

The background of the cover is a dark, atmospheric illustration. In the center, a high-ranking Night Elf warrior, likely a Sentinel, stands prominently. He has white hair, a goatee, and glowing yellow eyes. He wears ornate, golden armor with red and blue gemstones. He holds a large, curved sword with a glowing green blade. Behind him to the left, a female Night Elf in blue and silver armor looks on. To the right, a human warrior in golden armor with a glowing yellow star on his chest holds a glowing yellow sword. In the upper left, a small, dark, winged creature flies. The overall scene is set against a dark, rocky landscape with green energy or magic emanating from the ground.

# WORLD WARCRAFT MIDNIGHT

CHAPTER  
EXCERPT

# BLOOD TIES

CHRISTIE GOLDEN

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR



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# BLOOD TIES

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CHRISTIE GOLDEN



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PROLOGUE

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## Felsoul Hold Ruins, Suramar

### THE BROKEN ISLES

“You’re having second thoughts.”

“No, I’m not,” Dionaar lied. He winced inwardly as he heard his voice quivering. “I just think . . . we may be pushing our luck. That’s all.”

The nightborne youth craned his neck to look up at the demonic structure. It was broken, a ruin created by a long-defeated foe. Dionaar knew it ought to have signified nothing more than a reminder of the past—a reminder, in fact, of a great victory.

But the stories of what had happened here were not easily forgotten, and this unnerved him.

“You’re certain no one followed us?” Corentyn stood up a bit straighter. He was taller than Dionaar, slim, almost bony. He had all the recklessness expected of his seventeen years, a confidence that Dionaar could only dream of possessing. The flickering orange glow of the torches played over his frowning, knife-sharp features, casting a capering shadow of his profile.

*Confident and clever, but not too wise*, Dionaar thought. Two weeks ago, in an act of rebellion, Corentyn had carved a protection glyph onto the back of his hand, bragging about it to all the students who

would listen. If he'd spent even a little time studying, his bravado would have been productive. But he hadn't, so of course he'd messed it up, and now the glyph etched into his very skin meant nothing. When his parents discovered it, they'd been furious with him, told him he'd simply have to wear it until he could earn enough coin to have it removed himself.

*He's all talk*, Dionaar thought, though his stomach clenched. He shook his head vigorously. "Not that I saw, but . . . a patrol might come by here. Eventually."

Corentyn gave a careless shrug. "We can just hide—wait until they pass."

"If we were noticed . . ."

Corentyn laughed and prodded him in the chest with a forefinger. "I'll just shove you out in front of me. You'd take the fall, right?"

Dionaar looked down and didn't answer. It wasn't fair, of course; Corentyn was always out in front showing off, and Dionaar was just his lackey, spreading the stories of all the great things Corentyn did or the creepy abandoned places they'd checked out together. Even now Dionaar was expected to convince the others that they needed to sneak out, see for themselves if the horror Corentyn warned them about was real.

Corentyn slapped him on the shoulder. "Ah, cheer up, I'll get you out if your parents lock you up. But I need you at your best tonight because I have something special planned." He toed the large sack he had brought. Its lumpiness shifted slightly, but Dionaar had no idea what might be inside it.

"What's that?"

"Can't reveal the trick." He sniffed. "Don't be too scared; *you* at least know it's all fake."

Even though Dionaar was in on every prank, sometimes Corentyn's antics still scared him. "You sure about all this? Vanaur and the Mystralín girls are coming, and their uncle is part of the Duskwatch. What if they tell—"

"They won't, or they'll get in trouble, too." Corentyn rolled his

eyes. "Don't be such a baby. Go on, get going. Oh, wait—tell them before they come that orc warlocks used fel magic to steal years of life from their own children so they would be old enough to fight!"

"What?" Dionaar had never heard this. "Cor, you're making this all up. And no, I'm not going to tell them that."

■ ■ ■

"They did what?" Renae's voice was a horrified whisper.

Dionaar nodded sagely. "They drained their lives with fel magic so that they grew years older in seconds!"

"I want to be older," Julyan said.

"Not like that," Vanaur said.

Each of the teenagers carried a torch, except for the youngest, who clung tightly to her sister's arm. "Now, remember," Dionaar said, "we have to be very quiet. No talking, not even whispering. Demons have excellent hearing."

Their faces were turned up to him, their eyes wide, and they nodded. "I'm going to take you to where I last saw the fel magic, but we have to be careful to not attract any attention. Because if they find us . . ."

"They'll eat us," whispered Renae.

"No," Vanaur said, rolling his eyes. "Haven't you been listening? They'll drain your life and make you *old*!"

"Oh, they might eat you *afterward*," Dionaar said. "Probably shouldn't stick around to find out, right?"

Energetic nods. "And one more thing. You can't tell anyone what you saw here. Not a word. Ever."

"But shouldn't we— I mean, if there truly is a demon in these ruins . . ."

"I've, um, already alerted them," Dionaar lied. "This is our last chance to see it before the Duskwatch takes care of it."

They agreed silently, and Dionaar lifted his torch, stepping into the darkness.

It was a short, easy path, and Dionaar knew it well by now. He



gasped and pointed at a puddle of “demon blood” (water thickened with luminous mushroom gills), a “victim’s bone” (which Corentyn had salvaged from a birthday celebration featuring roasted stag), and a “demon horn” (which had also belonged to the unfortunate stag).

The Mystralin sisters were properly alarmed, but Vanaur was growing bored. “You promised fel magic.”

“There’s only fel magic when they’ve fed souls of the innocents to the machinery,” Dionaar replied.

That was Corentyn’s cue, but nothing happened.

“And if we see that, we’ve stayed too long,” Dionaar said louder. “And we *don’t want THAT*.”

Nothing.

*What’s going on?* Corentyn had said something about a surprise, but maybe his trick didn’t work. This wouldn’t be the first time one of his pranks backfired. Still, by now he should have at least activated the lamp with the green glass, started the smoke . . .

“I *knew* it,” Vanaur said. “Just another one of your stupid pranks, you and Corentyn. You really shouldn’t—”

He broke off with a strangled sound, his mouth open, staring behind Dionaar, who exhaled in relief. *Thank goodness*. The audience was bathed in the familiar eerie green of the filtered light. But there was a smell . . .

Rotten eggs. Fel was supposed to smell like rotten eggs! So *that* was the surprise!

It was then that the sensation of fear struck Dionaar so powerfully that his knees buckled. The others shrieked, the promise of silence utterly abandoned, and they ran back the way they had come, the wildly bobbing orange flames of their torches growing smaller and smaller, then devoured by darkness.

Dionaar had dropped his own torch and made no effort to find it, his breath catching as he covered his head with his hands and curled into a tight ball. He tried to gulp air, but he could taste the awful odor, and there was another smell laced with the reek of rotten egg, a smell less innocently explained. The smell of something *dead*.

Then came the scream.

It was coming from right behind the rock, high-pitched and pure in its perfect terror, a sound that Dionaar had never heard issue from Corentyn's throat but that was undeniably his. Dionaar squeezed his eyes shut against the green glow, but it seemed to penetrate his very skin. His throat hurt so badly, was so raw, and he realized it was because he was screaming, screaming to drown out Cor, whom he was sure was dying back there, *dying*—

And then there was silence, except for Dionaar's panting and the pounding of his frantic heart.

"Are you all right, Dio? Looks like I scared *you* more than them!"

The voice belonged to Corentyn. He sounded . . . normal. Excited, even.

Dionaar's body shook violently, but he slowly lifted his head to see his friend grinning down at him. "Good prank, huh?"

Emotions flooded Dionaar: Relief, anger, confusion. But most of all *joy*. He got to his feet and threw his arms around his friend.

"It's all right," Corentyn said, hugging him back awkwardly. "I'm fine. I'm fine."

Dionaar pulled back and then swung at Corentyn, cursing him, but the young man ducked and laughed, fending him off easily. As Dionaar's adrenaline ebbed, Corentyn explained what he'd done. He'd been hanging on to the rotten eggs and meat for a while, and he'd practiced his shriek several times near the shore, where his voice would be drowned out by the tide.

"I did too good of a job, though," he said, relighting Dionaar's torch from his own. "I suspect the Mystralin girls are going straight to Uncle Duskwatch now, to tell him they saw fel magic down here." He flashed a grin. "Party's over, but at least I went out on a high note . . . so to speak."

"We should tell our parents the same thing," Dionaar said. "So they won't blame it on us."

"Good idea. Let's get going. Do you need to change your pants?"

"Oh, shut up!" Now that Corentyn had officially ended the hoax,



Dionaar could laugh about everything. Even if his parents found out they'd been behind it, he was just glad that it had been a foolish joke.

Corentyn placed a hand on his friend's shoulder and gently started to turn him around, but then Dionaar froze.

A hand was sticking out from behind the boulder.

A hand with a half-healed, miswritten rune carved into it.

Corentyn laughed, following his friend's line of sight. "Looks pretty real, doesn't it? I was going to wave it like I was trying to climb out, but those kids ran before I could even use it! What a waste."

"Y-yeah," murmured Dionaar, staring at the hand. "A waste."

"Come on," Corentyn said, "let's get out of here." He had already begun talking about their next prank before they reached the exit.

But as Dionaar glanced behind them, searching the green, unnatural glow, he could have sworn he saw the hand twitch.

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## CHAPTER ONE

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### Light's Hope Chapel, Eastern Plaguelands

#### THE EASTERN KINGDOMS

lang. Clang. Clang.

The sound of hammer against steel was a familiar one outside Light's Hope Chapel. But this time Master Craftsman Wilhelm—who usually repaired the weapons and armor of the Knights of the Silver Hand—was not the one producing it. The gruff dwarf was instead leaning back against a grassy hillock, peering up at the brown-gray sky of the Eastern Plaguelands and belting out a smithing song between swigs of Thunderbrew lager. He paused long enough to pose a question to the half-elf champion who had offered to take his place.

“How long can that skinny little arm of yers keep this up, laddie?” Wilhelm's eyes twinkled, his mustache wet with foam. The “laddie” in question, Arator the Redeemer, grinned at him as he wiped his brow.

“Yet again I lament that I do not possess the dwarven musculature,” he said with an exaggerated sigh.

Wilhelm guffawed. “Ah, well, we cannae all be so fortunate.”

Arator's arm was certainly up to the task, but it was hot work, and neither his human nor his elven blood gave him the innate dwarven

ability to long withstand the heat of the forge. He removed his upper body armor and laid it to one side, revealing a pair of dragon tattoos on his muscled upper arms. They were identical in style, both outlined in gold, but filled in with different hues: one bright as the White Lady moon and the other a shade of charcoal.

A human boy of about ten, Winthrop, sat beside him. Winthrop was the newest squire to the famed paladin Lord Grayson Shadowbreaker, a position that Arator himself had held when he was new to the order. It was the boy's task to which Arator now plied his own efforts, working on cleaning and hammering dents out of the great man's armor. Today marked young Winthrop's first visit to Light's Hope Chapel, and he was far too dazzled by the elite company he presently kept to have made much progress in mending his lord's gambeson.

"I can't believe you're bothering to help me," he told Arator. "I mean . . . you're the son of High Exarch Turalyon and Lady Alleria Windrunner! They've statues in the Valley of Heroes, *songs* sung about them. You were practically *born* famous!"

Arator had heard all this before and had tired of it years ago. Still, it was hardly Win's fault, and he meant well. Although Arator was much older than Winthrop, the years of a half-elf did not keep pace with those of humans. It was one of many challenges bequeathed by his unique parentage. For all Arator's experience and all he had seen, in many ways, he felt more kinship with the new squire than with his lord knight.

Arator turned his smile on the boy. "As I said, I enjoy being of assistance." Arator well remembered how many tasks had been assigned during his own time as Grayson's squire. It was important to learn skills like armor repair, of course, but young Win seemed buried beneath mundane chores. Arator felt that there was no task so small it was beneath him, if he could help someone by performing it.

Winthrop's brown eyes narrowed, and he glanced toward where Lord Grayson and another of his former squires were engaged in

conversation. "I hope he doesn't get angry at us," Winthrop murmured.

Arator couldn't blame the boy for being concerned. Tall, muscular, having lost his right eye in battle long ago, Lord Grayson could seem intimidating even when out of armor and chatting casually. As one of Stormwind's foremost paladins, he'd trained many among their number, had even brought Arator with him to their order's war council a time or two. It was hard not to see him as intimidating, formidable—certainly an enemy Arator would not want to meet in battle. Simply sparring with the man was hard enough. But Grayson had made a firm commitment to others in the order, and he'd served the Light longer than most.

"Don't worry," Arator reassured the boy. "He'll know it was my idea, not yours, trust me."

"I don't want *you* to get in trouble, either."

"I won't."

Winthrop sighed. "Everyone says I'm lucky he picked me, but . . ." The boy looked down. "He's so . . . strong, and confident, and can knock me to the ground in seconds when we're sparring. I've heard a lot of the stories—he's a real hero! He's more than just a knight, he's a *lord*! I've got to make sure I don't disappoint him." As he spoke the words, Winthrop reached for the gambeson and set to mending it with renewed purpose.

Arator felt his smile fade slightly. Even though he might be the son of legends, he was, in Winthrop's innocent words, *just a knight* of the Silver Hand. Many would say that was honor enough, but Winthrop's easy dismissal of it only echoed Arator's own thoughts. He had earned that rank for himself long ago, had even been recognized with a title. Now and then, the Light would grant a paladin inspiration regarding another's destiny. Arator's own father had been so moved to name the famous Uther "the Lightbringer." Arator had been named "the Redeemer." But whom or what exactly he would one day *redeem* eluded him. And until that moment came, it seemed

the order was content to let him chase accolades without ever receiving them.

He tried not to let it bother him, but others younger than he, still panting and bloody, had received battlefield promotions. Their companions, weary but buoyed by victory, had cheered them with hoarse voices. Usually when he had such thoughts, Arator rebuked himself, as he did now, for being envious—and, perhaps, overly imaginative. He had joined the Knights of the Silver Hand to lend his strength to a worthy cause, and while acknowledgment of his efforts was nice, he certainly didn't require it to continue his course.

Arator had fought well and valiantly in several wars already, but his efforts had been insufficient to attract much notice. At least, he thought ruefully, notice of the *good* kind. There seemed to be no end to the order's rules, and Arator had bent, if not fully broken, most of them. He'd concerned himself too much with the locals here, hesitated there, gotten information from a questionable source another time. His methods were always a topic of discussion among the order, but Arator noticed that no one raised concerns with his results. Some had voiced, obliquely or bluntly, that his disregard for protocol and rules would one day harm his standing in the order, but Arator dismissed the idea. To him, it was simple: If he could not change his world, improve the lives of common folk, what purpose was left for a Knight of the Silver Hand?

In truth, it had been more than a willingness to be helpful that had prompted Arator to help young Winthrop. He had been summoned to Light's Hope by Lord Maxwell Tyrosus, one of the central leaders within their order. Arator understood that Lord Tyrosus was an extraordinarily busy individual, and while he was not surprised he had to wait for an audience, he did need something to keep his mind off the meeting. Arator knew exactly why he had been asked to come here today, though he did not know what the outcome of the conversation would be.

Abruptly, Winthrop sprang to his feet, dropping the gambeson.

“Lord Tyrosus!” he exclaimed, his voice climbing a half octave with excitement and delight.

But Arator felt only knife-sharp disappointment as he beheld the expression on the knight’s weatherworn face. An ominous clue as to the tone of the conversation. Arator schooled his own features lest Lord Tyrosus see how hard the blow had struck. Rising, Arator placed Lord Grayson’s armor down next to Winthrop, who was still gazing up at Tyrosus with wide eyes.

Lord Tyrosus glanced over the boy’s progress. “Good work, young man! But best pick up the pace, eh?”

Winthrop gulped and nodded furiously, unable to speak.

To Arator, Tyrosus said merely, “Come. Let us pay our respects together.”

They fell into step, heading toward the Sanctum of Light, the scent of stone and its coolness enveloping them as they descended. This had been the headquarters for the Knights of the Silver Hand since the Burning Legion’s invasion, and Arator knew it well. He had come here many times on Silver Hand business, but he often found himself at the sanctum for no other reason than to simply be with the Light, to draw inspiration from watching others perfect their skills, and to pay respect to the many who had gone before.

They paused before the tomb of the legendary Tirion Fordring. Tirion had been one of the five original paladins—the first in Azeroth’s history. Archbishop Alonsus Faol had called upon these five to lead the order long ago. Faol’s vision was to marry the Light’s compassion with the power of the hammer, knights who would be priest and warrior both. But where the Light had a tendency toward order and rigidity, Tirion knew it to be flexible and kind. He saw the Light’s reach in all he met, famously held empathy for his former enemies, and yet never feared raising hammer or sword when he saw injustice . . . even when it meant standing against his fellow paladins. Even when it meant exile from his home and this very order.

It had been the honor of Arator’s life to fight beside Tirion at the



Broken Shore, a bleak and bitter fight that held catastrophic losses for their kind, including Tirion himself. The knight had died as he had lived, serving the people of Azeroth until his final breath. It was the kind of legacy Arator hoped to leave. Not a list of victories achieved by following every archaic convention to the letter, but a tapestry of service to his world, every thread a deed, a word, a thought.

“Heroism has never been commonplace, and yet it has never disappeared altogether,” Lord Tyrosus said quietly, as if speaking Arator’s thoughts aloud. “Even if it goes unremarked by history, it dwells in the hearts of good people. Some are trained for war. Others are ordinary folk who discover it in their souls and rise to the challenge when heroism is asked of them. Fordring taught us that heroic deeds need not be confined to the battlefield. They are also found when holding firmly to one’s faith and ideals, even if it costs one everything.”

“I know all of Tirion’s stories,” Arator said. “He ever fought for peace. I am glad he lived to see the Horde and the Alliance working together, however briefly, before the end.”

Lord Tyrosus nodded. “Charging into battle takes far less courage than enduring so much loss for doing the right thing. It is our most admirable, and rarest, quality. Compassion, a true understanding of justice, bravery . . . *all* these things make a paladin. But heroism transcends even that.”

Arator’s heart sank. This was starting to sound like a prelude to bad news. He turned, not looking at Lord Tyrosus, his visage a model of neutrality, hands lightly clasped behind his back. Part of him—likely his mother’s blood—longed to simply interrupt and be done with the conversation, but he held his tongue.

His superior continued. “In recent years, paladins and champions have risen to the demands of their order, and many have performed extraordinary acts. And even so, few have earned the right to accolades beyond knighthood.”

With uncharacteristic informality, Tyrosus placed a hand on Arator’s shoulder, turning the younger man to face him. “We have had

our eye on you for some time, Arator. How could we not, given your lineage? We find you consistently remarkable both in battlefield skills and in the gentler aspects a paladin should embody. Like taking the time to help young Winthrop today. But we have not yet seen you rise to *truly* heroic heights. Therefore, we will not be considering you for lordship.”

Arator nodded. “I understand, Lord Tyrosus. I shall continue to strive to be better, so that I may more effectively serve those I am sworn to protect.”

Tyrosus squeezed his shoulder briefly. “I do not doubt that for an instant. I hope to be there when the truth of your title is revealed to us. I know you will astound us all.”

Arator felt the genuine warmth of these words, but then Lord Tyrosus continued. “After all, with the blood of High Exarch Turalyon and the legendary Alleria Windrunner flowing through your veins, you were practically born to heroism.”

There it was. The stone that inevitably dropped in every conversation he had with another of his calling. The comparison he could never escape. He summoned his rote response. “My lord, thank you. It is a high calling indeed. An honor and a responsibility both.”

The older man seemed pleased with this. “You are dismissed, if you’d like to rejoin your young admirer outside.”

“I believe Lord Grayson’s gambeson is, justly, consuming Winthrop’s attention,” Arator deferred. Tyrosus chuckled. “I’d rather stay here awhile, if you don’t mind, and meditate on what we discussed.”

“Of course. It is a lot to think about, and there is no better place to ponder than here.”

Arator listened until he could no longer hear the sound of boots, then turned to regard another image carved in stone: High Exarch Turalyon.

For Arator’s father, like Tirion, had been one of the original five paladins.

*You were practically born to heroism*, Tyrosus had said with complete confidence.

*Was I?* Arator wondered. *Was I, truly?*

Ever since he was old enough to understand the concept, he'd been introduced and spoken of as "the son of Turalyon and Alleria." He had never asked for—nor accepted—anything that smacked of favor due to his parentage, but the fabled couple were so universally known that it had been impossible to conceal his identity among his fellows. Lord Tyrosus's rejection stung in part because, although Arator worked harder than most to prove his worth and skill, his accomplishments were ever weighed against or eclipsed by those of his famous parents.

Alleria and Turalyon had lived through an extraordinary era. Arator's own lifetime had certainly been fraught with danger, from demons to the undead to the shattering of Azeroth itself. So many had risen to join those battles, people from both the Horde and the Alliance who fought with skill and dedication and passion. But acts and feats that had been remarkable in earlier times were so no longer, and while Arator was glad that his companions on the field of battle excelled at what they did, he could not help thinking of the deeds of his parents, not just on Azeroth but on other worlds, performed so consistently and successfully for so very long.

Arator had grown to realize that, although he was a blend of humanity and elvenkind, rather than straddling both worlds, he increasingly felt that he belonged to neither. The rejection today also brought home other truths, other struggles. He had become an adult, his own person, long before his parents had returned. In many ways, he was still getting to know them, even as his life had been indelibly shaped by their legacy, by the *idea* of them. Arator wanted nothing more than to be with and learn from them after they had been so long away . . . but he also longed to stand apart, to contribute in his own ways and not be judged against their standard.

How long he knelt ruminating, in the shadow of his father's statue, Arator did not know, but when he stood, his legs were stiff, and his heart was, perhaps, even heavier than it had been.

He emerged, blinking, into the daylight.

"Perfect timing," said a friendly, familiar voice. "I've only been waiting a few moments."

"Liadrin!" Arator exclaimed, surprise driving away the cloud for the time being. "What are you doing here?"

"I come bearing a special delivery," she said, indicating the small, cloth-wrapped package she held.

Lady Liadrin led the *sin'dorei* paladins, an order called the Blood Knights. She had been the first of her order, a former priestess who turned to the tools of war to fight for her people. Though Liadrin and his father were quite different, Turalyon had done the same thing.

After his parents had been lost beyond the Dark Portal, Arator had been raised by his aunt Vereesa and the many friends who had loved his family. While his aunt Sylvanas had been kept busy by her duties as ranger general, her second-in-command, Lor'themar Theron, had taken Arator under his wing.

After the Scourge decimated Quel'Thalas, it was Lor'themar and Liadrin who had been at the forefront of the kingdom's reclamation, but they had not forgotten Arator. From Arator's youth, Lor'themar had trained him in the tradition of the Farstriders. And Liadrin had been a confidant, easy to talk to, who held his friendship close and his secrets closer, speaking both kindness and truth when he needed to hear it. He had remained fond of and grateful to her all his years.

"You're a hard fellow to catch up with," she continued. Her brow furrowed as she regarded his expression. "Don't tell me you had a dressing-down."

"No," he replied quickly. "It's nothing."

"I see," Liadrin said, her tone implying she knew quite well that it was not *nothing*. "Perhaps this will sweeten your mood." She extended the package to him, untying the bow that held the cloth closed. Arator recognized the item instantly: honey from the Breeze-blossom Apiary. He accepted the jar and dropped it into his satchel.

"Thanks."

"You didn't even ask which twin sent it." At Arator's listless shrug, she sighed. "Come on. I brought a bottle of Suntouched wine, too."



Liadrin and Arator sat on the dried, yellow grass of a hillock a short ride from Light's Hope Chapel. His gaze was fixed upon the chapel as he took a decidedly inelegant swig from the excellent vintage. Then, in a quiet, flat voice, he told the Blood Knight leader what Lord Tyrosus had said.

Liadrin grimaced in sympathy and extended her hand for the bottle.

"I understand his point," Arator continued. "But I was . . . frustrated. Disappointed."

"Disheartened?"

"That, too, yes."

Liadrin took a swig of wine, then handed him the bottle. "And now?"

A smile that had nothing of humor about it twisted his lips. "Frustrated, disappointed, *and* disheartened."

She chuckled at that. "Would it surprise you to know that I am quite familiar with all of those emotions?"

It did. Liadrin had always struck him as confident, undaunted. She led the Blood Knights with passion, inspiring them to excel by modeling excellence and courage, a commander seemingly as bright as the Light she wielded. Her next words startled him even further.

"You know well that my path to knighthood was quite the winding road. Looking back on it, I welcome the false starts, the dead ends, the misconceptions. Without each of those, I would not have developed the strengths that got me to where I am. You're on your own journey, Arator. It's as unique as you are."

"No shortcut through the farmer's field, huh?"

"I'm afraid not. You must walk every step of it. And it might take you places you don't want to go."

"For a priestess, you're doing quite poorly at cheering me up."

"I cast that vocation aside long ago. I'm just telling you, now is not

the time to imagine what might be written on a plaque beside your statue.”

He thought about what he'd been doing before Liadrin showed up and had to laugh. “Well, the words ‘The Great Failure of Two Great Peoples’ did come to mind.” Arator lifted the bottle to his lips, but Liadrin's arm stayed him.

“Arator,” she said quietly, “look at me.” Reluctantly, he did so. Her gaze was steady and kind. “I've known you for many years now. I watched you grow into someone strong and kind and sincere. Lord Tyrosus's denial is not the end of it. You will be acknowledged as exceptional with time. Or . . .”

Liadrin paused, seeming to reconsider the words she had been about to utter.

“Or . . . ?”

She was silent for another moment, then chose her words carefully. “Yesterday, I met with the regent lord and the first arcanist,” she said. “Thalyssra has received some reports regarding possible demonic activity near the ruins of Felsoul Hold.”

Arator raised an eyebrow. He'd heard that, during Azeroth's most recent battle against the Burning Legion, the demon Azoran had made Felsoul Hold his base. The place contained a soul engine, a fel machine designed for harvesting souls to convert into fel magic. Azoran had planned to use the engine to fuel his command ship, which he would turn against the armies of Azeroth. Azoran had been slain, and the attack, thankfully, foiled. “I thought the nightborne led strikes to ensure the Legion's soul engines were all disabled.”

“They did. And they were. At least . . . they *thought* so,” Liadrin replied. “But local inhabitants have reported witnessing what they said was a fel glow coming from the area.”

“That's alarming.”

“Indeed. Thalyssra requested a small team of Blood Knights to conduct reconnaissance and report back to her. But I think you're more than capable of handling that by yourself.”

"Just . . . scout and report back? Winthrop could do *that*. Well," he amended, "almost."

"Arator," Liadrin said, sitting up straight and looking him in the eye, "think for a moment. If you go to Suramar City and volunteer, this puts you in an active role. You're no longer waiting around, hoping for the Silver Hand to give you a task. And . . . it puts you in front of the First Arcanist of Suramar, and, very likely, the Regent Lord of Quel'Thalas, too. They think far differently about things than the Silver Hand does when it comes to what's important. I can't make any promises, of course, but if you do a good job for them, they might be inclined to write to the order about you in a positive light. The Silver Hand may be taking you for granted. It wouldn't hurt to have other leaders remind them how lucky they are to have you."

"I appreciate you saying that," Arator said, moved.

"I wouldn't say it if I didn't believe it."

He knew. "Do you really think she'll do it?"

Liadrin extended her hand for the bottle and took a final drink. "Well," she said, "there's only one way to find out."

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TO BE CONTINUED . . .

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RANDOM HOUSE

**BILZARD**  
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