing later. For now—show me what picture you can paint with just yourself as the palette.”

Again, he paused. Annoyed, she turned away—then she stopped as a hand grabbed her arm. It was stubby, compared to that of a night elf: shorter fingers, broader palms. Delaryn turned and looked down into the face of a fine-featured human male.

“It’s the best I can do, for now,” he said, in the heavy accent of a Stormwind native. And it was only now, with a start, that she noticed the long kaldorei ears. Somehow, impossibly, her eyes had not wandered to them. She shook her head and said, “Change back.”

He straightened, and the deceptive shadow he had wrapped around himself fell away.

She considered. “How are you at impersonating Forsaken?”

Tavar grinned.



Everything hinged on trickery, and that was not Delaryn's strength. But it was the only option left other than fighting and dying while the siege engines rolled over her body on the Horde's implacable march toward Teldrassil.

When the scouts returned with news that the Horde's own scouts were a few hours away, Delaryn's company melted into the shadows of the forest that embraced Astranaar. Delaryn herself was perched in a tree, thinking how easy it would have been for Ferryn to have climbed it. She could almost see him on a topmost branch, his tail switching playfully as he waited for her to catch up to him.

She should accept that he was dead. But if she did, she would have to grieve for him, and she could not. Not yet. So she told herself he was fighting elsewhere; Elune knew there were plenty of opportunities to kill Horde. *And he loved a good fight.*

Loves a good fight...

The first test was the Horde scouts. Would they notice anything amiss? *They look tired*, Delaryn thought. Sure enough, after a cursory prowling around the perimeter of Astranaar's lake (during which, of course, they found no hint of the elves concealed only a few hundred yards away), one of them—a blood elf—stuck the toe of his boot beneath a corpse and lifted it appraisingly.

"Rogue's blade," he said.

"Here, too," a troll replied. He sniffed at a second corpse. "Bloody."

Delaryn tensed. Would the troll investigate further? Lift the cape to discover the gaping sword wound it hid? There would be nothing left then but to kill the scouts and abandon the area to the Horde.

"But I can catch da stink a poison," the troll continued.

"Those who did not die fled, I would imagine," said the blood elf. "Cowards."

"Lotta us gotten killed by dose 'cowards,'" the troll replied.

The other scout shrugged.

Delaryn, weary as she was, could have shouted in delight.

Hours ticked by. The Horde infantry arrived and set up a base camp on the highly defensible island—as Delaryn had intended.

Carts and caravans rumbled up. Delaryn's muscles ached from remaining still, but they tensed as High Overlord Saurfang dismounted from one of the carts. He was smarter, and more careful, than most she had seen in this army. Would he notice what the others had not?

He did not. He simply inquired about a battle that had not taken place, and grunted his approval when a female orc suggested that the night elves had been slain by their rogues.

Saurfang passed within range of Delaryn's bow, but she did not fire, nor did anyone else. Silently, she thanked Elune for their—and her—restraint and discipline. An hour later, the loathed siege engines arrived, grinding to a halt along the main road into Astranaar.

Delaryn slipped down the tree, resuming her watch from a lower limb. The branch extended far enough that she had an excellent view of the inn's interior as well as one of the entrances. She made eye contact with Tavar in another tree and nodded.

He returned the nod... and disappeared. A half hour later, a Forsaken, taller than most and wearing the armor and mark of Sylvanas Windrunner's personal guard, approached the inn. It took her three full heartbeats to realize it was young Tavar. *Elune has blessed you with a gift, dark though it may be,* she thought. *May her blessing follow you.*

Tavar strode with confidence to the inn. This was the final test, the one upon which everything hinged. If Tavar succeeded...

He paused at the entrance. She leaned forward, straining to hear, and marveled at the strange, sepulchral timbre of the Forsaken in his voice. He was *very* good.

"High Overlord Saurfang? Outside, now."

High Overlord Saurfang, however, was in no mood to cooperate. He fixed Tavar with a glare, then returned his attention to his maps. He said something Delaryn couldn't catch. She strained to listen.

Tavar tried again. "The warchief is waiting for you. Do you not follow her commands, High Overlord?"

Delaryn frowned. *Be careful, Tavar.*

Fortunately, Saurfang did not seem to notice the over-the-top performance, for he started toward the door. Then, he paused.

Has he...

He had not. Saurfang had merely left his axe on the table and now retrieved it.

But another orc had observed what her commander had not. Delaryn's heart sped up as the orc stepped between Saurfang and Tavar and said something that Delaryn couldn't hear.

"I am the emissary of my queen," Tavar said. "That should be enough for the likes of *you*." Delaryn could hear the slight panic, and she said a prayer to Elune that the enemy had not noticed.

Saurfang gripped his axe and spoke more words Delaryn could not hear.

“You have your orders. Outside, High Overlord. How long will you disobey the warchief?” Tavar had recovered some; his voice sounded almost bored.

But it was too late. Delaryn knew it, and so, she suspected with a sick, sorrowful pang, did Tavar.

Saurfang strode forward, and Delaryn could now hear the old orc. “I do not believe you care a bit for the warchief. Tell me, night elf, what name does Malfurion call you?”

Elune... no, please...

“Draw your blades, assassin, or die running!”

There was nothing Delaryn could do. She watched, helpless, grieving and angry, as Saurfang charged—as Tavar, so young, so full of talent and promise, drew his daggers and struck out at the high overlord of the Horde. The blow did not land.

Saurfang’s did, cutting cruelly through the youth’s neck.

The disguise disappeared as Tavar fell to the floorboards, and through a shimmer of futile tears, Delaryn saw his true features a final time. The orc did too, surprise showing on the weathered green face as Saurfang no doubt realized how young his opponent had been.

Saurfang said something. His voice was almost kind. Tavar spat on the high overlord’s boots before he died.

Now, too late for Tavar, Saurfang strode outside the inn. Delaryn had thought herself beyond hurting, but she had been wrong. Her hands tightened on the branches. *You succeeded, Tavar. Be at peace.*

“Listen well! Does the Horde need a reminder that *we are in a war?*” Saurfang bellowed, fury radiating from him. “Does the Horde need—”

He broke off.

No, Delaryn cried silently.

Weary from fighting and lack of sleep, the old warrior had almost—almost—let down his guard enough for the ambush to work.

It still will, she told herself.

The high overlord of the Horde raced for the supposed safety of the Astranaar inn, but the ground beneath his feet began to shiver, like a wild beast preparing for an attack. The air felt thick and heavy, and Delaryn allowed herself a fierce, almost cruel grin as her hair stood on end. She covered her

ears. The enormous sound, like a boulder crashing from a cliffside, nearly deafened her anyway as the earth quaked from the impact.

Malfurion Stormrage, all fury and grace and power, landed where Saurfang had been standing a scant second before.

“*Lok-Narash!*” Saurfang shouted.

“*To arms!*” *indeed*, Delaryn thought.

Now. For Tavar, and Vannara, and Marua, and even Anaris. For Ferryn. For all of those who had died. Delaryn did not believe in revenge. But she believed in justice. And this—this was justice.

With war cries ripping from their throats, the elven company dropped from the concealment of the trees and joined their beloved shan'do in battle.

Gone was the gentle, protective shan'do, who pitched his voice softly and whose movements were so light they scarce seemed to harm the grass upon which his catlike paws fell. In his place stood an embodiment of wrathful nature itself. Had Malfurion grown larger, somehow? He seemed to loom over the now-fleeing Horde—even the tauren looked weak and fragile in comparison. Delaryn quivered in fierce joy and the anticipation of victory... and of Saurfang's death.

The ambush had taken the Horde almost completely by surprise, making them easy targets as they attempted to recover. The beleaguered kaldorei, far outnumbered by their enemy, were able to mitigate that disadvantage during those first few moments.

Delaryn nocked arrows, let them fly, and nocked again and again. Seven Horde fell with arrows protruding from eyes and throats before they were even able to ascertain where the threat came from. The druids among them were predators seeking prey, and the warriors... Their weapons cleaved enemies in two, severed heads, pierced armor. The Horde were dropping like flies.

Malfurion had pursued Saurfang into the inn. Screams of agony came from inside, along with a defiant bellow from Saurfang. Delaryn could not spare much attention to it, but she caught one word out of the din: *mak'gora*. The old orc was challenging Malfurion Stormrage to a duel of honor.

It was almost—*almost*—humorous. Later, over a glass of wine with Ferryn in the Darnassus they had saved, she would laugh.

Now, she continued to kill.

She did not hear Malfurion's reply to the challenge. But she heard the groaning and creaking, saw the roots explode from the soil and race up along the walls of the inn, their tendrils grabbing the solid stone and tearing it apart. The noise was deafening, and hitherto brave Horde warriors hesitated.

It cost them. More and more fell to the kaldorei.

Then the roof started to collapse with Saurfang still inside.

Elune was good.

But then... Delaryn shivered violently. Some instinct older than time made her recoil. The hairs on her arms lifted again, not from the presence of Malfurion and his near-godlike power over nature, but from something else—something twisted, wrong, and *un-natural*.

The arrow, its ghostly dark trails of violet smoke twining, snakelike, about its shaft, was not meant for her, but it passed within an inch of her cheek. A few yards away, Malfurion crossed his arms in front of his face, the feathers that lined them fluttering with the gesture. The arrow exploded in front of him, and he appeared limned in emerald green light. The color of nature. The color of kaldorei defiance.

“No!” The scream of anguished, enraged protest tore from Delaryn’s throat. *We had them! It was to have ended here!*

Her cry drew the attention of the Banshee Queen. She had already nocked and let fly a second arrow, but she paused and turned. At that instant, another tremor shook the earth, and what was left of the inn collapsed.

Glowing red eyes met Delaryn’s, and a sadistic smile curved dark lips. That gaze pierced Delaryn as if it had been an arrow itself. Then Sylvanas Windrunner turned her full attention to a more worthy adversary.

Delaryn should have felt lucky. Few of her people had received that gaze and survived. But all she could feel—as Malfurion cried out a challenge and the green energy of life clashed with Sylvanas’s miasma of barren death—was bitterness. Bitterness and coldness.

Wild cheers erupted from the Horde. Malfurion’s appearance had startled them, and the inn collapsing on their high overlord had left them stunned. But that trepidation was supplanted with renewed fury with the presence of their warchief.

Malfurion had anticipated Sylvanas Windrunner’s arrival, and he had had sent Delaryn instructions for what to do when it occurred. *Elune willing, Saurfang will be killed, and the rest of his forces demoralized, before she arrives. Even if this is not so, you must retreat north, he had written. I will join you at the border between Ashenvale and Darkshore, if I can.*

Retreat north, to see if by some blessing the Feralas-bound fleet had received Malfurion’s message and arrived in time.

We were so close.

Delaryn lifted the horn to her lips and sounded the notes of retreat.

Astranaar had been a sound choice for a dangerous gamble, one that had partially paid off. The northern terrain of Ashenvale, though, was an even better friend to the night elves, with ocean on one side and a challenging mountain range on the other. If they wished to claim their prize, the Horde would be forced to traverse a very narrow path through the forest.

And there was something else there that would aid the night elves—something the enemy had, perhaps, not anticipated.



Now that they were not being harried by kaldorei, the Horde made surprisingly good time through the northwestern part of Ashenvale. They tasted victory, and that lent them speed.

Do not sip from that cup just yet, Delaryn thought. We will resist you as long as a single one of us yet breathes—and even afterward.

As he had promised, Malfurion met Delaryn's forces at the border. With him was someone the commander had feared she would never see again—Eriadnar. The two embraced tightly, and Delaryn thanked Elune that Eriadnar had survived. Eriadnar, the archdruid, Delaryn, and the remnants of her company waited, so dreadfully reduced in number since that first, terrible moment when Ferryn had killed their would-be assassin in the tree. The night elves balanced their hatred, their desire to act, with the patience of those who had lived long lives.

Delaryn was sent south to monitor and shadow the enemy. The Horde had set up a skeleton encampment on the shores near the ruins of Zoram'gar Outpost, out in the open, where they knew the night elves would not venture. The warchief was present, a slender, lithe figure among the bulkier trolls, tauren, and orcs, and Delaryn saw with a stab of disappointment that Saurfang had survived his encounter with Malfurion.

The orc was too far away for her to comprehend what he was saying, but he was shouting, and there was a cheer as several of the soldiers surged forward. He was calling for volunteers. Over a hundred armed and armored Horde troops moved from the beach toward the shadows of the forest.

Keep coming, Saurfang. We are ready for you. We are all ready for you.

Delaryn had been trained to respect a worthy foe. Even so, as she followed them unseen for the next several hours, she took fierce glee in watching the Horde move in, step by step, growing more nervous by the moment as they were not attacked. Sometimes, patience was sweet.

Pageantry, Malfurion had written in his instructions. Delaryn had not understood what that meant. But now she did. They were about to enact a piece of lethal theater that was dependent upon illusion, partial truth, and mystery.

So she waited. There was illumination in the forest: glowing, insubstantial orbs darted and hovered about. Those who did not understand what they were might simply find the lights pretty and slightly compelling. Those who did know regarded them with respect, reverence, gratitude... or fear. These were wisps, the spirits of the beloved kaldorei dead. For a moment, Delaryn wondered if any who had fallen today were among them—if Ferryn was among them—but she banished the thought. Now, more than ever, there was no room for distraction.

A troll waved a thick, three-fingered hand in annoyance at a few of the wisps darting about him. A tauren's tail swished and her ears twitched, as if these lights, only the size of a kaldorei's head, were nothing more than buzzing insects.

Fools, Delaryn thought. *Keep coming...*

It took several more minutes before Saurfang realized the peril. In the ugly, guttural language of the orcs, he shouted the order for a retreat. Fear tinged his voice.

As well it should. In small groups, the spirits of the dead were indeed innocuous. But in large numbers, they could bring down a demon lord—and they had.

And now... Malfurion Stormrage called the chief performers in this drama to take the stage. His voice boomed forth like thunder. "*Ash karath,*" he cried. *Do it!*

His words were both an order to the spirits and a taunting challenge to the Horde. The latter retreated as fast as they could—at least, the wise ones among them who had listened to Saurfang.

The darkness of the forest lit up as the wisps obeyed the shan'do. Too late, all the Horde who had ventured into the shadows of the trees understood. The wisps descended in a solid sheet of light upon those too foolish or confused to have fled with their commander, obscuring them from sight—but not silencing them; the forest rang with shrieks of torment. And Delaryn was glad to hear that song.

The remaining Horde soldiers fled frantically, futilely. An orc, huge and bristling with weapons, tripped on one of the dozens of roots that now snaked out, and he hit the earth hard. A white, buzzing cloud descended on him. A moment later, the cloud lifted, sailing toward the next victim of the wisps' wrath, leaving nothing behind but charred skeletons, or sometimes merely ash.

"To me!" the shan'do cried.

Now, the elves took their own cue to participate in this play of life and death. They rose from the undergrowth or dropped from the branches where they had been concealed and joined their leader, racing forward in pursuit of their enemy. The wisps buzzed angrily, harrying the Horde as they fled back the way they had come.

Delaryn had guessed more than a hundred had accompanied the high overlord. Only a handful—no more than a dozen—made it back to the shore near Zoram'gar Outpost. The rest had been demolished by the wisps.

As his soldiers reached the fringes of the forest, Malfurion shouted the order to halt. He lifted his powerfully muscled arms and, in a swarm of light, the wisps darted toward him, forming a wall that concealed their living brethren.

A few moments later, again obeying his silent bidding, the wall of wisps parted, drawing back like a curtain to reveal Malfurion Stormrage standing atop a small rise, with every single soldier he had at his command lined up before him so their numbers looked greater. Around them, the branches of the trees moved, grasping only air... for now.

“This ends now.” Malfurion’s voice, rich and resonant, carried through the still air to the Horde clustered on the shore. “The Horde will not take a single step farther into our land, not without paying with their lives. This I vow.”

The curtain of living light closed once again.

Pageantry.

The next move was up to the Horde.

Delaryn sagged slightly, but she was smiling. “Shan’do,” she said, “how did you know this would work?”

Malfurion smiled. Normally the expression gentled his face, but now it only reinforced his fierceness. He bowed deeply to the lights that had answered his call. “Fear is a useful tool, when used shrewdly. The Horde is powerful,” he said, his deep voice thrumming with resolve, “and its members are intelligent. But many are deeply superstitious. I anticipated that these protective spirits would not only destroy those they embraced, but also terrify those who managed to escape. This fear will spread to the rest of the Horde army. They cannot go forward without facing the wisps, our arrows, and the forest’s wrath.”

His gaze roamed among the upturned faces. “This is our land. Our home. They will not prevail. We will fight to our last breaths, if need be. We shall stand here as long as—”

The great druid broke off, sensing something. He lifted his gaze skyward. Delaryn looked up, at first seeing nothing—then she saw a storm crow. It fluttered down to the shan’do, shifting its form to reveal a kaldorei girl. She knelt before him, apparently too nervous to look him in the face. “Great Shan’do,” the girl said, “I have just come from General Shandris Feathermoon. The fleet is here!”

“Elune has heard our prayers!” Malfurion exclaimed, and a cheer went up. The sound of cannon fire confirmed the young druid’s words. Delaryn could not see past the radiant wisp barrier, but her heart surged.

In between the booming of the kaldorei vessels’ weapons, Delaryn and the others could faintly hear Saurfang barking orders to pull back. There was no way they could get their siege engines onto the shore now. Any effort would result in the great weapons being reduced to so much kindling.

The Horde army was pinned now—pinned between the fury of elven ghosts and the power of elven ships. They could still triumph. They had the numbers. But they would have to force the wisps back step by step, and they would take casualties for every single one. It would be slow going indeed, and they would be doing so while cannon fire rained down upon them. It would take weeks—and the Alliance reinforcements had sailed days ago.

We could win, Delaryn thought, and she almost swayed with the force of the revelation.



A fiercely grinning Teshara had returned to Shandris with good news, though she and the crews of the fleet had already seen the welcome shimmer of wisplight. They had driven the Horde from their comfortable seaside spot to the fringes of the forest—where Malfurion Stormrage awaited them.

“The shan’dō has called the wisps to defend our homeland,” she said. “Our numbers are reduced, but all who have survived the fighting are barring the Horde’s path to Teldrassil. The enemy has nowhere to run.”

It was said with the conviction granted only to the very young, but it was, Cordressa knew, absolutely true. With this newfound hope, she couldn’t resist teasing the younger elf. “Oh yes, they do,” she said. “They can run back home with their tails between their legs.”

Death faced the Horde on all sides save retreat. The fleet bombarded them from the west. Malfurion and the kaldorei soldiers, both dead and living, stopped them from continuing north, and to the east lay Felwood and impassible mountains.

“Do not celebrate just yet,” Shandris warned them, lowering her spyglass. “They have left the shoreline, but if we extend our range, we risk destroying the wisps.”

Teshara slumped, and the ebullience seeped out of Cordressa. “We still have them trapped, though, unless they retreat.”

“We do. And we can hold them here until the Stormwind ships arrive.”

“Can’t we attack now?” Teshara asked. “On the beach?”

“Not all of our ships have arrived, little one, and we do not have the numbers for a decisive victory by hand-to-hand combat. No. Time is our friend. We have the advantage for now. Should they try to bombard us, we will have a chance to destroy their siege weapons. We wait.”

She smiled. “And we will fire, from time to time, just to remind them we are here.”



The hours crawled by, bringing more of the fleet. Some aboard the ships slept. Others played games to while away the time. Twilight colored the sky, and then nightfall. Teshara came back from a scouting flight to report that a large number—hundreds of Horde soldiers—had been sent to search for a path to Darkshore through Felwood’s mountains. The revelation caused Shandris to chuckle.

“They must know that is a desperate effort,” she said.

Cordressa agreed. “Fewer Horde to worry about.”

Later, the young druid complained of boredom, and Cordressa laughed, ruffled her short green hair, and told her to be grateful for it.

But all of them were primed for action. To have come so far so swiftly and be denied a fight was frustrating.

Soon enough, they got their wish.

The Horde began rolling out their siege engines. At once, the ship crews leaped into action and bombarded the massive weapons. Several were destroyed in the first volleys, but the rest—

They were not launching stones at the ships. They were launching *fire*: unstable, arcane-enhanced payloads that set their targets ablaze almost instantly. Those vessels closest to the shore fell victim first, and Cordressa watched in helpless horror as one went up like so much tinder.

“Keep targeting the siege engines!” Shandris ordered, her face grim and taut with pain and fury. The kaldorei ships sent cannon shots and glaives, trying to destroy the delivery systems of the unnaturally lethal payloads.

Puddles of flame spread across the surface of the water, moving toward additional targets. Three ships—no, four now—were burning beyond salvation. Those aboard the lost vessels leaped into the water, swimming frantically toward what ships remained.

Something caught Cordressa’s eye. Movement in the water, but not the familiar shape of a night elf. An orc. What madness was...

And then she understood. “They’re trying to board!” she shouted.

“Continue bombardment!” cried Shandris. Both of them nocked arrows and began shooting at the Horde heads that broke the surface of the water.

In the span of a handful of minutes, the fleet had gone from boredom to chaos—from utter safety to impending destruction.

Another ship exploded into flame. Cordressa kept firing.

It was all that she could do.



Whatever gods or loa or ancestors the Horde had prayed to, those prayers had been answered.

Malfurion's plan ought to have been successful. But if the wisps could not make a tight cluster, they were no more dangerous than raindrops. The mountains were impassible—except they were not. What kind of dark passageway had the Horde found that the night elves, who had lived here so very long, had overlooked?

Now, the battle was on two fronts—before and behind them. The wisps were being dispersed... and killed.

He sensed her. She was close, now; he had led the Banshee Queen on a merry chase, but the time for elusion was over.

This would be how it ended—not with the Stormwind fleet sailing to their aid nor the wisps destroying the enemy, but in chaos, in having the trap—the trap that by all rights, all logic, should have worked—being turned against them.

My people are the ones caught now, Malfurion thought. I cannot save them. I can only mitigate the disaster.

There was no time to write a letter, and no time not to. The young druid, Teshara, took the folded missive with a shaking hand. Her large eyes swam with tears. “Go to Darnassus,” he told her. “Have them send you through a portal to Stormwind. Deliver this to my lady.”

“I want to fight! I can hear the battle!”

“You will best serve me and your people by obeying my orders.” There would be time enough for this child to fight. The battle to regain the World Tree would be a fierce one, and she might wish those words back.

Teshara swallowed hard, then flung herself down on one knee. “It was an honor to serve you, Shan'do,” she said in a thick voice. Then she rose unsteadily, jumped up, and transformed into a storm crow.

Delaryn ran up to him, panting slightly. Her armor was spattered with blood; none of it appeared to be hers. “We cannot hold them off any longer,” she said.

The archdruid lifted his face to the sky, watching the storm crow disappear.

“Sylvanas seeks me once again,” he told her calmly. “This time, I will go to her and delay her as long as Elune wills.”

Delaryn had been courageous, steadfast, obeying his orders yet thinking on her feet when she needed to. She had been strong, had kept the faith. She and those she commanded had fought so hard and sacrificed so much. But the Horde army was simply too large. Through sheer numbers, they had pushed past everything the kaldorei could summon against them.

Numbers, Saurfang's tactics... and the Dark Lady's evil will.

Tears slipped down Delaryn's face. Gently, Malfurion wiped them away. For a moment, she leaned her cheek into the comfort of his large hand; then she took a deep breath. She knew. The Horde would take Darnassus. The struggle now was to save as many lives as possible.

"What are my orders, Shan'do?" she asked quietly.

So brave. They have all been so brave, Malfurion thought. They deserve better than this. Would that I could give it to them. But the only thing I have to give is my life.

"Take your troops north to Mist's Edge," he replied. "When you are there... do all that you can." Malfurion paused. "Commander Summermoon... you did well. Elune be with you."

She straightened, saluted smartly, and then took off running.

Malfurion Stormrage shifted his shape, tossing the stag's antlered head as his hooves traveled swiftly over stone and grass. He followed the ugly thrum of dark power wafting through the air. If he slew her, the city would still fall—but it would be more easily retaken with the Horde in disarray.

And part of him wanted her to pay for what she had done.

He shifted form from stag to elf, sent out commands to rock and root and soil and leaf, and waited. And when she appeared, sensing him as he sensed her, elegant even in her undeath, he found that his union with things so much greater than he had taken away his fury, leaving only sorrow—for his people, for his beloved, and even for Sylvanas Windrunner.

"There will be no forgiveness for this, Sylvanas."

"I know."



Anduin had thought he was ready for this. But as the days passed, each with fresh horrors, he realized that no one could ever be truly prepared for something this soul-wrenching.

The refugees *just kept coming*. Anduin had ordered that the portals be constantly open throughout the city, but the magi had to sleep and eat, as did every one of the stoic but emotionally wrung-out refugees. The cathedral was now filled to overflowing, and the priests took to wandering

Stormwind, doing what they could to tend to the hungry, exhausted, and frightened. Anduin opened the royal coffers to pay for blankets, bedding, and food, and the innkeepers—and even common citizens—had generously flung open their doors.

The young king knew he had been spared some of the worst of the crisis. Velen stood ready to return to Azuremyst Isle if need be, but thus far, the Horde seemed obsessed with their march to Darnassus, and the draenei were not currently threatened.

When a slight, young kaldorei druid with a shock of short green hair stepped through a portal, clutching a pair of letters and insisting that she deliver them to Genn and Tyrande right away, she was immediately escorted to the high priestess, who—along with Anduin, Genn, and Velen—was helping the injured. The messenger thrust a letter at Genn, who took one look at her face and read the note at once. He sighed with relief.

After Tyrande straightened and turned around, the druid abruptly burst into tears. She handed her lady the letter and began speaking brokenly in Darnassian. The high priestess went terribly pale as she read. *No*, Anduin thought. *Please, Light...*

Tyrande swept the devastated girl into her arms, comforting her even as it was clear that she herself had been dealt a terrible blow.

“Lady Tyrande,” Anduin said, “what has happened?”

The high priestess slowly lifted her head. “Malfurion Stormrage has made his farewells.”

The refugees who heard her gasped. A few began to weep. Velen and Genn looked stunned, and Anduin couldn’t breathe.

Tyrande continued, still speaking with eerie composure while the girl clung to her. “The Horde attacked him and his soldiers from behind, and the wisps are scattered. Now, my beloved goes to face Sylvanas Windrunner, to hold the line while more kaldorei escape a city that will soon become a prison.” She rose, stiffly. “I go to join him.”

“Tyrande, you can’t,” Anduin said.

Tyrande seemed to come to life all at once, whipping her head around to stare at him. The girl, startled, drew back and stepped aside.

“Are you *sure* you wish to say that to me?” Tyrande asked, her voice shaking.

Calmly, he replied, “You would leave your people without a leader, at a time when they need one more than ever.” He pointed to the hundreds of night elves huddled in the cathedral. “Genn and Velen and I have already pledged to help the kaldorei recover the World Tree. Die now, and you buy them a few hours. Live, and you will buy them a future.”

For answer, Tyrande simply stood straighter and remained silent.

“You’ll go, then.” It was Genn. Tyrande nodded. Genn did, too. “You tell my Mia to come home. Now.”

The corners of Tyrande’s lips rose at Genn’s bluntness, though her smile faded quickly.

Anduin accepted that he couldn’t change her mind about going, but maybe he could help her in another way. “When I was younger,” he said, “my father and I were at odds more often than not. Jaina gave me this—so that I could escape the keep from time to time.”

He reached inside his coat and removed a small stone. It was flat and gray, and there was a swirl of glowing blue set into it. “It’s a hearthstone,” he said. “It used to transport me to Theramore to visit her.” He smiled sadly. The memories of those visits were bittersweet. “Since then, I’ve had it attuned to Stormwind.”

He held it out to Tyrande. “Take it. Stay alive. Find Malfurion and bring him back. Then, together, the two of you will lead your people and retake the tree—and Stormwind will stand with you.”

She stared at the hearthstone for a moment, then slowly reached to accept it. Then Tyrande Whisperwind gave him a soft, luminous smile. “I will do this, King Anduin Wrynn. And we will mark this moment as the beginning of that battle.”

She bent and kissed him softly on the cheek, then stepped through the portal to Darnassus.



Tyrande emerged into turmoil.

Night elves were pressed in tight lines, waiting to escape the city through the portals—the only means available. The magi operating them looked exhausted, their arms trembling as they kept the gateways open. Priestesses, every bit as weary, tried to shepherd the throngs through in an orderly manner. Several kaldorei crowded the moonwell, praying to Elune for safety. Children, sensitive to the anxiety of their elders, were weeping, and their parents clutched them close.

A cheer went up as all recognized their high priestess.

“Lady Tyrande!” a night elf woman cried, trying to push through the crowd.

“High Priestess!” someone else shouted.

“What is happening?”

The voice was human, and the speaker stepped beside her after shouldering her way through the crowd. Tyrande looked down at Mia Greymane. The queen's expression was stoic, but her eyes were wide, and she trembled ever so slightly. The high priestess bent to listen to her words. "We hear that the Horde has destroyed the wisps, that the Sentinels are all dead, and that the Horde approaches with arcane fire to burn the World Tree."

"None of those are true," Tyrande said. "But... the Horde is coming." She paused, wishing she need not utter the awful words. "And they will take Darnassus."

Mia took a sharp breath, then squared her shoulders and nodded. "Are you here to help with the evacuations?"

"I cannot," and Tyrande's voice broke as her eyes swept the scene. "Malfurion goes to fight Sylvanas. I must aid him. If he wins that battle, the Horde will suffer a severe blow to their morale. They could even become disorganized for a time, which could allow more of our citizens to escape." She paused. "You should return to your own husband, Queen Mia. He is so worried."

Mia shook her head. "Not yet. I'm just a few steps from a portal," she said. "It'll do Genn good to practice patience for a little longer. Go. I'll continue working with the priestesses to keep the lines moving and everyone calm."

Then Queen Mia hopped onto the wall of the moonwell. "Citizens of Darnassus! Honor your high priestess! She goes to join Malfurion Stormrage in battle!"

The throngs fell silent, and a pathway was cleared.

Moved, Tyrande lifted her arms and asked Elune's blessing upon them. Her people needed hope and courage and strength if they were to take up the burden that would soon be placed upon them. "Oh, my people ... we are *not* alone," she cried. "Malfurion and I will do all we can so that as many of you as possible will be safe. For those who must remain, do not fear! If Teldrassil does fall to the Horde, the Alliance will come hard on their heels. We have friends. And we have our will. We are *kaldorei*!"

They cheered her as she passed. She knew her words were not enough. But it was all she could do—for now.



It was night. From atop her hippogryph, Tyrande beheld the grim sight of hundreds of night elves fleeing toward Darnassus from other parts of the World Tree, surging into the city and covering

every inch of the pale white stone of its streets and the green of its grasses. And as the feathered wings of the great creature beat steadily, Tyrande's heart broke even further.

Below her, several ships blazed brightly, members of the fleet that had sailed toward Silithus to defend the innocent on a non-existent battlefield. Other kaldorei vessels retreated, still intact for now. Battles were being fought at Mist's Edge. The moonlight, so beautiful and usually so welcome, was cruel, shining down on those in combat, illuminating a terrifying number of siege weapons aimed at the tree.

And many of the elven shapes on the shore were far too still.

For half a heartbeat, she wanted nothing more than to bring the hippogryph down, to die fighting alongside these courageous kaldorei who knew the best they could do was take the enemy with them as they fell. But Anduin was right; she could not leave her people leaderless. She and Malfurion were needed more than ever.

"Forgive me," she whispered to the kaldorei soldiers, shivering from more than the bite of the night air. "But know you will be remembered."

She dragged her gaze inland, wondering where Malfurion dueled the hated Dark Lady. She needed to find him quickly. But where was he? For all her millennia of accumulated wisdom, all her lessons in patience, she was ill equipped to locate a single being in the vast forest below. Would she fail everyone?

Tears blurred her vision. She lifted her face up for the kisses of the moons. *Lady Elune*, she prayed, her heart filled to overflowing with emotion, *light my path*.

"May Elune light your path" was a common blessing among her people, uttered as a friendly farewell, a casual well-wish among friends and strangers alike. But now, Tyrande was pleading for it like never before. She needed a miracle, something to give the night elves hope as they huddled, a displaced, dispirited, terrified people, surviving by the kindness of their allies.

Tyrande gasped.

Her goddess had heard her.

A single shaft of moonlight pierced the night sky, shining straight down, penetrating the canopy for a brief moment before fading.

There. Her beloved was there. The last hope for the night elves was there.

And Elune was showing her the way.

"Thank you," she said—half whisper, half sob—as she brought the hippogryph down, praying she was not too late.

On the forest floor before her, dying, lay her beloved. His blood gleamed in the moonlight. And standing over him, axe raised, was High Overlord Varok Saurfang.

Tyrande cried out and sprang from the hippogryph. Elune's light, blazing and bright and white, flooded the area. His back to her, Saurfang froze where he stood, gripped by her spell as if turned to stone. As Tyrande's feet touched the ground, she shoved one hand forward hard. The orc was lifted up and flung to the side. He struck the earth heavily but was still alive.

Tyrande stood over her beloved as Saurfang looked up at her. The light she had summoned had re-formed into radiant, deadly spikes of illumination that hung over the orc's white head. He squinted in the brightness, panting, but made no move to attack.

I can strike him down with a thought. And yet he meets my eyes and does not plead for mercy. The orc should have struck Malfurion with the lethal blow before she could intervene. He had not. Why?

She kept her gaze locked with Saurfang's as she knelt and placed a hand on Malfurion's still-breathing form. Sylvanas's darkness had left its ugly marks on the archdruid, but it was the horrible, gaping wound in his back that lanced Tyrande's heart as her fingers sank into a rivulet of blood.

Elune, let me heal him. Let me bear him away, and give us strength for what we must face going forward.

Yet again, the light of the goddess came to her call. The same glow that had been a tower of illumination now coalesced around Malfurion's body, wrapping him in brightness until the glorious healing energy had been absorbed. Beneath her hand, bloodied but benevolent, she felt bones knit, wounds close, and that great heart begin to pump steadily.

Tyrande let a breath of relief escape her, then rose to face her husband's would-be killer. Saurfang, wisely, had not moved; the daggers of light still hovered over his head, awaiting her instructions.

"You did not kill him," she acknowledged. "Why?"

His brown eyes studied her for a moment; then he seemed to reach a decision. "I struck without honor," he replied, quietly. The admission seemed to cost him, almost wound him. "I did not deserve to end him."

Anger shuddered through her and made her voice hard as stone and sharp as a blade. "This whole *war* is without honor." She thought of the shivering, frightened refugees, of the bodies sprawled on the shore, of the siege engines preparing to attack her city. "What is wrong with you? How dare you spill so much blood for nothing!"

"We dare because we must," Saurfang said. He still had not moved, nor broken eye contact. "And we must succeed."

The lethal points of Elune's light responded to her rage, becoming terribly, deathly still. Their sharp tips pointed at his throat. She longed to release them.

But she did not. Tyrande had seen little enough honor from the Horde, and she believed Saurfang was ashamed. How long had he stood there, not striking the death blow—he, the high overlord, a warrior who had shed blood a thousand times over?

The Horde would take Darnassus. When they did, a general who believed in honor, and who had received mercy, might in turn show mercy to the kaldorei prisoners.

And there had been so much death. Her heart was sick with it; she had no wish to add to it out of her own vengeance.

"The Horde may win this battle, Saurfang, but we will reclaim our home."

"Perhaps."

Was he trying to goad her into losing her temper? She would not give him the satisfaction.

"You spared Malfurion, so I will give you a choice. You can die trying to stop me from taking him away, or you can stay there, lying in the dirt, and live."

But the orc was not done. He replied, "You have the same choice. You can take him back to Darnassus, and both of you will fall when we conquer it, or you can take him far away from here, and you will both live."

There was nothing more to be said.

She knelt beside Malfurion, resting a hand on his torso. His breathing was calm, rhythmic. She had saved him.

But they had lost their home. Tyrande knew that, for the rest of her life, she would wonder if she could have changed anything if she had stood alongside her beloved, fighting Sylvanas Windrunner and High Overlord Saurfang. Would they have won? Or would they both have watered the earth with their blood, together in death as in life?

After all her brave words to the others at the temple—they would be prisoners. Orcs and trolls, Forsaken and tauren, goblins and blood elves, would occupy the tree.

Tears filled her eyes, but she would not let the orc see them. She allowed herself one last look at the towering trees of Ashenvale. At her home.

Forgive me, my kaldorei. But we will return. This, I vow.

Her other hand slipped into a pouch around her waist, closing around the small hearthstone that fit snugly into her palm: the gift of a good and true young spirit who was maturing into a stalwart

ally of the Light. She pulled the stone out and gazed at it for an instant, and with a thought, she returned with her beloved to Stormwind.



Delaryn's throat and eyes stung from smoke. Those night elves who had been able to escape the World Tree were clustered on Darkshore, their stoicism, at last, shattered as they screamed in terror, calling out in vain for rescue from the vessels that were still able to sail.

Delaryn understood why the ships were fleeing, and she prayed that Cordressa was safely aboard one. The Horde were maneuvering their deadly, fire-flinging siege weapons up the shore. Any ships attempting to reach the frantic kaldorei on the beach would be engulfed in flames before they could save a single elf. Shandris Feathermoon was wise to set sail. Live now and come back with the Alliance reinforcements to wrest the tree from its hateful occupiers. But that logic was no comfort to those who would shortly become prisoners.

Delaryn Summermoon would not be among them. Her task was to fight, and keep fighting, until she could fight no longer.

Adrenaline and determination allowed her to shrug aside the first few arrows. But her body betrayed her a little bit more with each one that pierced armor and flesh. When the final one found its mark, she swayed for a moment; then her knees buckled and she dropped to the earth.

She could stave off the inevitable no longer.

She felt cold, but strangely, the pain was lessening. "Soon, it will not hurt at all," came a warm, familiar voice. A loved voice.

Ferryn was beside her in his favorite shape—that of the nightsaber. For a moment, Delaryn rejoiced. But then she realized that he was speaking. He should not have been able to. Feline mouths could not form words.

"You are... not real," she murmured, disappointed.

"I am as real as you wish me to be."

She was dying, and her mind was conjuring comforting images. She was oddly at peace with that thought. One thing she knew, though she did not understand how: Ferryn *was* dead. And she was at peace with that, too, for soon, she would be joining him.

"Rest," he said.

She wanted to. But something would not let her slip into that final sleep. She struggled against it, keeping her eyes open. Watching as the Horde came.

“... Cannot,” she said, realizing she had spoken aloud. A soft, harsh sob of a word.

“There is no longer anything you can do,” Ferryn said softly, kindly.

Was his ghost, or this figment of her imagination, right?

Figures approached. She heard the frightened cries of her people, the crackle of the ships still blazing, and the grinding, heavy noises of the siege engines. And above the din, strangely clear, bizarrely close, a throaty, cool voice issued an order: “Secure the beach. Prepare to invade the tree.”

Sylvanas.

Malfurion had failed.

I have failed, Delaryn thought with a shudder of despair. The former high elf and ranger-general was about to unleash the Horde’s worst facets—the pillagers, the revenge-seekers—upon a populace that was by this point completely civilian. Her very name, Sylvanas, spoke of a love for the woods—of green, living things. Was there anything left of that elf in this monster who was now striding toward her?

Delaryn would not die. Not yet. Not without trying, with her final breaths, to reach this woman who looked so like her, yet was so different.

Not without understanding.

Elune, guide me. Help me find the words to reach her heart.

Sylvanas did not see her. She strode right past the dying Sentinel.

Delaryn inhaled to speak. “Why?”

The warchief paused.

PART FIVE:
CONFLAGRATION

*The tree has fire for leaves
And skeletons for branches,
And its roots feed only upon
The ashes of the dead.*

*The winds that sigh through it now are the cries of the dying
And this song,
This lament
For horrors unspeakable,
For cruelty unimaginable,
For the life and the beauty and the grace that once were
And shall never be again.*



The Stormwind night was alive with controlled chaos. Even in an evacuation, when the night elves could be forgiven for being terrified and out of control, there was no screaming, no violence, no crush of bodies crowding one another in a stampede to safety.

The cathedral could hold no more refugees, not even in the darkest corners of its extensive catacombs. The inns had ten to fifteen in each room. Even certain areas of the keep were filled with silent, stoic kaldorei. The flood spread to seemingly every surface of the city, continued down through the Valley of Heroes, and spilled out most of the way to Goldshire.

Malfurion was resting comfortably. Tyrande had been loath to leave his side, but when he was deep in a true, restful sleep, she had risen to accompany Anduin as they kept vigil at the mage tower portals.

The magi had not slept for days, keeping the portals open. They subsisted on conjured food and drink and the priests' continual blessings.

Genn had not slept either.

Anduin had watched, concerned, as Genn's everyday gruffness had turned harsh with worry. Mia had obviously anticipated this, sending letters along with the refugees who were all too happy to deliver them. Genn was respected by the kaldorei, but Mia was beloved. But as the crowds increased,

the frequency of the letters decreased. And when Tyrande had returned with a badly injured Malfurion and briefed Anduin on the situation, Genn was so distraught and furious that his control slipped and he began shifting into his worgen form. He halted the change only with a visible effort.

“She is close to a portal,” Tyrande had said. “She will come through when she is ready.” She had placed a kind hand on Genn’s arm. “She is doing much good.”

“She can do good here,” Genn had snapped. “I should go and bring her back myself.” But he had not. Not yet. But if Mia did not appear soon, Genn would no doubt make good on his words. Anduin couldn’t blame him.

Velen had taken Genn away from the Wizard’s Sanctum, saying that the magi needed space for the refugees. Genn and Velen were now below at the tower’s exit, directing the increasingly heavy flood of confused and frightened night elves. Anduin had promised Genn that the instant Mia arrived, he would send her to where her husband anxiously awaited her.

He hoped that moment would be soon.



The first volley of the siege engines struck true.

Rut’theran Village, its docks crowded with night elves, was the first to be consumed. Those not killed outright tumbled into the water, screaming in agony as the cold brine brought not relief but only further shock... then death.

The arcane-touched payloads crashed into the branches of Teldrassil, each bough the size of an ordinary tree itself. The fire caught quickly. Shaman in Darkshore conjured winds to amplify the flames. Sparks danced like vicious imps from bough to bough, leaving crackling crimson and orange in their wake.

The inferno climbed eagerly upward, the flames spreading. The surface of Lake Al’Ameth glowed with reflected hues of a black and scarlet sky. The conflagration spread north to Dolanaar, east to Starbreeze Village, and west to Gnarlpine Hold.

And thence to Darnassus.

The wooden buildings of the Tradesmen’s Terrace burned quickly, but the implacable fire was thwarted, albeit only briefly, by the stone and water of the great city’s heart—the Temple of the Moon.

Then, the flames leaped to the Temple Gardens, and the boughs bending over the temple, too, caught fire.



The horrible reek of burning wood and flesh struck Mia like something physical. She doubled over, coughing, her eyes watering, her ears ringing with the din of screaming from outside—and inside—the temple. She heard a dim booming sound underneath the noise of terror.

Beside her, Astarii, Lariia, and the other priestesses had frozen in sheer horror. Their senses were sharper than Mia's by far. Cold fingers closed around her heart and squeezed. She did not want to know what information they had gleaned.

Her moment of ignorance vanished. A voice from the entrance of the temple screamed, "We are under attack! The tree is on fire!"



What have I done?

Teldrassil.

The Crown of the Earth.

The illumination of its branches, enormous and hitherto a sanctuary, bathed the water and the land with an orange glow and grotesqueries of shadow.

Now, you understand, the Banshee Queen had whispered into Delaryn's ear—before she did the unthinkable. Before she...

But the Dark Lady had been wrong. *I understand nothing*. Delaryn's grief and guilt raged as fiercely as the fire. In a final touch of malice as unfathomable as her motives, Sylvanas Windrunner had turned Delaryn's head so the dying kaldorei had a perfect view of the incineration of all she loved—all she had fought for, believed in, bled for. All she had lived for... and was about to die for.

The tree of life was now a deathtrap, and soon would be the site of the greatest mass incineration Azeroth had ever known.

"Close your eyes," Ferryn said. He stretched out in front of her, trying to shield her from the inferno's tortured brightness. But his ghostly form was translucent. He blurred, but did not block, the sight.

I cannot close my eyes. Though she couldn't say it. She was long past speaking. Her breaths had numbers. *I have to see this*.

If there were any mercy, the excruciating sight would burn her eyes to blindness, but cruelly, that solace was denied her. Her senses were at their peak, screaming. She shouldn't be able to hear the

crackling groans of the World Tree's burning limbs, yet the sound mingled with the shrieks of those left on Darkshore.

With a strange perversity, Delaryn felt only coldness in the face of the scorching heat.

Death is cold, she thought. Even for those who burn.

Those whom I failed.

"Release your hatred and your fear," Ferryn said, so softly, so gently. "You are past all of it now. Come with me."

You are not real, Delaryn thought with both anger and anguish. You are only wistful shadows, promising peace.

There will be no peace. Not for me.

The ghostly form of the night elf druid disappeared—but of course, it had never been there.

Above the canopy, above the burning tree, above all the trials and torments of this world, hung two moons: the White Lady and the Blue Child. Mother and infant, Elune and her people. The night skies once offered such comfort and balm. Now they were cold, the stars as hard as the diamonds they resembled.

Where are you, Elune? How could you abandon your children to fire? We gave all we had. For what?

She was lucky. Arrows would claim her life. But the children whose cradle had been the boughs of the World Tree would die in agony and, worse, in utter innocence.

Turn your face from Azeroth in shame, Elune. Her thoughts were daggers. You have abandoned us. We tried so hard... We believed in your love, in your protection...

Her mouth was too dry, her body too weak, to even spit in contempt.

Her pain grew, even as the coldness seeped into her heart.

Soon, it will not hurt at all, the ghostly shape of her beloved had assured her. Would it still hurt when she passed into oblivion?

There was no Ferryn to ask.



Smoke was coming through the portals, and Tyrande Whisperwind despaired.

Now, at last, the semblance of calm shattered. Panic was on the faces of the night elves; they raced through the portals into the Wizard's Sanctum, trying to escape a fire that had inexplicably broken out in Darnassus—

“Clear the area! We need to make room, *now!*” Anduin shouted.

The Stormwind guards were quick to obey, picking up night elf children and rushing alongside their parents down the ramp and out into the open.

But more room would not make a difference. The fire was too much, too fast, and it was no ordinary flame. It reeked of magic bent to a task so cruel, so utterly devoid of even a scrap of compassion, Tyrande could scarcely wrap her mind around it. *Have I tempted fate with my arrogance, Elune? Is Sylvanas Windrunner beyond even your light, that she would burn Darnassus?*

Kaldorei desperately shoved and clawed their way past one another at the portals. Tyrande, Anduin, the Stormwind guards, and the Sentinels pulled coughing evacuees to safety, shoved them in the direction of the ramp, and then reached through the portals for more. The smoke thickened, black and choking, and it became harder to see those on the other side.

Heat buffeted Tyrande's face, evaporating tears she hadn't realized had fallen. Against all her instincts, she pulled back, letting someone take her place, and forced calm on herself. In this moment, when seconds counted, she could assist in a better way.

Elune... please let me help them...

And all around her, there was an intake of welcome breath as damaged lungs were healed.



Tears poured down Astarii's face, both from the smoke and her heart.

How could this be happening? How could the Horde have gotten so far, and how—in Elune's name, *why?*—had the Horde chosen to burn the World Tree? This was more than war. More than cruelty. This was madness and genocide and hatred so extreme that Astarii could not understand it.

Numb from shock and horror, she forced herself to focus on the now. There were still portals open. There were lives that could be saved—if she could just get them to listen.

“Please stay calm!” Astarii shouted. “Do not crowd the portals, or else no one will get through!”

A few turned their faces to her, pausing in their primal search for safety. More, though, continued to push forward, heedless of Astarii's plea. Cries for help came as families shoved their way inside the temple. Some carried loved ones with horrific burns, who screamed in agony at every

movement, their blackened, oozing skin sloughing off. Others were already beyond any help the priestesses could give.

The reek of fear mingled with the stench of fire and burning flesh. Some who had thrust their way past others did not even head for the portals, but instead leaped into the moonwell, splashing themselves with sacred waters and weeping as they prayed to their goddess.

“Listen to your priestess!” It was Mia who was shouting, still standing on the edge of the moonwell, her hands cupped around her mouth.

Astarii met Lariia’s gaze and pointed toward the temple entrance. Lariia nodded, understanding immediately. Lariia then submerged herself in the pool, skirting where the distraught supplicants huddled, and emerged, dripping, to push through the crowds and disappear from view.

She returned a few moments later, her face stricken. “Everything is on fire,” she said to Astarii. “All the trees, all the grass...” She coughed. “Fire blocks the roads into the city.”

“Mia,” Astarii called, shouting to be heard over the cries of the terrified elves. “It is time for you to go.”

The human woman clenched her jaw. “Not yet.”

Astarii swallowed. The queen of Gilneas had a husband, a daughter. And they were not kaldorei. The priestess would not allow the fire to take Mia from them. “It will soon be too late,” she said. “Dying with us will do nothing. You can help us more by living!”

She opened her mouth to say more when there came a horrible groaning from overhead. Slowly enough for everyone to see and understand, but too swiftly for them to escape, something huge and orange-red hurtled toward the glass dome atop the temple. A massive tree limb, engulfed in licking flames, crashed down.

The elves in the moonwell screamed.

For the briefest sliver of time, the great branch was halted by Haidene’s bowl of ever-flowing water, and Astarii’s heart surged. *Elune has saved—*

A crack zigzagged along the stone basin, and the bowl broke in two.

The sacred waters spilled. The great stone bowl tumbled down, and the statue of Haidene lost both arms. A chunk of the basin severed the statue’s neck, sending its head toppling onto the screaming night elves who had sought refuge in the pool. The moonwell shattered, and its sacred waters flowed onto the grass, red now with the blood of innocents.

There were more screams. Those who could stampeded outside like crazed beasts, where nothing but more flames awaited to embrace them.



The flood of survivors tumbling through the portals, wreathed in black smoke and taunted by flickers of flame, slowed to a trickle, and then... nothing.

Still, Anduin and Tyrande stood in the Wizard's Sanctum. Waiting. Praying. Coughing and squinting against the heat.

A tongue of flame licked greedily through one of the portals, and Anduin realized he had to make the most difficult choice he had faced in his life.

If any yet lived on the other side of the portals, they were too weak or injured to come through. He couldn't even hear screams anymore, just the implacable crackle of greedy flames. No more families, no more children would be saved. No priestesses.

No Mia Greymane.

Genn would never forgive Anduin for the order he was about to issue. Anduin would never forgive himself. But the thick black smoke a world away in Darnassus would choke those in Stormwind if he did not speak the command that stuck in his throat.

Devastated, he said in a voice that cracked with pain, "Close the—"

A terrible howl sliced through the cacophony of the panicked crush of night elves.

"Out of my way!"

The voice was deep and ragged. The Gilnean king, fully in worgen form and running on all fours, barreled through the crowd in the Wizard's Sanctum. Smoke filled the chamber now, and Genn Greymane charged straight toward the main portal.

Anduin lunged without thinking. He slammed into Genn, knocking him to the floor. Genn whirled, easily pinning Anduin, and snarled, lifting a white, clawed, furred hand as he nearly succumbed to the rage that always lurked when he was in this bestial form.

"Too dangerous!" Anduin said, coughing.

Genn's feral face was but an inch or two away from Anduin's; his lips curled away from long, sharp teeth as he growled savagely.

"Genn, it is too late!" Tyrande cried.

The worgen sprang toward the night elf.

"She took my kingdom!" Genn bellowed at Tyrande. "She took my son! She is *not* taking my wife!"

And before Anduin could even form words, Genn had leaped through the smoking portal.



Genn was no stranger to war, violence, cruelty, or heartache. But nothing he had seen prepared him for the horror on the other side of the portal.

Where once a beautiful statue had stood offering healing waters, there was only debris, shattered bodies, blood-hued mud, and a gigantic burning branch. The air was almost unbreathable. The smoke and the horrible stench of death assaulted his lupine senses.

Genn forced himself to inhale and shouted, “Mia!”

“Genn! Over here!”

The voice was rasping but recognizable. It was the priestess Astarii. She and a mage were trying to move a chunk of debris that pinned a limp form.

Mia...

Genn sprang toward them, fear and fury whirling together in a maelstrom of strength unlike any he had felt. He lifted the huge chunk of stone as if it were a piece of furniture, no heavier than one of those hideous end tables Mia loved so much, the ones they’d left to rot in Gilneas when they had fled—

“Mia!”

She was curled up tightly, protecting herself from—

No. Not herself. Mia’s arms, miraculously unbroken, were wrapped around a night elf infant. It was ominously still. The coppery stench of far, far too much of his wife’s blood filled his nostrils. Her legs were twisted, as if she were a doll that some irate child had broken out of spite. Bone jutted through skin, and there were burn marks—

He turned, agonized and helpless, to Astarii, but the priestess was already murmuring a prayer in her smoke-roughened voice. Light appeared from nowhere, limning her hands. Genn watched as his sweet Mia’s legs straightened, her bones knitted, her lacerated skin—

Her eyes fluttered open, and the child she held squirmed.

Fresh tears, not born of smoke, stung Genn’s eyes.

“Elune yet hears us,” Astarii said, her face, even here, even now, soft with joy and wonder.

Mia reached for her husband. “Genn... the tree—they’re burning the tree...” She coughed violently, her lungs seared afresh by the overheated air. “The child... take her. Leave me.”

“Not a chance,” he snarled. They’d seen horrors together. Faced death side by side. As long as he breathed, so would she. “I’ll take you both!”

Could he do more? These people were his friends, and they were facing the worst death he could imagine. The great tree, home to thousands, had been set aflame. They would be burned alive, knowing that all was lost. Even as he scooped Mia into his arms, Genn paused. Running away had never sat well with him.

“We will not leave them,” Astarii said, gesturing to the other night elves. Genn realized she understood his conflict. The time for rescue, like sand in an hourglass, had run out. She meant that someone would be with the dying, to help them in their last minutes.

Gruffly, not knowing what else to say or do, Genn said, “Elune be with you.”

Cradling his beloved wife and the final, tiny night elf refugee, Genn Greymane stepped through the last portal.



The priestesses knew what to do. Astarii extended her arms to a mother and her young son, who were among the last to enter the temple. “Do not be afraid,” she said to the boy, who was mute and trembling. “Come here.” With one arm around the mother and the other around her boy, Astarii sank to the soaked earth.

The last three priestesses of Elune in Teldrassil prayed. They did not ask for healing or for rescue.

They asked for mercy.

And their goddess heard them as Astarii began to sing.

By the moons’ glow, listen.

Beside the river, listen.

Holding those you love, listen

To the cries of the dying,

To the whisper of the wind over the silent dead...

Sleep brushed Astarii’s mind, feather soft, honey sweet. The pain disappeared. She let out a sigh. All around her, she heard similar sounds.

The fire was relentless. The smoke would kill them, and the flames would devour their flesh and even their bones. Only ash would remain. But they would feel nothing.

No pain in the Lady's light, in the Lady's love. Mother and child both slept, breathing gently despite the smoke. Her duty faithfully discharged, Astarii allowed her own eyelids to flutter closed.

There will be justice, one day, but eyes other than ours will behold it.

The last thing she heard was a cracking sound as she slipped into slumber.



"Close it!" Genn shouted in a voice made hoarse by the smoke—by the smoke, by the fire, by the horrors he must have beheld.

The mage, his face pale and etched with sorrow, lowered his hands.

The last portal disappeared.

He'd done it. Genn bore not only Mia but a night elf child. Anduin couldn't see if any of the three were wounded, so he summoned the Light. He had asked it for aid a thousand times or more in the last several days, and still it came, as always, and the wounds were healed.

No. Not all the wounds. Genn sank to the floor, holding an exhausted Mia. Tyrande gathered the infant to her. Genn took a deep breath and exhaled, resuming his human form. He looked up at Tyrande, and the utter bleakness of his expression spoke more clearly than words the depth of what had happened.

"The tree is burning," he said. His voice was hard and laced with pain.

"You mean Darnassus?" Tyrande asked, her words catching in her throat.

"The *tree*," Genn repeated. "I'm sorry, High Priestess. The Horde has burned the World Tree." His eyes, bloodshot from the smoke, narrowed. "They will pay for this. I swear to you—*they will pay!*"

Anduin felt cold with shock. The tree was on fire. Teldrassil, with all its hamlets and nooks and towns, its hills and valleys and creatures. Everyone and everything in it would burn.

Tyrande closed her eyes. "I said the tree would not be..." Her voice broke. She opened her eyes and looked at the child she held in her arms, covered with soot, but whole. Healthy. Alive. Tears slipped slowly down her cheeks. "What is her name?" she asked softly.

Mia shook her head weakly. "I don't know."

"Then, little one, I shall name you *Finel*. 'The last.' For you are the last kaldorei to escape with your life."

The World Tree was more than a city. It was an entire land, home to countless innocents. How many night elves were elsewhere in Azeroth? Far too few. Now, they were all who remained of their people.

Sylvanas Windrunner had committed genocide.

Anduin had known she was selfish—arrogant, too. Cunning. Driven. But he had never expected this. Through blurred vision, he saw Genn Greymane's face as his wife clung to him, and he realized that not even Genn, who hated Sylvanas with his whole heart, could believe it. No one had thought she would put her cruelty before her cleverness. There was no strategic purpose, no possible reason to destroy the tree. Far from it—with this unfathomable decision, Sylvanas had united the Alliance in a way nothing else could.

None of that mattered now. There had been chances to stop her. Chances to attack before she had. Anduin had chosen to reject those opportunities. Now, numberless voices would haunt his dreams until he achieved one thing: stopping Sylvanas. Permanently.

His eyes met Tyrande's over the baby's head. Finel whimpered, and Tyrande cradled her close. Then, so softly that Anduin could barely hear her, the high priestess of the night elves began to sing.

*O little last one, listen
To the song my broken heart will ever sing
Of the story of the Tree of the World
And the death of all the dreams
It once cradled in its mighty boughs.*

Anduin dragged a sooty sleeve across his wet eyes. His raw, aching heart broke at what he had to do. Quietly, calmly, he steeled it. After this, there could be nothing else.

There was no choice.

No doubt.

No regret.

War.

CREDITS



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