

THE SHADOW OF THE LICH



THE SHADOW OF THE LICH

WRITTEN BY
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AND SHAWN FRENCH

The Shadow of the Lich

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Part of Vikstone's Classic Expedition

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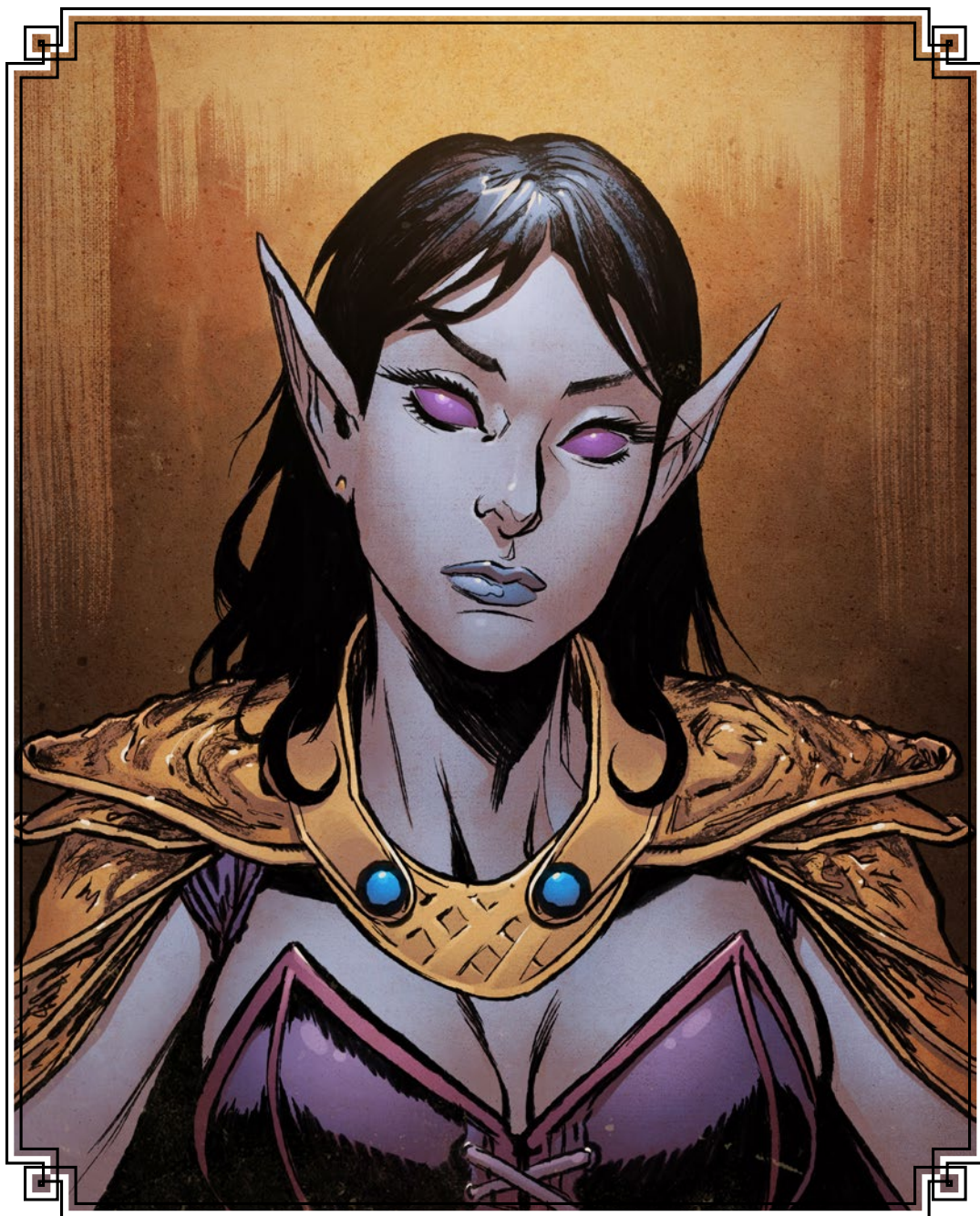
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Vikstone

A night elf warrior who buried his sword and built a life in Elwynn Forest. A wife, a daughter, a silence he'd earned. When the Scourge tears that life apart, Vikstone crosses Northrend to get it back, paying for every mile in blood and bone.



Namarie

Devoted of Elune. Wife of Vikstone. Mother of Lunara. She fought to give her family a life beyond war. When the Scourge comes for them, she is the first to fall.



Lunara

Daughter of Vikstone and Namarie. Six years old. Her father's comfort on his darkest nights. Her favorite toy is a stuffed yeti from the Darkmoon Faire, and her favorite word is "Raaaar."



Mardagan

Human paladin and former knight of the Argent Dawn. Vikstone's oldest friend and the man who dragged him back to war. Loud, loyal, and stubborn enough to walk into any fight with a smile on his face. He would die for the people he loves.



Calvey

Draenei hunter. Lady of Telaar. Namarie's closest friend and one of the finest archers in Azeroth. Quick with a joke, quicker with a bow, and too stubborn to stay down.



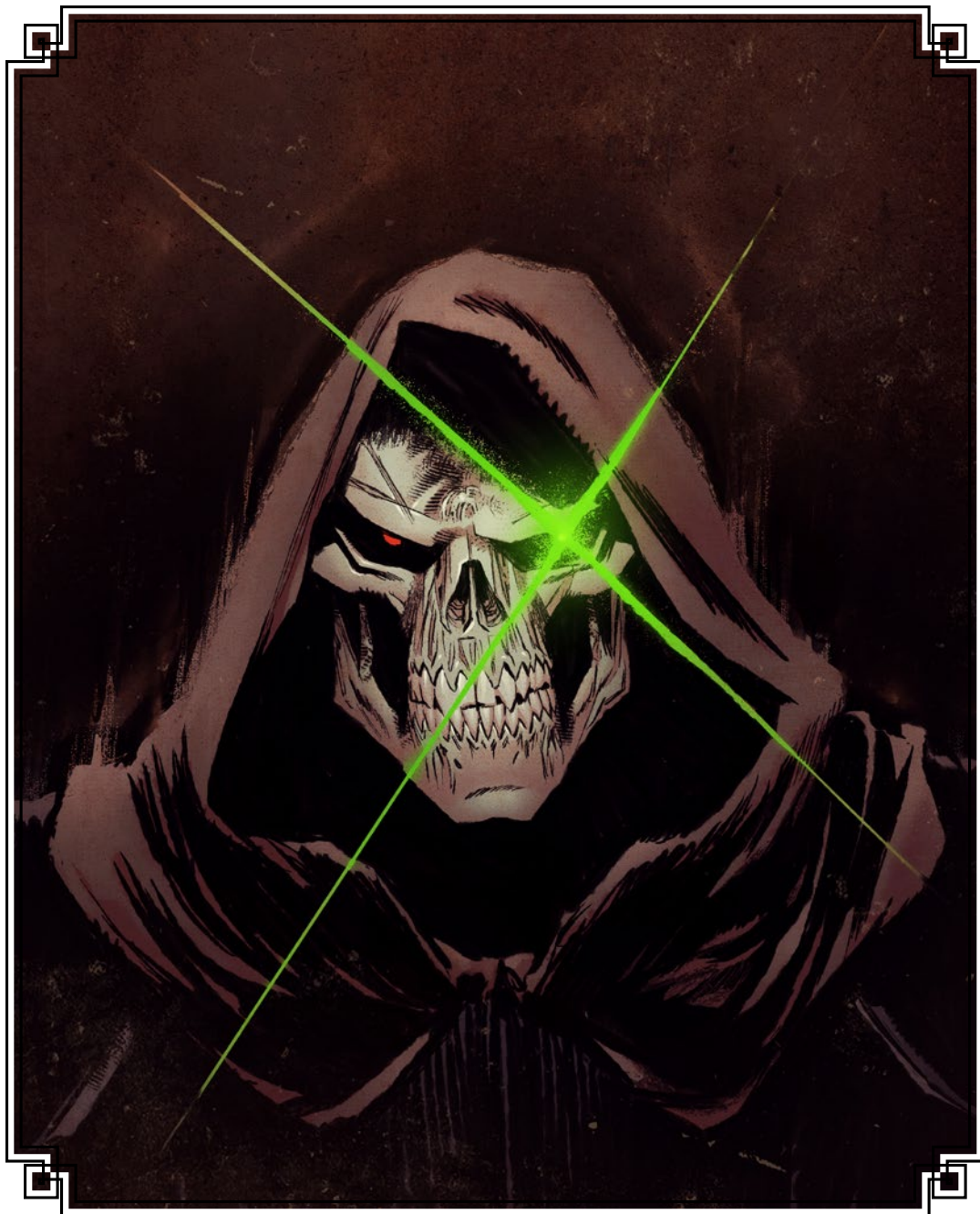
Wopak

Dwarven warrior of the Blackrock Clan. The only dwarf in Azeroth mad enough to smoke black lotus in a pipe. Honor-bound, foul-mouthed, and the first one through any door, whether it's open or not.



Gabe

Father Gabriel. Priest, scholar, and the oldest member of the company. He has healed this group of friends more times than he can count, and none of them have ever thanked him properly. He would not have it any other way.



Malthrax

Vrykul lich lord and servant of the Lich King. An artist of soul magic who has conquered death and built an empire from it. What he wants, he takes. What he loves, he keeps.

CHAPTER 1

A CALL TO ARMS

Honor Hold, Hellfire Peninsula

The stench hit him first. Ash, burning meat, and fel rot thick in the air. Vikstone looked down from the parapets of Honor Hold at the horde stampeding toward the gates. Fel orcs, demons, and warlocks, butchering everything in their path. Winged demons swooped from the blood-red sky, razor talons ripping defenders from the wall.

“Archers ... release!”

At their commander’s signal, the archers atop the wall unleashed a volley of arrows into the swarm. Those killed were replaced by an endless wave of reinforcements, felhounds vaulting over their own dead in a mad rush to reach the front gate.

Vikstone ducked low, a winged demon’s claws slicing the air above him. A backhand swipe sheared through one of the demon’s wings, sending it spiraling with an agonized shriek.

Fel orcs surged forward, red skin slick with sweat and blood, bellowing war cries that shook the earth. Safely out of arrow range, their pit lord commanders called out instructions from the rear, conducting a symphony of carnage.

The fel orcs swarmed to the base of the wall, clawing their way upward. As the first orc pulled itself up over the edge, a dwarven defender greeted it with a swing of her axe, sending the invader plummeting back into the writhing mass below. The soldier

grinned in triumph—until an arrow, black with fel magic, sprouted from her throat, her expression frozen in disbelief as she toppled from the wall.

Infernals crashed down from the heavens, monstrous behemoths of stone and flame. Each impact sent a shockwave through the battlefield, scattering men and orcs like broken marionettes. The ground cracked and smoldered beneath the creatures' steps.

Two of the beasts, each fifteen feet tall, charged the outer gate and smashed into it. Shattered wood and twisted iron exploded outward as the gate cracked and buckled, tearing free from its moorings to hang lopsided. Demonic felguards scrambled through the breach, their blackened axes raised.

With a roar, Vikstone leapt from the parapet toward an unsuspecting infernal, twin elven blades in hand. He landed on the beast's shoulders and stabbed diagonally downward at its neck from both sides, burying his blades deep. The stone monstrosity stumbled, reaching over its shoulder, but the elf had already circled to the opposite side, dragging his embedded blades around the creature's neck.

With a sharp kick, he sent the decapitated head falling free, backflipping away as the infernal toppled, lifeless. He dove into a roll, evading a pair of leaping felhounds, which collided with each other midair, jaws snapping.

"Hold the breach!" The paladin, Mardagan, thundered into the fray, his seven-foot frame encased in battle-scarred plate armor that glimmered in the glow of fel fire. The human's thick, greying beard was singed at the edges, his blue eyes cold, as he charged at the demons. For all his bulk, he moved with a veteran's precision, swinging his greatsword in wide arcs.

Mardagan cleaved one of the attacking felhounds in half as Vikstone dispatched the other. The two old friends exchanged a nod before rushing to defend the fractured gate, Vikstone sheathing his blades and switching to a spiked mace and a round iron shield with a six-inch spike in the center.

All around them, the hold's defenders—a ragtag band of humans, elves, and dwarves—rushed to meet the demonic charge. Before any of them could reach the gate, it burst open under the force of a pit lord's hammer.

Mardagan let out a short laugh as they looked up at the creature. It stood over twenty feet tall, its four legs sheathed in armored scales, its demonic torso crackling

with green fel energy. In its clawed hands, it held the colossal enruned hammer that had just obliterated their gate.

“You ever fought one of these things?” Mardagan said.

“Can’t say that I have,” Vikstone said, circling to flank the monster.

Mardagan grinned from across the beast. “Shadows always fade, brother.”

Vikstone tightened his grip on his mace.

“Come at me, freak!” Mardagan roared. “You look like a blindfolded toddler tried to draw a centaur.”

The pit lord’s eyes flared as it bore down on them, ground shaking beneath its feet. Its hammer came around in a low sweep, faster than something that size had any right to move. Unable to leap back, Mardagan stepped forward instead.

The paladin brought his greatsword across in a short strike, splintering the hammer’s handle. The six-foot head punched through the hold’s wall—another breach.

The impact knocked Mardagan flat, his sword torn from his grip. The pit lord glared down at him, raising the broken handle to impale him.

Vikstone launched through the air, bringing his mace down to crush the demon’s right hind leg. With a howl, the pit lord whirled on the warrior, raising its arms to the sky.

“Back!” Mardagan scrambled to his feet, flexing his sword hand.

Vikstone dove aside as the skies unleashed a torrent of fel energy. It clipped his left leg as he rolled, sending him spinning. He kicked off his greave—glowing with fel corruption, scalding his skin.

“Shield!” Mardagan called.

Vikstone dodged a swipe from the pit lord’s spiked tail and launched his shield. It whistled through the air toward Mardagan, who snatched it, yelling at the pit lord to reacquire its focus.

“Over here!” Mardagan rattled off a series of protection spells.

The pit lord shambled toward the paladin, dragging its mangled leg. Mardagan glanced toward the night elf, who began scaling the tower wall. “Got somewhere to be?”

“I have a plan,” Vikstone said. “Bring him closer.”

“You’re a lunatic.” Mardagan rushed forward, his shield high. The paladin collided with the pit lord’s scaled torso and lifted.

At the top of the tower, nearly forty feet above the battle, Vikstone swatted winged demons from the sky, his fury building as he waited for his moment.

“Now.” The pit lord’s front legs were off the ground, the beast tilting off balance.

With a primal cry, the elf somersaulted through the night air before driving his mace down in a two-handed execution strike, shattering the pit lord’s skull.

Vikstone crashed to the ground, and the air blasted from his lungs. Nearby, Mardagan struggled to extricate himself from under the dead beast. “That was your plan?”

The night elf coughed as he gained his feet and lifted one of the demon’s giant legs off the paladin. “My successful plan.”

As they started toward the remnants of the front gate, a sharp cry from inside the hold stopped them. Vikstone’s heart sank. The refugees had begun to turn.

In the pen at the center of the fortress, nearly two hundred orcs huddled together—men, women, and children taken from surrounding villages and quarantined. Many wept and prayed as those around them convulsed. The fel corruption was overtaking them. Eyes burning with green fire, veins bulging black beneath their skin, the orcs transformed into the same monsters swarming the hold.

Vikstone and Mardagan exchanged a horrified look.

“Burn them. Burn them now!” the commander screamed—then a hurled boulder struck him from the parapet, crumpling his breastplate like paper.

Mardagan snatched a keg of oil and threw it into the pen. It shattered, coating the ground beneath the orcs. The refugees screamed as fel magic tore through them, transforming them into slaving monsters.

A pair of towering felguards advanced on Mardagan, driving him back as he parried their blows. “Vik, do it!”

Vikstone seized a torch—then froze. An orc child stared defiantly at him from the pen. A young boy not much older than his daughter. Then the child began to twitch, eyes turning putrid as the infection overtook him.

Vikstone threw the torch.

The flames spread across the pen, hungry and unforgiving. The screams multiplied, high-pitched, pleading. He told himself the fire was mercy. That they were already lost. That it was the only way to stop the corruption from spreading.

Vikstone collapsed to his knees. Around him, the battle raged, but all he saw was a single, perfect night lily growing through the blood-red soil. He plucked the luminescent flower. It wilted and crumbled to ash in his hands.



With a gasp, Vikstone bolted awake and staggered from bed, snatching a knife from the bedside stand as his green eyes swept the room. He found only his wife, Namarie, asleep in their bed. He moved to the window, covered in sweat, and drew in the cool night air of Elwynn Forest. Moonlight washed over his pale lavender skin, catching the silver streaks in his long blue hair. The stench of brimstone and charred flesh faded.

“The dreams again?” Namarie asked, hugging Vikstone from behind.

He nodded, his hands trembling as he leaned on the windowsill, unable to meet her gaze. His pulse pounded in his ears, each beat summoning the cries of those he had killed during the Burning Crusade.

“It wasn’t your fault,” Namarie said, reaching for his hand. Her voice and touch soothed his tremors as she took the dagger and set it on the windowsill.

“You don’t know that. You weren’t there.” He stared into the moonlight filtering through the forest.

“No, but I know you.” She cupped his chin and turned him to face her. Even now, trembling and haunted, her husband cut an imposing figure. Her thumb brushed the jagged scar across his cheek. “You’re a good man who was placed in an impossible situation.”

“Daddy, are you okay?”

Vikstone turned, his expression softening. His six-year-old daughter, Lunara, clung to his leg in a sleepy hug. “I’m fine, sweetie. Just had a bad dream.”

Lunara's eyes lit up, and she rushed from the room, returning a moment later with a battered stuffed yeti dangling from her hand. A remnant from their last trip to the Darkmoon Faire.

"When I have scary dreams, Teddy Yeti always keeps me safe. He'll protect you too, Daddy."

Vikstone crouched and pulled his daughter into a hug as she thrust the plush yeti out to him. "Thank you, my moonlight. I don't know what I'd do without you. Without both of you."

Vikstone scooped the giggling Lunara up and carried her to their bed, where she snuggled tight between her parents. Once they settled in, Namarie sang an ancient elven lullaby, her voice soothing her daughter and husband until both drifted to sleep beside her.

*Stars above and branches sway,
Moon and night will guide your way.
Close your eyes, dear loves of mine,
Let dreams of Elune fill your mind.*



Sunlight filtered through the treetops, dappling the ground with gold. The air inside the cabin was thick with morning dew and the smell of fresh-baked biscuits.

Vikstone sat at the table, Lunara perched on his lap. Her stuffed yeti stomped across the surface, knocking over cups and plates.

"Raaaar! I'm a monster," Lunara growled, kicking the yeti's leg into a cup of juice that Vikstone caught before it could topple.

Namarie, a perfect sprig of night lily in her hair, as usual, stood in the alcove off their kitchen where she kept her Elune shrine, her hands resting palm-down on the small altar, eyes closed. She held the pose a moment longer, then opened her eyes and smiled at them. "I think the little monster needs to eat her breakfast."

Lunara looked up at Vikstone. "Can we ride the kitty later? Or the drake?"

Vikstone chuckled, shaking his head. “Next time they visit, sure.”

Lunara threw her head back in exasperation, stomping the yeti across the table and punching its foot through a biscuit. “Ugh. Can’t you just call them?”

Vikstone kissed the top of her head, removing the yeti’s foot from her breakfast. “They aren’t mine anymore. They’re retired, just like me and your mom. They live free now.”

“Flying monster! Raaaaar!” Lunara steered the yeti through the air and into Vikstone’s face.

“Oh, you got me.” Vikstone tumbled backward out of his chair, cradling Lunara as he rolled with her, both of them laughing.

A knock on the door shattered their peace. A heavy steel gauntlet struck wood, rattling the plates on the table.

Lunara scrambled off her father’s lap and ran to her mother. Namarie emerged from the shrine, her eyes narrowing as she shared a knowing look with Vikstone. He righted the toppled chair and let out a steadying breath as he walked to the front door.

“Vikstone!” Mardagan walked in, decked out in full plate mail, dented and dinged from a thousand battles. The paladin pulled his old friend into a bear hug, lifting him off the ground as Vikstone struggled to break free.

Mardagan dropped him and turned with a wide grin toward Namarie, who looked far less happy to see him. He stomped into the kitchen, leaving a trail of mud and Elune knew what else in his wake. “Namarie Moonswept, how is it I keep getting older and you always look just as radiant?”

“Likely a result of a human’s mercifully brief lifespan,” Namarie said with a hint of a smile.

Mardagan laughed before crouching to look eye-to-eye with Lunara as she peeked out from behind her mother’s leg. “And could that be little Lu? Last time I saw you, you were knee-high to a kobold. I brought you something.”

“You did?” she gasped, eyes wide.

“Yep. It’s in here somewhere ... and here we are.” From his backpack, Mardagan removed a tiny sheathed dagger and presented it to her. “This is Frostbite, which I crafted from the claw of the great frostwyrn Nal—”

As Lunara reached for the blade, Namarie snatched it away, scowling at the paladin. “Mardagan, she is *six* years old.”

He shrugged, rising to scope out the leftovers on the table. “What? When I was her age, I’d already felled my first deer.”

Vikstone shot Namarie an apologetic smile as he tried to herd Mardagan toward the door. “How about we go for a walk and you can get me caught up on the old crew?”

Before following, the paladin took a biscuit off the table, his brow furrowing as he examined the tiny yeti footprint in its center, before devouring it in a single bite.

“You’ve built a good life here,” Mardagan said, crouching as he skipped a stone across the lake.

Vikstone sighed. “Why can’t I shake the feeling that you’re here to ruin it?”

“I wish I could say you’re wrong, old friend. The Scourge situation in Northrend grows grim. The Lich King, Arthas, has returned, bringing with him the floating necropolis Naxxramas—I saw it with my own eyes over Dragonblight. We need every available warrior.”

Vikstone looked away, his eyes following a loon taking flight across the lake. “I am not among them.”

“He’s raising death knights, Vik.” Mardagan’s voice dropped. “Our old friends are getting back together to venture to Northrend and take the fight to the Lich King. Gabe and Calvey are already there.”

“I’m retired.” Vikstone’s voice was firm and almost mechanical, a conversation he had practiced a hundred times.

“A night elf, retired?” Mardagan laughed. “You have thousands of years left in you. Do you intend to spend them all planting flowers and skipping through the woods with your kid, while the world burns? You’re a warrior.”

“I *was* a warrior. And I have given enough. You of all people should know that.”

Mardagan skipped another stone across the water. This one veered right and thudded into a rotten log. “No one’s questioning your sacrifice, least of all me. We lost a lot of good people in the Burning Crusade.” He paused, his gaze distant. “On that note, we spotted Karg Bloodfury in the Borean Tundra.”

Vikstone's fist clenched at the mention of the orc's name. He let out a slow breath. "I don't care. He's someone else's problem now."

"You can't hide here forever, Vik. The Lich King is coming. It's not a question of if, only when." Mardagan turned to face his friend. "Where are your weapons? Your armor? You've grown soft these past two years."

Vikstone gestured to the distant silhouette of the capital city. "And you've grown more pigheaded. I live in the shadow of Stormwind, the heart of the Alliance. The greatest army in Azeroth trains a day's march from my home. The war is over, Mardagan. We won."

"The war has just begun. And it will come for us all, one way or another."



Namarie's head snapped toward the door as it opened. Vikstone entered alone. She rushed to his side. "Vik, you can't go with him. Your life is here now, with your daughter."

Vikstone sighed, glancing toward Lunara's room. "The Lich King has returned, and Naxxramas has been spotted over Dragonblight."

"A problem for the next generation of heroes. You and I have sacrificed enough," Namarie said, taking his hand. "Mardagan has always been reckless, even by human standards. That man has never met a war he didn't like. Every time you leave with him, less of you returns."

"Namarie, I—"

"I won't let him take you from us. Not again. We swore a pledge ... for our daughter." She lowered her head. "For us."

"Hear me out ... please," he said, lifting her chin. "I told him no."

Namarie gasped and pulled him into a fierce embrace. "Truly?"

"You have my word."

"Daddy ... are you leaving again?" Lunara stood in the doorway, eyes wide.

He crouched in front of her, meeting her sparkling violet eyes. "Nope. Daddy's staying here with you and Mommy. Right where I belong."

“Yay!” Lunara cheered, throwing herself onto her father and sending them both tumbling in a flailing pile of limbs.

As Namarie smiled down at her husband and daughter rolling around together, laughing, the morning breeze through the kitchen window sent an unexpected chill through her.



Vikstone moved through the underbrush, bow in his left hand, an arrow notched but relaxed. The forest was his haven. The gentle rustle of leaves in the autumn breeze and the distant call of birds had become familiar comforts. He had traded the cold weight of steel for the presence of nature.

But today, something felt off.

The woods, normally alive with a symphony of sounds, were muted. The birds, always chattering amongst the branches, were silent, and no deer were in sight. He paused at a small patch of ferns.

The plants were withering, their leaves curled in on themselves like the fingers of a dying man, veins turned an unnatural black. He knelt to inspect them, his nostrils flaring at their putrid scent. A stench he knew all too well. Necrotic magic.

He rose, watching the trees as an icy shiver ran down his spine. Something foul had tainted this place.

The vibration reached him before the sound—a low, furious growl. Vikstone dove into a forward roll as a massive wolf’s jaws snapped shut behind him.

The night elf sprang to his feet, arrow notched, and turned on his attacker. The giant wolf’s eyes burned green, its flesh marred by rot, patches of fur sloughing off its decaying body, exposing sinew and bone.

“What in Elune’s name?” Vikstone loosed an arrow that thunked into the wolf’s side, piercing its heart.

Unfazed, the undead beast clamped its jaws on his right collarbone. Vikstone took an arrow from his quiver and stabbed the beast in the throat, which only seemed to aggravate it. Its teeth still buried deep in the elf’s shoulder, the wolf thrashed its head.

Vikstone's collarbone gave way with a wet snap, the wolf tossing him like a rag doll. A white-hot rush of agony shot down his arm.

He snapped out of the daze and grabbed a rock with his left hand, bashing the beast in the face and knocking it aside. He drew his hunting knife and rose to his feet.

The wolf circled, moving in for the kill. It hit him full force and sent them tumbling to the ground together in a blur of fangs, claws, and steel. He struggled to keep it off his throat. Vikstone's berserker rage, long buried, simmered deep, reigniting a part of himself he'd tried to leave behind.

Raw power coursed through Vikstone's veins as he surrendered to the rage, his vision going red, and his pain briefly fading. Unable to use his ruined right arm for leverage, he instead clamped his teeth on the wolf's neck, holding the thrashing beast in place long enough to drive his hunting knife into its brain.

Vikstone rolled the corpse off him, spitting the taste of decay from his mouth as he scrambled to his feet, nearly a mile from home.

"Namarie. Lunara." He broke into a staggered run, his right arm cradled tight against his side.

His senses clouded with pain, and his body was losing blood from half a dozen bite and claw wounds. He channeled his rage to keep himself upright as he shambled toward home. Cheeks stained with tears, he spotted the smoke rising ahead. He increased his pace, now moving at a dead sprint.

"Namarie!"

His breath coming in ragged gasps, Vikstone hurdled roots and ducked under branches. His foot slipped on a moss-covered log, sending him stumbling into a tree with his broken shoulder. Darkness threatened to engulf him, but the image of his little girl kept him moving.

"Lunara ..." he mumbled as he put one foot in front of the other, desperately clinging to consciousness.

Vikstone broke free of the treeline; the sight before him stopped him dead.

Plague cauldrons bubbled and hissed, their foul green contents spewing noxious fumes into the once-pristine sky of Elwynn Forest. The normally lush ground beneath

his feet was blackened, grass curling into ash. The air was filled with the low, mournful wails of ghouls, their emaciated bodies twisted and spasming as they slaughtered any living creature in their path.

A shrill, terrified cry pierced the air.

“Daddy, help!”

Vikstone threw himself into the ghoul swarm, scattering them. He grabbed a dagger from a fallen guard and charged. Blood thundered in his ears as he let the rage guide him.

He barreled through the undead, exploiting one gap after another in their disorganized ranks, not stopping to fight lest he be overwhelmed by their sheer numbers.

His rage was the only thing keeping him upright as he lurched toward his home, visible now, surrounded by undead. “Namarie!” he called, drawing the attention of the swarm.

In the doorway of their home, behind a waist-high semi-circle of ghoul corpses, Namarie Moonswept howled as she jammed her twin daggers into both sides of a ghoul’s head, adding it to the pile. With a loud crash, ghouls smashed through a window in the house and climbed through to flank her.

“Lunara, stay close.” Namarie ducked under a ghoul’s claws. Her husband was staggering out of the sea of undeath, his face wild, barely recognizable beneath the blood.

Behind him, towering over the undead horde at nearly twice the height of the ghouls, stood their leader, a skeletal figure draped in dark, enruned robes. In one of his rotted eye sockets sat an emerald, casting a sickly green light over Vikstone.

Malthrax the Undying, one of the Lich King’s most trusted generals.

“Behind you, Vik!” Namarie called, but it was too late.

As her husband emerged from the ghoul horde, the lich’s flail struck him square in the back, blasting the air from his lungs and hurling him face-first into the muck.

Namarie stepped forward to help, but she and her daughter were surrounded, ghouls now pouring through the windows to press in from all sides.

“Lu, hold onto my leg as tight as you can, and close your eyes. Close your eyes, baby.”

Vikstone gasped for breath. His ribs were cracked, his vision narrowed from pain and blood loss. He reached a hand forward as he tried to crawl to his family. “Na ... ma ...”

Malthrax’s armored foot crashed down onto Vikstone’s back, grinding him into the mud with a wet crack of ribs.

Namarie continued hacking at ghouls with her blades, but the circle was closing, claw swipes now getting through her defenses to tear at her flesh. Lunara clung to her mother’s leg, her eyes clamped tight. “Mommy, I’m scared.”

Namarie tried to calm her daughter while slashing a ghoul’s reaching hand clean off. “I know, baby, I know. Just keep your eyes closed. Everything’s okay.”

Malthrax watched the exchange, his iron boot continuing to overwhelm Vikstone. The moment it seemed the horde would overrun Namarie, the lich raised a hand, and the ghouls backed off.

Her breathing wild, her arms bloodied, Namarie faced the lich. “What do you want from us?”

Malthrax’s skeletal face widened into a sickening smile, his voice terrible. “I want ... your souls.”

Ghouls strained to topple a nearby plague cauldron, sending a cloud of swirling corruption rolling toward their once idyllic home. The emerald in Malthrax’s eye flared brighter, its baleful glow washing over Namarie and Lunara moments before the toxic cloud engulfed them.

He tried to scream, but the weight of the giant lich stole his breath. For an instant, Vikstone felt a flicker of hope when he saw Namarie’s foot emerge from the cloud. Then she stepped fully into view.

His wife’s gentle smile had been replaced with a sneering, snarling maw of jagged teeth, her violet eyes now a venomous green. Namarie’s thin, elegant fingers were tipped with claws, and the howl that escaped her lips sent shivers down Vikstone’s shattered spine.

Malthrax had transformed his soulmate into a banshee.

And still clinging to her mother’s leg, Lunara had been similarly corrupted, her once adorable little face now warped and twisted with rage. She giggled and clapped her clawed hands as she watched Malthrax. “Squish him till he pops.”

“No ...” Vikstone rasped before surrendering to his fate as the air was crushed from his lungs, the final blackness fast approaching.

A feral roar echoed through the valley. Stormclaw burst through the ghoul horde, covering the final twenty feet in a single bound and into Malthrax’s chest, blasting the lich into the mud. Vikstone’s old sabercat, Stormclaw, had joined the battle.

The air rushed back into Vikstone’s damaged lungs, leaving him coughing and sputtering. Next to him, Stormclaw bit and swiped at the lich—until Malthrax slammed her into the ground.

“I want to play with the kitty,” the little banshee said, drifting along. As they closed in, the wounded cat straddled Vikstone’s body protectively, prepared to die alongside her former master.

A screech pierced the air. Malthrax craned his head upward—a dark blur moving toward them. The projectile slammed into the ground, sending ghouls flying. The impact left a small crater, and standing at its center was Vikstone’s netherdrake, Veridian. Twice the size of a warhorse, her translucent green hide shimmered against the plague smoke as she shrieked at Malthrax, coiled and ready to pounce.

Stormclaw used the distraction to grab Vikstone by the back of his shirt and flip his battered body onto Veridian’s back. As the undead swarmed in, Stormclaw pounced atop Vikstone and sank her claws deep into the drake’s flank to hold them both in place.

Veridian soared into the air, a pair of ghouls briefly dangling from her legs before losing their grip and plummeting into the horde. Vikstone’s last image before the blackness claimed him was his beloved Namarie staring up at him, her corrupted eyes filled with hate where love had been.

Nighthaven, One Month Later

The morning wind moved through the ancient trees of Moonglade and across the sacred waters of Lake Elune’ara, carrying a chill. A harbinger of winter. Thal’dorin, the elder of two night elf druids walking along the riverbank, pulled his cloak tighter around him as he looked to his younger companion.

“He’s awake?”

The younger druid, Feylana, nodded, her jaw tight. “He is. It is by Elune’s grace alone that he still draws breath, but he refuses to lie still long enough for our healing magics to do their work.”

Thal’dorin chuckled. “Such is the nature of warriors.”

They walked in silence for another moment before Feylana asked, “Respectfully, why are we treating a warrior in our sacred grove? There must be better—”

Thal’dorin silenced the young healer with a wave of his hand. “He is our guest because Namarie Moonswept is ... *was* a great friend to our people. We owe her a debt that can never be repaid.”

“Of course, Master. I didn’t mean to ...” Feylana’s voice trailed off at the sound of arguing from the Nighthaven Inn up ahead.

“Sir, please,” the innkeeper said, positioning himself between Vikstone and the stairs. “I have instructions to keep you in your bed for two more weeks.”

Vikstone pushed past the innkeeper, striding toward the door with a slight limp. “I’m fine, and I’m leaving.”

Feylana rushed up to Vikstone. “Okay, how about one week? Just to give your shoulder a chance to mend.”

He shrugged, lifting his right arm before wincing and continuing out. “Close enough.”

Thal’dorin blocked the doorway. “Your impatience is understandable, but you have not yet healed. You risk permanent—”

“My wife is out there. My little girl is out there. The monster who killed them is out there. You would have me *rest* while my wife is a banshee in service to a lich?”

“I cannot fathom your pain.” The druid smiled kindly, laying a hand on his bandaged arm and channeling Elune’s power, casting spells in rapid succession. “And your quest for vengeance is a righteous one. I wish only to ensure your success.”

“Noted,” Vikstone said, the soothing blue glow of healing magic seeping into him as he stared expectantly at the elder druid. Thal’dorin nodded and stepped aside, allowing the warrior to pass.

Outside, Vikstone whistled. A dark shadow passed overhead, growing larger until Veridian swooped to the ground, lowering her neck for him to climb into the saddle. With a grunt, he pulled himself up.

“Wait,” Thal’dorin said, extending a belt pouch. “Apply this mana thistle salve to your shoulder each night—lesser, perhaps, than the healing powers of Lake Elune’ara, but it should aid in your recovery.”

Vikstone accepted the pouch with a grateful nod. All around, druids stepped from buildings to see him off. “Thank you for your help. Send word to Mardagan in the Borean Tundra. Tell him I’m on my way.”

With that, Veridian raised her head, letting out a piercing cry as she took to the sky. The drake and her rider vanished over the horizon.

Thal’dorin looked after them, his voice barely a whisper. “May Elune guide him.”



CHAPTER 2

BOREAN TUNDRA

Approaching Valiance Keep, Northrend

T*he Kraken* groaned through the ice of the Frozen Sea.

The icebreaker's stormsteel hull shouldered aside grey slabs of sea ice with a sound like trees splitting. Slow, deep cracks traveled through the deck and up into Vikstone's boots. Fog sat on the water in low, heavy banks, and where it thinned, the horizon offered nothing but more grey: grey sky into grey water into grey ice, the seam between them broken only by distant icebergs.

Vikstone stood at the bow, one hand locked on the rail, his injured shoulder a constant, grinding presence. Ice pellets stung his face and clung to his black cloak. The crew gave the warrior a wide berth as they moved about the deck, like water moving around a stone in a riverbed.

Valiance Keep materialized out of the fog in pieces. The stone walls first, still rising, pale against the tundra. Then the scaffolding, raw timber rigging climbing the keep's unfinished towers. Smoke from forge fires hung low over the battlements, too heavy to rise in the cold air, and the flags of Stormwind snapped from every post the engineers had managed to sink, golden lions on blue. The keep served as the Alliance's landing zone and main base of operations in Northrend.

The deck of *The Kraken* was bustling with activity as they approached the harbor. Sailors scrambled to secure lines, shouting as they maneuvered the vessel toward the dock. Before the gangplank dropped, Vikstone hopped from the bow of the ship to the pier fifteen feet below, his boots hitting the frozen planks hard enough to draw stares from the soldiers nearby.

The dock was lined with recruits, fresh deployments waiting to be sorted into the war. Some wore plate mail that hung loose on frames too young to fill it. Others looked hardened and grim, fellow veterans of the Burning Crusade.

“Welcome to Valiance Keep, traveler!”

Vikstone glanced right. An older man stood bundled in furs, bright-eyed cheer about him that seemed out of place in the stark surroundings. Behind him, a trio of saddled griffins awaited their next fare.

“The name’s Tomas Riverwell, flight master for Valiance Keep. We offer rides to all major locations in Northrend, including Dal—”

“Bank?” His eyes scanned the fledgling outpost town, barely more than a fortified inn and an unfinished castle, though he noted several new buildings under construction. The Alliance was clearly settling in for a protracted campaign against the Scourge.

“There’s no bank, per se, but there is a representative from the Royal Bank of Stormwind staying at the Valiant Rest, just up ahead on your right. Enjoy your stay in Northrend,” the flight master said as Vikstone stalked away.



A roaring fire crackled in the stone hearth of the Valiant Rest, the scent of roast caribou offering reprieve from the tundra. A gnome woman sat by the fire, wearing a deep violet robe embroidered with gold thread.

“I need access to my vault.” A night elf stood over her, gaze as cold as the Frozen Sea.

As she sized up the warrior, banker Fizwina Goldweave drummed her fingers, each adorned with fine jeweled rings, on her fireside table. She shrugged, turning back toward the fire. “I’m done for the day. Come back tomorr—”

“Now.” He dropped a belt pouch full of gold coins on the table next to her with a satisfying clink.

“The portal will remain open for fifteen minutes,” Fizwina said, shutting and locking the door to her private suite behind them. “If you fail to return before it closes, you’ll be stuck in Stormwind, and you’ll need to catch another boat ride back.”

The banker began gesturing, her fingers leaving glowing green sigils in the air that swirled together, creating a vertical portal that expanded as Vikstone watched. In the center of the portal, his and Namarie’s private vault came into view, containing the most powerful weapons, armor, and artifacts gathered during their adventuring careers.

“You may experience a bit of nausea, an unavoidable side-effect of traveling a week’s march in seconds.” Fizwina gestured to widen the portal further.

“Yeah, I know the drill,” Vikstone said, ducking his head to step through the still-forming portal.

Namarie used to say that teleportation felt like being devoured whole by the universe and excreted elsewhere. She preferred flying or traveling by boat, never seeming to mind if it took a bit, or even a lot, longer to reach their destination. Like she had all the time in the world.

Vikstone staggered, his vision swimming, as he emerged from the portal into the cold, sterile vault, deep beneath the Royal Bank of Stormwind. Behind him, Fizwina waved from her hotel room on the other side of the portal, simultaneously a few feet and half the world away.

The vault was exactly as he and Namarie had left it, lined with shelves bearing relics from battles past, weapons mounted on the walls. Ghosts of their glory days. He ran his fingers along the curve of Namarie’s prized longbow, Thori’dal, taken from the lair of demon lord Kil’jaeden the Deceiver. He had never met a finer archer. If only she’d had it with her when the Scourge attacked ...

The warrior hefted one weapon after another from a wall-mounted rack containing maces, hammers, axes, and greatswords. All trusted implements of war that had served him well in the past. After swinging several of the weapons around the empty room, he settled on Worldbreaker, a two-handed spiked mace. Claimed from the lair of

Fathom-Lord Karathress, it was strong enough to pulverize undead bones, yet light enough to wield with a compromised shoulder.

Vikstone pulled open a heavy steel door, revealing an alcove where his old armor hung on display, a shell of the man he once was. Numerous dents from demonic weapons pebbled his breastplate, and one horn on his old helmet had been severed in a battle against Karg Bloodfury that nearly claimed both their lives.

He slid his feet into his titansteel sabatons, cold and restrictive after years of living barefoot in the forest. He grimaced as he fastened the vambraces, each piece heavier than the last. The once-familiar weight felt alien now. Oppressive.

Vikstone strapped his belt tight, sheathed with a dozen flasks containing potions crafted by Namarie herself. Healing, swiftness, protection, and enhancement spells. He unstopped the most potent of the healing potions, draining it in a single gulp, before tossing the flask aside.

“Three minutes, sir,” said Fizwina from the other side of the portal.

Vikstone reached for the handle of the door opposite the alcove. With a sharp exhale, he pulled the door open, revealing the mannequin wearing Namarie’s old armor. He collapsed to his knees, sobbing as he pressed his forehead against her breastplate. Almost expecting to feel her hands ruffling his hair, as she had so many times. *Before I got her killed.*

He rose, swaying, his armor feeling awkward after all this time. Around the mannequin’s neck hung the enchanted necklace he had crafted for Namarie from the Star of Elune, presented to her on the night they wed. He unfastened the necklace, tucking it into his backpack next to Frostbite, the miniature dagger Mardagan had crafted for Lunara.

Vikstone caught his reflection in the full-length mirror—gaunt, hollow-eyed. He barely recognized himself.

With a final look back at their vault, the warrior stepped through the portal, the spiked mace in his gauntleted grip. The chill of Northrend rushed back to greet him, but the rage burning within him kept the cold at bay.

Veridian was waiting, her translucent green hide catching the cold light, nether energy drifting beneath the surface. She’d carried him out of Outland. She’d carried him out of Elwynn. She’d carry him through whatever came next. He was ready.

Coldarra, Borean Tundra

Veridian banked hard over the Borean coastline, her wings cutting through air that thinned and sharpened with altitude. Below, the tundra was a vast white nothing, flat and featureless.

Warsong Hold passed beneath them, the Horde's spiked palisades and iron towers dark against the snowfield. Vikstone steered Veridian wide. Horde defenders had a habit of loosing arrows at anything flying Alliance colors, and he wasn't in the mood to test their aim.

Then Coldarra came into view.

The island sat off the western coast, ringed by mountains that rose sheer from the frozen sea. Above it, the air had broken open. A column of raw arcane energy twisted from the island's center into the clouds, and around it the storm churned. Magic tearing loose from whatever had held it in place. Platforms hung suspended hundreds of feet in the air around it. Arcs of blue lightning forked sideways, striking nothing, grounding into nothing. Shards of ice the size of longships floated in the maelstrom, rotating slowly, as if gravity no longer applied.

Veridian let out a low growl, the vibration traveling through her body and into Vikstone's chest. "Easy, girl." He kept them high, skirting the edge of the storm.

Above the Nexus, dragons wheeled and clashed, blue scales against red, their roars reaching him as distant rolling thunder. Whatever Malygos had started here, it had drawn the other flights into open war.

Somewhere down there, Mardagan had gone in alone. Because of course he had.

Vikstone leaned over the saddle, scanning the ground below the worst of the arcane distortion. Movement—a cluster of scaled figures on a rocky shelf, their clawed hands raised, channeling energy toward something at their center.

Mardagan's voice reached him first. "Release me, you cowards!"

He swooped lower and spotted Mardagan floating a few feet above the ground, encapsulated in an iridescent blue sphere. A half dozen wyrmkin surrounded him—monstrous demon and dragon hybrids with scaled bodies and glowing eyes. They focused their magical energy on the imprisoned paladin, who threw himself against the walls of the sphere.

He flew Veridian higher until the mountaintops fell away beneath them, and then into a sharp dive. The wind tore at his skin as the ground swelled beneath them.

Vikstone launched himself off the netherdrake's back, crushing a wyrmkin beneath him. The impact blasted the other five off their feet, and the sphere holding Mardagan shuddered and dissolved.

Vikstone couldn't shake off the impact, a move he'd done a hundred times in his younger days. He fumbled for his fallen mace, unaware of the wyrmkin raising its hammer behind him for a killing blow.

Mardagan's greatsword took the creature from shoulder to hip, its upper body sliding away from its legs. He then kicked Vikstone aside to push him out of the way of a second attacker, whose axe thunked into the icy ground.

"You ain't so tough without your magic hamster ball, are ya?" Mardagan drew the four remaining wyrmkin away from Vikstone to give him time to regain his footing.

Vikstone took up Worldbreaker. For the first time since his defeat at the skeletal hands of Malthrax, the warrior had an enemy in front of him and a weapon in his eager hands.

He brought his mace down on the head of a wyrmkin, obliterating it in a shower of gore.

He hit the torso of a second wyrmkin, shattering its spine.

Mardagan stepped back, watching in shock as his old friend went on a rampage the likes of which he'd never seen in all their years together. The warrior didn't even bother blocking the swipe of a wyrmkin's hammer, accepting the hit to his armored ribs in exchange for a return blow that tore the creature's head clean off.

The remaining wyrmkin turned to run, but he pounced on it from behind, battering the creature with repeated blows until it fell face-first to the ice. He continued to smash the corpse with two-handed strikes.

Mardagan put a hand on his shoulder to calm him, but before he could speak, Vikstone's mace swung around into his breastplate, knocking him off his feet.

He whirled on his latest attacker, mace raised to finish him—then Mardagan's wide-eyed stare snapped him out of his frenzy. He groaned and sagged to his knees as the tightness in his battered ribs set in.

Mardagan uttered healing spells for them both, studying Vikstone with concern. His head hung low as he hauled himself to his feet with a grunt.

The paladin pulled Vikstone into a crushing hug. “I heard what happened, and I am so, so sorry. I came to see you in Nighthaven, but you were still ... out.”

Approaching shouts disrupted their reunion as a dozen more wyrmkin approached, drawn in by the sounds of battle. Vikstone turned to face them, mace at the ready.

“What are you doing? Call Veridian.” Mardagan whistled for Al’ar. “We need to go—now.” His phoenix swooped down beside them, her body crackling with faerie fire.

“I got this,” Vikstone said, starting forward. Mardagan grabbed him by his collar and dragged him up onto the mount beside him.

The wyrmkin closed in, fanning out to encircle them, arms raised and gesturing as they prepared a volley of magical attacks. The wyrmkin’s magic shimmered, glowing with a blue light. The air around them vibrated as Mardagan dug his heels into Al’ar’s side. They shot skyward, the sound of explosive magic detonating harmlessly beneath them.

Kaskala Village, Borean Tundra

The fires of Kaskala smelled of whale oil and dried kelp, a thick, briny smoke that clung to everything. The tuskarr fed their communal pits with driftwood hauled from the shoreline, and the flames burned low and orange, painting the village in copper light. Beyond the firelight, the Frozen Sea groaned against the coast.

The tuskarr moved quietly, their heavy bodies surprisingly graceful as they passed platters of smoked fish and sea-root between the fire pits. They spoke in low rumbles to one another, their dark eyes flicking toward the two outsiders with the wariness of a people who had learned that visitors to Northrend seldom brought good news.

Vikstone sat across from Mardagan on a low driftwood bench, apart from the nearest fire pit. Close enough for light, not close enough for warmth.

“The situation grows worse,” Mardagan said, sliding his bench closer to the fire. “The Scourge presence expands across Northrend. Undead armies march on Westguard Keep, and things look increasingly grim in Dragonblight.”

“Do as you will with the Lich King. I’m here for Malthrax,” Vikstone said, watching the flames. “Once I locate Namarie and Lunara, and put an end to their suffering, I will find him, and I will destroy him.”

“Sure, but if we can coordinate those efforts with the Argent Crusade, it will be more—”

“Not my war.” Vikstone withdrew a whetstone from his boot and used it to sharpen the spikes on his mace.

“It’s everyone’s war.”

Vikstone shrugged, dragging his whetstone across another spike. “And those war efforts will be aided by my taking out the Lich King’s general, will they not?”

Mardagan frowned. “You speak as if you’re alone in your quest. I considered Namarie a friend, even if she didn’t return the sentiment. And the old crew feels just the same. Calvey’s in Howling Fjord, Gabe’s working with the red dragonflight at Wyrmmrest Temple, and Wopak’s heading to Grizzly Hills.”

“Sounds like you all have your own battles to fight.”

“Damnit, Vik.” He leaned forward. “You aren’t doing this alone.”

“If I knew you were gonna be such a nuisance about this, I wouldn’t have saved you back there.”

“Saved me?” Mardagan laughed. “I had everything under control.”

Vikstone raised a brow. “You were trapped in a floating bubble when I found you.”

“Trapped may be overstating things a bit. I was just about to make my move.”

“Uh-huh.” A trio of tuskarr warriors stood at the water’s edge, spears in hand, their eyes narrowed as they watched the distant waves. “What are they so worked up about?”

“Kvaldir raiders.” Mardagan nodded toward the guards.

An elderly tuskarr fisherman leaned forward, his eyes reflecting the flames. “They come from the sea, surrounded by fog thicker than an orc’s skull. Ghosts in the mist. Can’t shake the feeling they’re testing our defenses to prepare for the real invasion.”

Mardagan cast another glance toward the tuskarr guards before looking back at the old man. “And how are they? Your defenses, I mean.”

“Insufficient.”

Vikstone rose from the bench. “I need to go.”

Mardagan looked up. “Now? Where?”

“Silver Covenant contact. She may have something I need for Malthrax.”

“I’ll come with you.”

“She asked for me. Alone.” Vikstone whistled for Stormclaw. “Stay with the tuskarr. They could use the help.”

Mardagan didn’t argue. “Watch yourself out there, Vik.”

Farshire Village, Borean Tundra

Vikstone nudged Stormclaw into a slower gait as they came to a rest on a low hilltop. Below, the moonlight did Farshire no kindness.

The village had been a farming settlement once. He could still see the shape of it. Fenced plots gone to frost and ruin, a grain silo with its roof staved in, the stone foundations of cottages whose timber walls had been torn apart for barricades that hadn’t held. A child’s wooden horse lay on its side near an overturned cart, its painted mane flaking away.

The Scourge hadn’t just killed Farshire. It had left the corpse where everyone could see it.

Ghouls drifted through the fields in loose clusters, their low groans carrying across the still air like cattle. In the center of town, the bell tower of the old town hall was silhouetted against the night sky. It was the tallest thing left standing, and the only structure the dead hadn’t bothered to pull down.

Vikstone led Stormclaw along the treeline, skirting wide of the nearest cluster. At the damaged front door, Vikstone dismounted and patted Stormclaw’s flank. With an annoyed flick of her ear, the cat slinked away, casting a final glance back before vanishing into the night.

The narrow staircase protested under his weight, each step announcing him. Above, the old bell shifted in its cradle, its clapper tapping against the bronze, too faint to carry.

“You’re late.” The voice came from the shadows as Vikstone reached the top of the stairs.

“I’m not the one who scheduled our meeting in the center of a ghoul swarm, Elarya. Why the secrecy?”

The slim elven woman was seated on the bell tower's windowsill, looking down over the ruined town, her back to Vikstone. "There are spies in Valiance Keep. Cult of the Damned loyalists in service of Vashka Mournblade. The keep's cook, Thorpe, is among them. Is the great Vikstone suddenly afraid of a few ghouls?"

Vikstone settled onto the sill next to the agent, taking a deep swig from her offered flask. Elarya wore a finely tailored black robe, embroidered with the traditional silver and blue of the Silver Covenant, a faction of high elves fiercely opposed to the Horde, particularly the blood elves. "I heard what happened, and of your quest to destroy Malthrax the Undying," she said. "How may the Covenant be of service?"

Vikstone handed the flask back, meeting Elarya's eyes. "During our campaign in Outland, your agents used enchanted bracers on fel mages and ghosts captured in the Valley of Bones. I need two sets, the most powerful you have."

Elarya said nothing for a long moment. The bell creaked above them, and somewhere below, ghouls groaned in the dark. Finally, reluctantly, she said, "Vikstone ... you know you can't save them, right?"

She reached over to comfort the warrior, but he shrugged it off, batting her arm away. "I require your assistance, not your counsel," he said. "Will you provide it, or shall I look elsewhere?"

Elarya sighed, her gaze returning to the dead shuffling about below. "Namarie was like a sister to me, the greatest woman I've ever known. When my mother was abducted by the Shadow Council, it was she who answered the call, venturing alone into the Deathforge to rescue her."

"Namarie was never one to wait around for backup."

Elarya nodded. "The Silver Covenant has always taught that vengeance is a righteous cause. I will acquire the bracers you seek. We will, however, require a small favor in return."

Valiance Keep, Borean Tundra

Mardagan set down his mug at the fireside table at the Valiant Rest. "You seriously expect us to fly into impenetrable fog, somehow find the kvaldir flagship, and kill its immortal captain?"

“Well, when you say it like that ...” A hint of his old smirk crossed Vikstone’s face. Mardagan drained his oversized mug of mead, signaling to the barkeep for another. “So, who’s this captain of yours?”

“Gunvald the Drowned. His ship, *The Lost Maiden*, should stand out because the captain likes to crucify his victims on the masthead.”

“The more you talk, the worse this gets.”

“You did say you wanted to help the tuskarr, did you not?” Vikstone said.

“I was picturing a little more fighting and a little less drowning, but you know I’m in. So, when are we doing this?”

In the distance, alarm bells began ringing, drawing their attention to the door. A crowd was gathering, looking toward the north.

Kaskala was under attack.

“No time like the present.” Vikstone hopped to his feet as the bartender returned with Mardagan’s fresh mug of mead. Mardagan looked wistfully at it before tossing a couple of gold coins on the table to cover their bill and hurrying to follow the elf out the door.

Kaskala Village, Borean Tundra

The fog rolled in like a living thing, thick tendrils curling around the stilted huts of Kaskala as Vikstone and Mardagan flew above the coast on their drake and phoenix mounts. The tuskarr villagers had retreated to their huts, barricading their doors in hopes of waiting out the invaders. The ghostly raiders were a menace that came and went with the mist, striking without warning and vanishing just as quickly.

“Should we help on the ground?” Mardagan said, watching below, where kvaldir raiders poured out of a longboat and moved onto the village. Waterlogged and barnacle-crusted, the spectral vrykul moved through the fog as though born from it, their rusted axes trailing seawater.

Vikstone didn’t respond at first, his eyes locked on the horizon. Somewhere in that dense haze was *The Lost Maiden* and the captain he’d been ordered to eliminate. He looked over at the paladin, whose phoenix cast an orange glow against the grey. “It’s

coming from the flagship. Fly straight into the densest fog and we should run right into it.”

“That’s your plan?”

“That’s my plan.” Vikstone kicked his heels into Veridian’s thick, scaled flank. The netherdrake blasted away as if shot out of a cannon, across the water, and toward the thickest pocket. Mardagan spurred Al’ar to pursue. This might be the night he finally got them both killed.

Vikstone flew blindly into the fog, keeping his drake positioned at roughly the height of a kvaldir ship’s sails. The air was thick with the acrid stench of salt and rotting wood. Even Veridian’s wingbeats sounded muffled and distant.

The drake sensed the impact a moment before it happened, pulling up as they crashed through the mainsail of the ghostship. Rider and mount tumbled to the deck.

Mardagan was less fortunate. His helmet clipped the mast, unseating him. He plummeted, spinning fifteen feet onto the wooden deck.

Vikstone was already up and moving, bringing his mace around to greet a kvaldir raider that burst from the murk, its greataxe slicing downward. The elf was faster, knocking the raider off his feet and over the railing. Footfalls rang, as if coming from every direction at once.

“Mardagan?” Vikstone called, his visibility limited to a couple of feet. Another raider emerged, axe sweeping for Vikstone’s neck. Vikstone got his mace up partially to block, rolling under the axe as he deflected it upward.

As the raider spun for a follow-up strike, a six-foot-long steel blade sprouted from his chest as Mardagan ran him through from behind. Before they could celebrate, daggers flew from the fog—one sinking deep into Vikstone’s thigh, another glancing off Mardagan’s breastplate, a third grazing his elbow through a crease in his armor.

“Below deck, hurry.” Vikstone groped through the mist, found a door handle, and yanked it open as daggers hit the wall around them.

Mardagan slammed the door shut behind them. Blood covered his face from the gash where he’d hit the mast. Even here, the grey curtain persisted, though thinner than above.

“This Gunvald better be worth it,” he said, sliding a thick bolt in place to secure the door.

With a grimace, Vikstone yanked the dagger from his leg. Wisps of fog swirled around the spectral weapon as he tossed it aside. The steps pitched beneath them as the ship was tossed on the waves, causing Mardagan to stumble into a wall as they hurried down the stairs.

A narrow corridor stretched ahead, walls groaning. The mist, persistent and suffocating, coiled around their feet, as if trying to pull them down into the abyss. The elf led, mace ready. Mardagan followed, casting a healing spell to close the gash in his forehead.

“You feel that?” Mardagan’s voice was low, stripped of its usual bravado. The air grew colder with every step, gnawing at their bones and leaving frost clinging to their armor.

Vikstone grunted in response, his breath visible, and his eyes fixed on the far end of the corridor where an iron-banded door waited. A rhythmic chanting drifted from up ahead.

“So how should we handle—”

Vikstone was already sprinting down the corridor, his heart hammering as he surrendered to a berserker rage. The paladin shook his head and followed.

Vikstone kicked the door open, the wood splintering as the latch gave way. The dagger wound in his thigh flared, but he was entirely lost to the fury now. He rushed into the captain’s quarters but then stopped at the sight before him.

The chamber was dimly lit by a lantern hanging on the far wall. A thin layer of frost covered the floor and walls. Captain Gunvald the Drowned, leaning over his desk, turned to greet the intruders. Beneath the hood of his cloak, where his face should have been, was a writhing mass of seaweed. It spilled out of the arm and leg holes of his clothes. His entire body seemed composed of it. The captain had succumbed to the same dark magic that had claimed his ship and crew.

“What in the Light’s name ...?” Mardagan said as he took in the horror before them. One of the captain’s arms shot out, elongating as the seaweed latched onto the paladin’s leg, and slammed him upside down into the wall.

Vikstone covered the distance to the captain with a shoulder charge, driving him into the desk behind him. A vine-like tendril of seaweed shot from Gunvald's face, ensnaring Vikstone's mace and tearing it from his grasp. Meanwhile, Mardagan was still getting thrashed around the room. "A little help?" he called as he collided with a wall.

Vikstone grabbed the seaweed appendage but found it impossibly strong as it whipped the fully armored paladin from wall to wall. Another tendril snaked around Vikstone's waist and lifted him. The ship blurred as Gunvald swung them both in wide arcs.

Gunvald's laughter was a terrible thing, guttural and sputtering. The seaweed entangling them rippled, covering them in brackish water. His form swelled and contracted, as if the seaweed itself were breathing. The captain waved his two new toys around the room and then began slamming them into each other. The first impact into the paladin drove the wind from Vikstone's lungs.

As Gunvald pulled them apart to crash them together again, Vikstone's eyes darted across the room—desperate for something, anything. The glint of the lantern caught his attention. He lunged, curling one finger around the handle before being torn away, and swung it into the captain's face.

The lantern shattered upon impact. Oil splattered, and a bright, vicious flame ignited the seaweed. Gunvald dropped both prisoners, retracting his tentacles as flames engulfed him. Battered and coughing, they crawled toward the exit, smoke filling the room as the captain flailed in panic, igniting everything around him.

A scream tore from every fiber of the ship as the inferno consumed the captain. The thick fog in the hallway began to dissipate, and the ancient ship, no longer held together by his magic, came apart at the seams.

Wood creaked in protest, and the ship listed to one side, seawater pouring in from all around. Mardagan glanced at Vikstone as they waded toward the stairs. "If we don't make it out of this, I just want you to know that I hate you, and this is all your fault."

Vikstone laughed, despite the water filling the corridor and their pocket of air quickly running out. "After me." With a deep breath, he dove beneath the surface and swam hard toward the staircase, the lower decks now submerged.

They swam up the pitch-dark staircase, the ship listing further to one side, leaving them unsure which way was up. A brief glimpse of moonlight revealed their path to the surface. Vikstone's fingers closed around Mardagan's wrist to drag him upward.

They burst through the surface together, gasping for air and struggling to stay afloat in their heavy armor. Vikstone whistled, and Veridian came down from above, seizing them in her powerful claws and carrying them away from *The Lost Maiden* as it was swallowed by the sea.

Veridian deposited them on the Valiance Keep pier, like a pair of drowned rats, Mardagan landing flat on his back with a clang that drew stares from the night watch. Vikstone hauled himself upright, seawater streaming from every joint in his armor.

Mardagan lay there for a long moment, staring up at the sky. "I want you to know," he said. "That was the single worst experience of my life. And I once ate goblin street meat in Booty Bay."

"You said that about Gnomeregan."

"Gnomeregan was different. Gnomeregan was just humiliating." He sat up, emptied a boot that held an impressive amount of the Frozen Sea, and squinted at Vikstone. "You know what your problem is? You have a gift for finding the one plan that works and also nearly kills us."

"It did work."

"That's what makes it so infuriating." Mardagan clapped him on the shoulder as he stood, wincing. "Buy me a drink. You owe me that much."

"I owe you nothing. You were trapped in a bubble when I found you."

"I keep telling you, I had a plan for that bubble."

"So, what was it?"

Mardagan was quiet for a moment. "It was a work in progress."

Vikstone almost smiled.

"Come on," Mardagan said, nodding toward the tavern. "First round's on you, since you nearly got me killed. Again."

"You go ahead. I have business to attend to."

Mardagan studied him, the humor draining from his face. He reached up and rubbed the back of his neck, as if working out a chill that wouldn't leave. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

"That leaves the door wide open."

"That it does." The paladin turned toward the warmth of the Valiant Rest, pausing mid-step. "Vik. When this is over, I'm dragging you to Westfall. My mother's vineyard. Real food, real wine, no undead for miles. She's been asking about you, the old bat."

"I didn't know your mother was still alive."

"Tough as stormsteel and twice as stubborn. Where do you think I get it from?" Mardagan grinned over his shoulder before heading toward the Valiant Rest.

Vikstone watched him go. The warmth of the tavern spilled through the door each time it opened, laughter and firelight, gone when it closed. He stood on the pier a while longer, seawater still dripping from his armor onto the frozen planks.

Mardagan's mother. A vineyard in Westfall. He couldn't picture it. Couldn't picture anything beyond the next step—Elarya, the bracers, Malthrax. The future Mardagan described was a room in a house he couldn't find the door to.

Somewhere out in the dark, past the ice and the fog and the hundreds of miles of frozen nothing between here and Elwynn Forest, his daughter was a monster. His wife was a monster. And every hour he spent earning favors and killing sea captains was an hour they spent screaming.

He stepped off the pier and let the dark take him. It was an old instinct, the birthright of his people, the shadows of Northrend gathering around him like a cloak as his skin dimmed to match the night. The sentries on the wall never saw him pass.

Valiance Keep, Borean Tundra

The kitchen in Valiance Keep was quiet, aside from the ever-present howl of wind; the dinner rush long since ended. 'Salty' John Thorpe, the keep's head cook, wiped his hands on a grimy apron, eyes darting around the dimly lit kitchen. He reached down, pulling a nondescript burlap sack from beneath the counter. Its contents shifted with

a muted clink of glass vials as he extracted a detailed map of Valiance Keep that his master in the Cult of the Damned had tasked him with creating.

Thorpe tucked the map in his inner jacket pocket as he made his way to the kitchen's back door, slipping out into the raging blizzard. The wind from the Frozen Sea made his eyes water, but he blinked it away. He couldn't afford to be late.

Bells rang at the docks, announcing the impending departure of *The Kraken*, but the cook had another engagement. Keeping to the shadows, he maneuvered toward his drop point at the edge of town. The necromancer Vashka Mournblade was notoriously impatient. Her cruelty to those who failed her was boundless. For the hundredth time, Thorpe wondered how he'd gotten himself into this situation, and how he might get himself out.

He reached the drop point—a hollow log in the underbrush a short distance from the northern gate—and crouched to tuck the map into place.

“Rough weather for a late-night stroll.”

The cook whirled around. Vikstone stared him down. The warrior snatched the map away, his eyes scanning it to confirm Thorpe's treachery.

“Wait, I can explain—” The cook's hand drifted toward the knife at his belt.

A sharp right hook from Vikstone sent the cook sprawling to the ground, his knife slipping from his grasp. The warrior grabbed it and pounced, bringing the blade to Thorpe's throat. “Do you know what they do to spies in Valiance Keep? Ever heard of keelhauling?”

Vikstone leaned closer to his captive, his voice a deadly whisper. “Here's what you're going to do. You're going to walk straight to the docks and board *The Kraken*. Don't stop and get your things, just go and never return. If you ever again step foot in Northrend, your life is forfeit. In exchange for sparing your life, you're going to do me a little favor.”

The cook's eyes went wide. “What—what do you want from me?”

Vikstone smiled. “You're going to tell me where to find Vashka Mournblade.”



CHAPTER 3

HOWLING FJORD

Daggercap Bay

A cool wind whistled through the large cavern carved from the cliffs of Daggercap Bay by eons of erosion. Blackwater Hollow, once the lair of pirate Lyra Stormtide, long since murdered by her own crew. The remnants of her ship, *Unsinkabelle*, lay scattered along the beach.

The robed necromancer at the back of the cave, Vashka Mournblade, muttered to herself as she drew an intricate pattern on the floor in blood-red chalk. At the center of the design stood an ancient silver-framed scrying mirror, a gift from Arthas the Lich King himself. The mirror allowed her to stay in touch with him, as well as her minions in Northrend, one of whom had failed to report in last night.

Alchemic equipment littered lopsided tables, the glass vials and beakers of bubbling green liquid emitting a rancid cloud that discolored the walls. In a week's time, Vashka would execute the scheme she'd been planning for months, in the process earning the Lich King's favor and her rightful place at his side.

But now her contact at Valiance Keep had gone missing. Her scrying attempts came up empty, which meant Thorpe was either dead or had fled the continent.

Neither of which served her interests. Vashka contemplated sending a wraith through the spirit realm to track down the missing cook, but decided she had bigger concerns at the moment.

She snapped her fingers. The candles arrayed around the ritual circle flickered to life as she rechecked the chalk lines. A single smudged mark could result in the ward failing and the release of the dangerous creature with whom she was about to commune. Az'kharoth was a lesser but particularly ill-tempered demon.

The sigils Vashka had drawn flared to life, the mirror's surface rippling like liquid silver. From the depths of the glass, a monstrous form took shape, great wings folded tight, and tusks jutting from a snarling red maw of uneven fangs. The demon's eyes burned as he locked his gaze on the necromancer.

"Az'kharoth," Vashka said, her voice echoing through the cavern. "Answer my call and heed my commands."

The demon was powerless to resist the orders of the necromancer who had been controlling him for weeks since uncovering an eons-old tome containing the creature's true name.

"Speak, mortal," Az'kharoth rumbled.

Vashka knew the demon despised her and would tear her to pieces given the opportunity. Every communion carried risk, but the necromancer couldn't shake the feeling that something had gone awry with her plan. She required reassurances that her allies were still on course. Reassurances the clever Az'kharoth could provide. And so, she found herself staring down the demon for the third time this week, the strain sapping her energy and requiring intense focus to retain control.

"You are to survey Warsong Hold," Vashka commanded. "If you detect any deviations from my plan, report back to me immediately."

The demon laughed. "You reek of fear. I can smell it coming off you in waves. It isn't Warsong Hold you fear though, is it? The arrival of a new player in the game threatens your carefully orchestrated plans." Az'kharoth's face was inches from the mirror's surface as he studied the necromancer.

Vashka shrugged off the insinuation, true though she feared it was. Showing weakness around the demon was an invitation to disaster. "You have your comm—"

The roar of a great beast interrupted them. A netherdrake entered her cavern, an armored warrior on its back.

Az'kharoth laughed again. "And your new player arrives."

Vashka cast a panicked look back and forth between the mirror and the incoming warrior. "I'll release you on the condition that you destroy the intruder. Swear it."

"And then I am free? Truly free?" Az'kharoth asked. "You have a deal, human. I swear it."

Vashka dragged her foot across the chalk lines, and they stopped glowing immediately. The demon's claws reached through the mirror, gripping the frame as it crouched to fit its body through the cramped opening. The necromancer was already off and running through a claustrophobic series of tunnels. She hoped the allure of freedom would be enough that Az'kharoth would flee after killing the intruder, but she couldn't rule out the possibility that the demon would want payback for enslaving him these past few weeks.

Vashka's pulse pounded in her ears as the sounds of battle echoed through the cavern—booming impacts, the wreckage of alchemic equipment, and the guttural growl of Az'kharoth. She didn't dare look back as she twisted and turned through gaps in the stone walls.

The missing cook was to blame, she realized, chastising herself for not acting the moment she sensed something was amiss. Now her lab was destroyed, her new pet set free, and her location revealed. *Adventurers are like cockroaches. If you can see one, dozens more are near.*

The demon's cry reverberated through the cave system, followed by another distant crash and the shattering of glass vials. Vashka envisioned the intruder being taken up by his ankles and swung around like a club. There was no doubt that by the time she emerged from her hiding space, there'd be nothing left of him but a smear on the cavern floor.

And then, as quickly as the cacophony had begun, it ended. The oppressive silence settled in Vashka's gut. Her own rapid breathing was all she could hear as she reached the end of the tunnel, where she recovered a gnarled bone wand from an alcove. She doubted even the wand's necromantic magic would be enough to stop Az'kharoth. She only needed to slow him enough to allow her escape.

Footsteps approached. Slow and deliberate. The necromancer's breath hitched. Something was terribly wrong.

Out of the shadows stepped Vikstone, battered and bloodied. His armor was smeared with ash and ichor. In his left hand, he clutched one of the demon's horns, its severed head dangling limply at his side. He tossed the grotesque trophy at the necromancer's feet, where it landed with a wet thud. Vashka raised her wand defensively, but the warrior's voice froze her in her tracks.

"Maybe that wand is powerful enough to stop me before I reach your throat ... and maybe it isn't," Vikstone said, his eyes locked on the necromancer. "I'm willing to die today—right here, right now—to find out. Are you?"

Vashka's mind raced as she weighed her options, finally realizing that if this night elf wanted her dead, he'd already have attacked. She lowered her wand. "What do you want?"

"You're going to tell me everything you know about Malthrax the Undying," Vikstone said. "Give me the information I seek, and I'll let you live."

"And what are your intentions toward Malthrax?"

"I intend to destroy him and grind his bones to dust."

A smile crept across the face of the necromancer, her posture relaxing. While technically her ally and superior, Malthrax occupied her rightful place at the side of the Lich King. She had not clawed her way out of the Scourge's grip—out of that mindless, rotting servitude, where her body moved, and her voice spoke, and none of it belonged to her—only to spend her second life kneeling to another master. Especially one she didn't fully understand. Arthas was predictable in his hunger. Malthrax wanted something else entirely, something she couldn't quite name, and that made him the more dangerous of the two.

His destruction would suit her needs quite well. And if the night elf got himself killed in the attempt, nothing of value would be lost. Vashka saw no downside to sending two enemies on a collision course.

"At ease, warrior," she said with a crooked grin. "We have much to discuss."

Westguard Keep

Veridian traced the high cliffs of Daggercap Bay, following the river west toward the setting sun, past the towering walls of the vrykul stronghold, Utgarde Keep. Vikstone clenched the reins with one hand, the other arm cradled tight to his side. His ribs felt every breath, a result of being hurled upside down into a cave wall by the demon Az'kharoth.

The information had come at a cost: a ferocious beating and an agreement to spare Vashka's life. Vikstone now had a lead on the creature who murdered his family. Before becoming a lich, Malthrax had been a vrykul warlock, whose research specialized in soulstones. After failing the ritual of ascension and being branded as unworthy by his own people, he had worked as a researcher at Wyrmmrest Temple in Dragonblight. There, he learned of an artifact that led to his eventual rebirth as a lich. Some record of his research. Perhaps containing something that could be used against him.

Malthrax the Undying.

The name had taken root in Vikstone's mind, its gnarled branches stretching into every corner of his thoughts. He could still feel the iron boot between his shoulder blades, pressing him into the dirt. The smell of his burning home. Namarie's scream cut short. And beneath the rage, coiled in the place where he kept the things he wouldn't look at directly—fear.

Westguard Keep rose from the clifftops ahead, perched on a promontory that dropped away on three sides to the Frozen Sea below. The keep was half-finished. Raw stone walls braced with timber scaffolding, guard towers with no roofs, and a wooden suspension bridge swaying across the gorge to the north. A lone road wound up the western incline, the only approach that didn't involve wings.

Veridian circled the towers over the bridge once before touching down on the ramparts next to Mardagan, whose eyes were locked on the northern horizon.

With a grunt, Vikstone steadied himself on the drake's flank before giving Veridian a grateful pat. The beast snorted and flew off over the cliffs in search of dinner.

"I thought you were meeting with an informant?" Mardagan looked at his mangled friend and the blood already pooling beneath his boots. As the paladin gestured, a deep blue glow enveloped his hands and the sapphire pendant around his neck began to pulse.

Vikstone winced against the cold sting of Mardagan's healing magic flowing through him, the slashes on his thigh expelling the poison from the demon's claws before sealing themselves shut. He dropped to his knees, growling as his dislocated shoulder wrenched itself back into the socket, followed by the damaged vertebrae in his lower back unfusing themselves with a series of deep pops that he felt in his teeth.

Mardagan clamped his hand over the pendant, the blue fading as he leaned against the wall to steady himself. Vikstone rose, rotating his right shoulder in slow disbelief. It still throbbed, but he had nearly a full range of motion. "What did you ... how did you? Not even the healers of Nighthaven could mend my shoulder."

The paladin's eyes returned to the north. "You've been gone a long time, old friend. I learned a trick or two along the way. I can only cast that once per week, and I'd rather not waste it, so maybe don't go running off on your own like a maniac next time?"

Vikstone stretched his muscles. "No promises. What are you looking for?"

"Scourge forces are amassing at a camp to the north. It seems King Ymiron and his vrykul are in league with the Lich King, allowing themselves to be transformed into undead Ymirjar."

"They have an army of undead giants?"

Mardagan shook his head. "Half-giants, and no, not yet. The commander's spies caught wind of an upcoming ceremony. A rebirth, they're calling it."

"How could someone willingly subject themselves to such defilement? The vrykul have always been a good and noble people."

"Power can corrupt even the best of intentions," Mardagan said, watching engineers make preparations on the suspension bridge spanning the gorge. "I think I saw one of them. The Ymirjar, I mean. I did a flyover of their camp, and I swear on the Light I saw Gorvahn Frostbreaker among the undead. He was different, though. His eyes glowed with an icy fire, and he turned to look right up at me. Like he could sense I was there."

Mardagan paused for a moment, shifting his weight back and forth before continuing. "And I saw something else on my flyover of the camp. A banshee."



Sundown bathed the icy cliffs of Howling Fjord in amber. The air hung heavy with rot, the smell of decay carried on the chill wind blowing in across the sea.

Gorvahn Frostbreaker walked at the head of the undead horde as they marched southward. The Ymirjar stood twelve feet tall and was clad in blackened armor crusted with frost, a battle axe strapped to his back. Since his rebirth as a Ymirjar—the name given to vrykul who willingly surrendered to undeath—his skin had turned a deathly grey, and ice patterns ran from the corners of his eyes down his neck like war paint.

Behind him marched a small army of over a hundred oversized ghouls, zombies, and skeletons. Each was raised from the frozen graves of half-giant vrykul warriors. The ghouls bounded alongside him, drooling black ichor from their hunched and ragged forms. The grim procession rolled southward, a tide of death ready to crash over the walls of Westguard Keep.

Two plague cauldrons trailed behind, each mounted atop a creaking wagon, their enormous glass chambers sloshing with a viscous, greenish plague toxin, capable of transforming any living creature into the undead. Hulking abominations hauled each cauldron by rusted chains—stitched-together monstrosities with misshapen, bloated bodies. Above the cauldrons floated a banshee, her translucent form shimmering in the fading dusk.

As the sun vanished below the horizon, the color drained from the sky, and the wind howled colder still, carrying with it the groans of the undead. Gorvahn paused atop a rise, gazing down at Westguard Keep. Torches burned on the parapets, tiny beacons of hope. He raised a fist, signaling for the horde to halt.

Gorvahn was fixated on the keep, where defenders scurried about making preparations. He knew they would be ready, but he was unconcerned. Soon, the undead would sweep across Northrend, converting every living creature into undead warriors in service to the Lich King.

The banshee drifted up next to Gorvahn. Her monstrous mouth opened wide, her features distorting as she emitted a keening wail that echoed across the cliffs. On her signal, the abominations grunted and shambled forward, dragging the plague cauldrons toward the keep. Vrykul ghouls separated from the slow pack as they advanced.

Gorvahn hefted his frost-rimmed axe, its edge glinting in the dying light, and began his charge down the hill.

Tonight, the living would know fear.



The dwarven commander, Captain Adams, stood atop Westguard Keep's battlements, his gloved hands gripping the stone as he watched the undead horde approaching the far side of the suspension bridge. A terrifying chill overcame him as the banshee's wail washed over the keep. He fought a brief impulse to leap from the wall and flee into the night.

He had prepared his soldiers for this, drilling them day and night to keep them focused and prepared. But now that moment was here. The plan was simple enough: let the ghouls cross, draw the undead into their trap, then blow the bridge when the plague cauldrons attempted to cross. Separate the horde from their leaders. But as he watched dozens of giant ghouls bounding across the bridge, every instinct screamed at him to destroy the bridge now, before those monsters could get their claws into his men.

The bridge groaned and swayed under the weight of the ghouls. At the entryway of the keep, which didn't have a proper gate at this point of construction, a twenty-person shield and pike wall would be responsible for stopping the initial charge. But if their shield wall broke, and the undead breached the keep, the resulting massacre would be brief and absolute.

Adams stared at the line of ghouls, their twisted, contorted bodies bounding forward. Clawed hands scrambled over ropes and planks as they crossed the midway point of the bridge. The skeletons and zombies were just starting to cross. It would be so easy. One order and the bridge would be gone.

Then he saw the cauldrons. The abominations pulled them ever closer. He knew the toxins roiling in those cauldrons could convert his men into monsters in seconds. He'd seen firsthand at the Hearthglen Massacre what horrors await those who fall victim to the plague. And so, he waited.

"Hold ..." Adams commanded the lieutenant at his side, her hands clenched tight around the signal flare.

The first of the cauldrons started to cross the gorge, alongside the slower-moving zombies and skeletons.

“Hold ...”

Below, the ghouls collided with the shield wall. Screams broke out. The soldiers were driven back a few steps before regaining formation. Archers opened fire from above. Pikemen stabbed from between shields.

“Hold ...”

The first cauldron crossed the midpoint of the bridge. The second cauldron had begun to roll forward as well.

“Sir?” the lieutenant said, her knuckles white on the flare.

“Hold ...”

The second cauldron began rolling onto the bridge as the first had nearly finished crossing.

“Now now now! Unleash hellfire!”

The lieutenant sent up her signal flare, a burst of fire streaking through the air. An instant later, a second fireball appeared, this one much larger and coming from the fire mage hiding in the cliffs. The fireball crashed into the barrel of explosives rigged beneath the bridge.

The night sky lit up, the explosives erupting in a cacophony of splintering wood. The bridge’s moorings broke free, and it began collapsing into the gorge. Skeletons, zombies, and the first plague cauldron fell hundreds of feet to their destruction. The second cauldron had just begun crossing the bridge and started tipping forward as the bridge crumbled.

Gorvahn leapt for the wagon carrying the remaining cauldron. He clamped both hands on the tow chain attached to it as it rolled toward the edge. His muscles rippled, his new undead strength flowing through him as he planted his boots in the icy ground and brought the wagon to a stop.

Just as Gorvahn stabilized the cauldron, a dark shape dropped from the sky. A phoenix. The fully armored Mardagan leapt from his saddle and slammed into the Ymirjar, driving them both into the ground.

As the half-giant regained his footing, Mardagan scrambled toward the cliff face, dropping his shoulder into the cauldron to start it rolling toward the edge again. Gorvahn went after it, snatching up the wagon's chain with his left hand while swinging his frost-covered axe at the paladin with his right. Mardagan deflected the blow, his shield nearly ripped from his arm as he was sent sprawling by the force of the Ymirjar's strike.

Gorvahn turned his full attention to the chain, locking both hands on it and tugging it taut as the wagon reached the cliff's edge. "You will *not* defile the Lich King's gift!"

Mardagan charged the wagon, lowering his shield as he launched himself into it, toxic green sludge sloshing around within the great glass tank. The front wheels of the wagon slipped over the edge as he was dragged forward.

Channeling every bit of his newfound rage, Gorvahn howled and drove each foot into the ground, sinking deep into the soil to build leverage.

Mardagan shifted tactics, whirling his greatsword in an arc. He brought it down in a savage slash onto the center of the frozen chain, snapping it in half.

"Nooooo!" Gorvahn dove for the falling cauldron, both hands tugging at the frame as it teetered on the cliff's edge. A final kick from Mardagan was enough to send the wagon down, dragging the screaming Ymirjar with it, too stubborn to let go, as he followed his precious cargo into the darkness below.

The defenders on the battlements of Westguard Keep erupted in cheers as they watched the final plague cauldron plunge into the abyss, alongside Gorvahn Frostbreaker. A distant crash of shattering glass echoed up from the gorge.

"All arms to the gate. Send 'em back to their graves!" Captain Adams moved down the stairway to join the fray.

A dozen riders barreled around the corner of the keep, tearing into the rear ranks of the ghouls and killing four of the creatures on their first pass. On the battlements, every man, woman, and child of Westguard Keep fired arrows or threw stones down at the ghouls. The soldiers maintained their shield wall, holding the creatures at bay while their allies cut them down from above and behind.

For a brief, shining moment, it looked like they might hold. The ghouls were thinning. The men on the walls clapped each other on the back, voices rising in

defiance. Adams allowed himself a grim nod from the gate. They'd lost the bridge, but the keep still stood. If they could hold until dawn—

A haunting shriek ripped through the night as the banshee drifted across the gorge in the moonlight. Her mouth hung open unnaturally wide, and her unholy scream hit the defenders. Overwhelming waves of fear bludgeoned them. Defenders threw themselves from the walls with haste to escape. The center of the spear wall buckled for the first time. Three spearmen turned to flee.

The ghouls surged forward with renewed ferocity. They tore into the disoriented defenders. Adams took the shield from a fleeing man and closed the gap in the shield wall. "Hold yer ground, soldiers. Shoulder to shoulder, not another step backwards, you hear me? Push!"

Then, with a feral shriek, the great cat Stormclaw bounded into view, carrying Vikstone, who leapt off the cat's back into the banshee. He knocked it forward, disrupting its magic. For a moment, Vikstone froze, his breath catching in his throat.

The banshee's spectral form felt familiar—achingly, painfully familiar. The curve of her back, the tilt of her neck, her thin build. "Namarie?" he whispered, his voice breaking.

The banshee turned on him, her eyes flaring blue with rage. Her hair was too short, her nose too wide, her clothes all wrong. It wasn't his wife. Relief surged through him, then anger.

She focused her full energy on him, unleashing a keening wail that sapped the strength from his muscles, bringing him to his knees. She grinned, her claws extended. "Your pain is delicious."

He was back in Elwynn Forest, back to the day he lost Namarie and Lunara. Malthrax's boot on his spine. Powerless.

The banshee's hand closed around his throat, fingers finding gaps in his armor. Stormclaw launched herself at the creature, ripping her away and breaking the spell. The banshee slashed back, opening the great cat's flank and casting her aside.

The banshee turned to finish him—and found him on his feet. His spiked mace obliterated her head, silencing her.

“Warriors, to me!” Mardagan flew in on his phoenix to hit the remaining ghouls from behind. Vikstone hurried to join him as the defenders rallied to their call.

Westguard Keep would survive this night.

Gjalerbron

The sun hung low in the pale sky as Mardagan guided Al’ar toward the vrykul stronghold of Gjalerbron. Captain Adams had asked them to locate a missing patrol, last seen near the stronghold’s outer walls, and Calvey had sent word that she’d picked up their trail. Below, cliffs and frost-rimmed towers rose from the ground. Guttural chanting rose from below, punctuated by drums heavy enough to feel in the chest.

“There,” Vikstone said, pointing to a glint of light below.

A mirror-flash cut through the grey, signaling from a ridge sheltered by great pines. Vikstone angled his netherdrake down, and Mardagan followed, their beasts’ talons kicking up snow as they landed. Before Vikstone could dismount, a lithe figure emerged from the trees, her bow slung over her back, and a grin plastered across her face. Like most draenei, her skin was colored a pale aqua. Twin horns curved gracefully back from her forehead, framing warm, violet eyes. Her thin lavender tail wagged as it poked out through her leather armor.

“Calvey.” Vikstone turned to face his old traveling companion. One of the most skilled hunters he’d ever known, and the reason he was still alive to know it.

She didn’t answer, instead closing the distance and hugging him. Her breath hitched as she pulled back.

“I ... I heard about Namarie and little Lu,” she said, the warmth of her voice cutting through the cold. “I’m so, so sorry, Vik.”

He nodded, his throat tightening.

Mardagan gave them a moment. “Any sign of the missing patrol?”

Calvey straightened, stepping back. “Yes,” she said, and pulled a small map from her pouch, spreading it on a flat rock. “Our people were captured by the vrykul and are being held in cages outside the central hall, meant to be sacrificed in some kind of ascension ritual. I didn’t catch all the details.”

“Ymiron’s vrykul are giving themselves over to undeath—reborn as Ymirjar,” Mardagan said. “Just one of those gave us all we could handle last night. Don’t love the thought of an army of them.”

“It gets worse,” Calvey said. “The dracolich Glacion has been watching Gjalerbron. Trying to hit them by force would be suicide.”

Vikstone paced. Every minute here was a minute not hunting Malthrax. “Okay, so we stealth this thing. How do we open the cages?”

“There’s an abomination serving as jailer. It carries the cage keys,” Calvey said. “If we can get the prisoners back to this spot, I have a portal already arranged to transport them to Westguard Keep.”

Mardagan chuckled to himself. “So, we sneak in, kill the jailer, free the prisoners, and escape past a dracolich? Okay.”



The corridors of Gjalerbron were dark and cold, the walls etched with old runes that glowed faintly with necromantic energy. Calvey led the way, her bow ready, while Vikstone and Mardagan followed close behind. Vrykul drums pounded through the halls, drowning out Mardagan’s pitiful attempt at stealth. His plate mail clanked with every step.

“The jailer follows the same route every night,” Calvey whispered, peeking around a corner. “We can set up an ambush.”

She raised a hand, signaling them to halt. Ahead, two vrykul warriors stood guard outside a chamber, their forms casting long shadows in the torchlight.

We’ll go around, Calvey mouthed, but Vikstone’s gaze was locked on the chamber door. An item within could help him on his quest to defeat Malthrax. He felt it.

Vikstone grinned at Mardagan. “Take the one on the right. In three ... two ... one!”

Calvey reached out to stop them, but they were already off and running, dashing straight into the surprised vrykul and driving them hard into the wall. The drumbeats drowned out the impact and the brief scuffle. Both vrykul were cut down before they could recover.

“I thought we agreed on stealth?”

Vikstone was already moving into the room. Calvey followed him in as Mardagan dragged the bodies out of the hallway.

A titan-forged battle axe floated above an altar at the far end of a small chapel, bathed in flames. Vikstone stalked toward it.

Calvey hurried to his side. “Wait, wait, wait. We don’t actually know what that is.”

Vikstone took up the axe by the hilt. Its magical heat flowed through his body and repelled the chill he’d felt down to his bones since arriving in Northrend.

Images came. A vrykul king cutting through a tide of undead, each swing leaving fire in its wake. King Ymiron. The same king, kneeling to the Lich King. The axe, falling from hands no longer worthy of it. Then silence. Waiting in the dark for someone who would not kneel.

A word escaped his lips. Unbidden, inevitable.

“Infernos.”

A low, wet growl echoed from the corridor behind them. Calvey spun, her bow snapping up as an abomination lumbered into view. Its hideous, stitched form shuddered as it spotted the group and let out a roar that reverberated through the halls.

“The jailer,” Calvey said.

The abomination’s bulbous eyes darted to the chapel entrance, its twisted mouth curling. It turned and fled, its heavy footfalls pounding against the stone.

“Catch him.” Calvey launched a pair of arrows into the abomination’s back before it shambled around the corner.

Vikstone didn’t hesitate. Infernos blazed to life in his hands as he sprinted after the jailer. The abomination was already halfway down the long corridor leading to the courtyard, where dozens of vrykul were gathered. He wouldn’t catch it in time. Vikstone planted his feet and let the flaming axe fly toward the abomination’s back.

Its flames sank into undead flesh. It howled in pain, spinning in circles and reaching back with its stubby arms in a futile attempt to remove the axe. Vikstone yanked it from the monster’s back, bringing it down in a spinning diagonal chop across its chest. Each strike fueled the axe and ignited its flesh. The creature collapsed in a foul-smelling heap.

Wincing and plugging her nose with one hand, Calvey crouched over the body and retrieved the keys. “Got ’em. The prisoners are just ahea—”

A blast from a vrykul horn interrupted her, their heads all snapping toward the corridor’s end, where a vrykul was pointing at them and yelling, “Infidels!”

“Uh, Calvey?” Mardagan said, his head snapping left and right.

“This way.” The hunter dashed away from the vrykul as the drumbeats took on a more ominous tone. War cries erupted from all around them as more half-giants took up the hunt.

The group burst into the open courtyard, sprinting toward three bamboo cages holding six captives. The drumbeats grew louder. Vrykul warriors closed in from all sides.

Calvey slid to a stop at the first cage, tearing the lock loose as Vikstone sheared through the bamboo of the second with his blade. Mardagan opted for a different approach, barreling into the third cage and sending himself and it sprawling over a five-foot drop. The cage tore open under his armored weight.

“Move, now,” Calvey said. Glacion came into view overhead.

The freed prisoners scrambled, slipped, and slid down the narrow trail. Vikstone and Mardagan fought to keep them moving, intercepting the first vrykul defenders as Calvey’s arrows dropped a gargoyle diving for a straggler. Mardagan grabbed a fallen man by the scruff of his neck.

Glacion’s shadow fell over them. Ahead, the portal shimmered into view with arcane energy. The ground exploded, sending the heroes and prisoners flying in all directions. Lightning tore through them.

“Keep ... moving ...” Calvey inched towards the portal.

Mardagan shielded a fallen prisoner as arrows struck the surrounding ground. Vikstone gasped as Infernos was knocked from his grip. The portal was too far.

A bugle rang out. Captain Adams burst through on horseback, cavalry at his back, followed by two dozen bloodied warriors from Westguard.

“Defenders of Westguard—attack!”

The cavalry ran through the disorganized vrykul ranks. Adams impaled a warrior, abandoned his lance, and surveyed the fleeing troops. “Cover them.”

Calvey reached the portal, stopping at its edge to provide cover fire, picking off gargoyles.

Glacion struck again. One cavalryman fell. Adams went down, his horse dead beneath him.

“Keep going ... save yerselves,” he croaked. The prisoners and soldiers vanished through the portal. He smiled. A good death. He accepted his fate—just as a gauntleted hand clamped down on his shoulder.

“Didn’t think we’d leave without you, did ya?” Mardagan said, dragging him the final few feet.

Vikstone threw himself into Mardagan, Calvey, and Adams, sending all four through. The portal snapped shut as lightning struck, leaving a crater where they’d stood.

Westguard Keep

Captain Adams had a medic dig the arrowhead out of his shoulder while he talked, which told Vikstone everything he needed to know about the kind of war this dwarf was fighting.

“I lost four riders at Gjalerbron,” Adams said, barely flinching as the medic worked. “Four of the twelve I had left. The bridge cost me twenty more.” He looked up at Vikstone. “I owe you a debt for them prisoners. But I’ll be straight with ya—I haven’t got much to pay it with.”

They sat in the commander’s quarters, a cramped stone room with maps pinned over maps on every wall. Cold air pushed through a gap where the mortar hadn’t been finished, and the lantern on Adams’s desk guttered each time the wind found it. Calvey perched on a supply crate, wrapping a strip of linen around a gash on her forearm she hadn’t mentioned during the escape. Mardagan leaned against the doorframe, arms folded, watching the corridor.

“I’m not asking for soldiers,” Vikstone said.

“Good. Valiance Keep is screaming for reinforcements. Valgarde’s barely holding. And Naxxramas is still parked over Dragonblight.” Adams waved the medic off and rolled his shoulder with a grunt. “The Scourge doesn’t have to win every battle,

Vikstone. They just have to keep us stretched thin enough that we can't concentrate force anywhere. And it's working."

"What about the Argent Crusade?" Mardagan asked.

"Fordring's building something up in Icecrown. Won't say what. Meanwhile, he's pulling his best people off every front to staff it." Adams shook his head. "I'm sure the Highlord has his reasons, but it doesn't help me hold this keep with a garrison half the size it was a month ago."

"We're heading to Dragonblight," Vikstone said. "Wyrmmrest Temple. Gabe is there, working on a lead."

"Father Gabriel?" Adams raised a brow. "Aye, the red dragonflight thinks highly of his research, from what I understand." He paused, studying the three of them—battered, bloodied, and clearly not under anyone's command. "Look, I can't give you troops, and you lot don't seem the type to take orders, anyway. But I'll tell you what I know."

He leaned forward. "Every Scourge general draws on the same war machine. Same plague cauldrons, same necromancers, same supply lines. That Malthrax of yers—if he's operating at the level you say, he's not just a threat to your family. He's a keystone in the Lich King's campaign. You pull him down, things start collapsing that have nothing to do with your fight."

"The brass in Dalaran won't see it that way," Mardagan said.

"The brass in Dalaran won't see much of anything till someone puts proof in front of 'em they can't ignore. Get that proof, and you might find more friends than you expect."

Vikstone met the dwarf's eyes. "I intend to."

"I'll send word up the chain to Commander Wyrmbane at Wintergarde," Adams said. "If yer Malthrax is pulling resources from the Scourge war machine for his own designs, Seventh Legion will want to know about it."

Adams clapped him on the arm as he rose. "Now get to it. And try not to blow up any more of me bridges on the way out."

Outside, the night air was sharp enough to taste. Scaffolding on the unfinished eastern tower groaned in the wind, and what remained of the garrison was visible from the courtyard. A handful of soldiers mended armor by torchlight, fewer than should

have been there. Calvey fell into step beside Vikstone as they crossed toward the landing where their mounts waited. She said nothing at first, her eyes on the gorge where the broken stumps of the bridge hung in the dark.

“You’re hurt worse than you’re letting on,” she said. Not a question.

“I’m fine.”

“Mhm.” She adjusted the bandage on her arm. “You know, Namarie used to do the same thing. Walk around bleeding and tell everyone she was fine. Drove me absolutely crazy.”

“She learned it from me.”

“Oh, I know. She blamed you, constantly.” Calvey glanced sideways at him. “We’ll find her, Vik. Gabe’s the smartest person I’ve ever met. He’s at Wyrmmrest Temple in Dragonblight, working on a lead. If there’s something in those archives, he’ll find it.”

Vikstone said nothing. Somewhere far below, the river moved through the gorge in the dark, patient and unconcerned with what had been built above it, or what had fallen.

Balargarde Fortress, Icecrown

The halls of Balargarde Fortress hummed with dark energy. Snarvok skittered into his master’s chamber, clutching a parchment nearly as long as he was tall. The imp’s oversized ears twitched as he scanned the cavernous space.

Malthrax loomed at the center of the room, his skeletal form bathed in the cold green light of an enormous soulstone. He didn’t turn. His bony fingers inscribed runes into the crystal’s surface.

“Master,” Snarvok squeaked. “There have been ... developments.”

A burst of blue magic erupted from the soulstone, showering sparks. “And?” the lich said.

The imp hesitated, his parchment trembling. “W-well, Az’kharoth has been slain, Master. As has Golvahn Frostbreaker. Two plague cauldrons lost at Westguard Keep. And more heroes arrive in Northrend by the day.”

“As anticipated.” Malthrax turned, his skeletal grin catching the soulstone’s glow. “The trap is set. Let them come.”



CHAPTER 4

DRAGONBLIGHT

Elwynn Forest

Laughter echoed through the glade ahead as Vikstone approached, the morning sunlight slipping through the canopy to dapple the ground. Fallen leaves drifted past him in lazy spirals, and the air smelled of wildflowers and warm grass. An Elwynn autumn, perfect and golden.

Atop a slight rise, surrounded by colorful mushrooms, Namarie and Lunara wore exotic spider-silk gowns as they sat around a miniature table set for a fancy tea party. Lunara giggled, the sound warming Vikstone's soul as his daughter lifted her teacup to her stuffed yeti's face to offer him a drink. Namarie beamed at her, pouring another imaginary serving from a cracked porcelain teapot.

The scene was impossibly vivid, the details so sharp and pure and perfect. The way Lunara's hair caught the light, the steam curling from the teapot's spout, the sound of his daughter's laughter layered over itself, like an echo in a place with no walls. He wanted to stay in this moment forever.

And yet.

The leaves were drifting past him in the same pattern they had a moment ago. The steam from the teapot hadn't thinned. Lunara's giggle came again, the same pitch, the same rhythm, the same intake of breath before it. A sound playing for the second time. The sunlight was warm on his skin, but it cast no shadow behind him.

“Namarie,” he tried to say, but found he had no voice. He stepped forward. His foot sank to the knee in rancid sludge. Vikstone slipped his foot free from his sabaton just as the sludge enveloped and swallowed the boot. Blackened roots burst up from below to entangle him, pulling him downward. Again, he tried. No sound.

A dense, green cloud crept its way through the forest toward the tea party, defiling every living thing it touched. Trees blackened as the cloud rolled over them, diseased tendrils sprouting through their bark.

“Namarie, behind you. Run!” He tried to call as the roots pulled him deeper into the muck—up to his waist now—but his words were smothered by vines snaking around his face.

The cloud reached Namarie first. Her serene smile turned to confusion as her hand faltered mid-pour. The darkness enveloped her, her skin turning pallid, her eyes flaring green. Lunara screamed, her little hands clawing at her face as the corruption consumed her.

Vikstone flailed, struggling to free an arm from the writhing mass of roots and tendrils, only his head and shoulders still visible.

“You failed us,” the banshee Namarie said as she floated toward him, her empty eyes a hateful glare. Her wail became a winter’s gale. Lunara joined in, their chorus sapping his strength.

Gnarled vines wrapped around his face and throat, pulling him down and down and down into the endless dark.

“Vikstone, enough.”

Namarie’s voice was gentle but unyielding, a scolding tone he had heard from her often in their years together. Vikstone opened his eyes to find himself lying in the grass, the cloud of corruption gone, and Namarie looking down at him, a perfect sprig of night lily in her hair.

“Namarie?” His hand trembled as he reached for her cheek. She captured his hand in hers, pressing it to her face. Her skin felt warm beneath his touch, alive.

“Stop using our love as a cudgel to beat yourself with,” she said. “It dishonors us.”

Tears streamed down his face. “But I don’t know how to save you.”

“There’s always a way, my love.” She smiled faintly. Then she turned, her eyes going wide. “They’re coming. I have to go.”

“No, wait!” Vikstone reached for Namarie as she stood, his fingers passing through her arm as her body dissolved into mist. “Where are you?”

The world fractured, the glade breaking like glass around him.

Vikstone awoke with a start, his chest heaving, his hand still outstretched. The pale light of dawn seeped into his tent, the muffled sounds of the camp coming to life around him.

Wyrrest Temple, Dragonblight

The snow crunched beneath their boots as the three companions approached Wyrrest Temple, and for a long moment, nobody spoke.

A thousand feet of titan-forged stone, pale and seamless, tapering toward a crown lost in low cloud. The steps at its base were cut for legs longer than Vikstone was tall, and the archways above them could have admitted a ship under full sail. Red dragons circled the upper tiers in slow, deliberate orbits, their wingbeats stirring the clouds. And even they looked small against the stonework.

Vikstone craned his neck until his hood fell back. It simply existed at a scale that made everything around it—the snow, the bones of lesser dragons sunk in the frost, the three figures climbing its steps—feel like an afterthought. The temple served as the central meeting place for the five dragonflights as they convened to strategize against the Scourge.

“Impressive, eh?” Mardagan said. “They say Alexstrasza herself holds court on the rooftop. I haven’t yet dared fly close enough to confirm.”

Calvey’s tail wagged. “Can we go to the top? I want to meet the dragons!”

Vikstone chuckled. “You always were obsessed with dragons.”

“It’s Namarie’s fault,” Calvey said. “I was fine until she put the idea in my head that we could tame and ride one. This was way back before you two met. We were in Netherstorm, gathering crystals for that creepy little goblin, Fizzle-something. Anyway, so Namarie spots this wild nether dragon gliding through the sky all majestic and glittery.”

“Oh, no,” Mardagan said, shaking his head.

“Oh, yes.” Calvey giggled as they approached the temple’s wide stone steps. “This is before we had flying mounts, mind you, so we climb up this rock spire to get closer. It was still too far away, though, so Namarie digs a goblin glider out of her pack. Next thing I know, we’re soaring through the air over this dragon, and then she yells, ‘Jump!’ and leaps off.”

Vikstone found himself grinning as Calvey flailed about while retelling the tale. “So Namarie lands all perfect like always, but me being me, I go bouncing down the dragon’s back, and now I’m clinging to its tail while it’s doing loops trying to shake us. We were clear to Zangarmarsh before I lost my grip and got dumped into the Dead Mire.”

Calvey took in a deep breath. “That’s how I’ll always remember her, a fierce and fearless goddess on the back of a great wyrm. She zoomed back and forth over that marsh for what had to be an hour, laughing every time they flew past. And then it landed right next to me and lowered its head so she could climb down. She tamed a freakin’ dragon! No, tamed is the wrong word. She befriended him.”

“Astralyth,” Vikstone said, patting the iridescent blue dragonscale shield hanging over his back. “Namarie used to visit him in Netherstorm and had a shield crafted for me from one of his shed scales. I always wondered how they met.”

Mardagan looked away. “She was a good woman. The world is a darker place for her passing.”

“She came to me last night,” Vikstone said. “In my dream. She told me it was still possible to save them, but then Malthrax spotted her, so she had to go.”

Calvey shot Mardagan a concerned glance. “My mother came to me in dreams for a year after she died. I know how real it feels.”

“It *was* real.” Vikstone held her stare. “What if they’re still alive? What if he’s keeping them somewhere?”

“But you saw them get transfor—” Mardagan said.

“If that’s true, we’ll find them.” Calvey took Vikstone’s hand. “Either way, you got to see her again. Every visit is a blessing. I have no doubt she’s watching over us, from this world, or the next.”

They continued up the stairs to the main entrance, where a trio of small red drakes hovered behind the temple’s steward, Tariolstrasz. The high elf wore flowing crimson robes embroidered with golden dragons.

“You are expected,” the steward said. “Namarie was a friend to dragonkind, and your quest is known to us. The red dragonflight welcomes you to Wyrmmrest Temple.”

A black-robed figure stepped into view from the shadows of the arched entryway. The elderly priest leaned heavily on his staff as he shuffled forward to greet them, his silver beard much longer than when they last met. Despite the weariness in his posture, his crystal-blue eyes were clear as he took them in.

“Gabe!” Mardagan pulled the startled priest into a bear hug. “By the Light, it’s been ages.”

“Too long,” Father Gabriel said, extricating himself as he shifted his focus to Calvey, who greeted him with a beaming smile and a considerably less violent embrace.

The old priest turned to Vikstone, his smile fading. “You look like hell, Vik.”

“I’ve had better years.”

Gabe clasped his arm. “The archives here are vast. I’ve found things—about this Malthrax.” His expression darkened. “Come. We have much to discuss.”

Wyrmmrest Temple Archives, Dragonblight

The archives beneath Wyrmmrest Temple had not been built for mortal hands.

The shelves rose forty feet before the first landing, carved from stone that predated the oak beams bracing them. Titan-work, smooth and pale, fitted without mortar. The tomes on the lower shelves were sized for human hands, but higher up, the volumes grew larger, heavier, their spines as wide as Mardagan’s breastplate. Dragon-scale bindings. Records kept by beings who measured their lives in millennia and saw no reason to write small.

Orbs of arcane light drifted between the stacks at varying heights, unhurried, moving on paths that seemed deliberate but followed no pattern. Where the light passed, dust motes hung suspended. The air tasted of old parchment and something mineral beneath it, like standing water deep underground.

Gabe led them deeper, his staff clicking on the stone without hesitation. Vikstone and Mardagan followed in silence.

Ahead of them, Calvey turned as she walked, her head tilted back, her mouth slightly open, trying to take in the painted vaulted ceiling that stretched above them.

Scenes of Azeroth's creation rendered in pigments that hadn't faded in ten thousand years. "It's so beautiful," she whispered.

"This way," Gabe said, guiding them into a smaller chamber lined with bookshelves and adorned with vrykul weaponry and artifacts. A black spear hung on the back wall, too large for any human to wield. Mardagan's eyes locked on it.

"Is that ...?"

"Soulpiercer. Iskalder carried it against Yogg-Saron himself—the Beast with a Thousand Maws." He traced a finger along the air beneath it. "The vrykul were titan-forged, you know. Created to maintain order. Noble, once. Before the Curse of Flesh twisted them into—"

Vikstone cleared his throat. "So, about Malthrax?"

"Right, right, of course." Gabe hurried across the room, grunting as he heaved a book the size of his torso off a shelf and laid it open on the pedestal, unleashing a plume of dust. "First pieces of the puzzle. Enough to trouble me."

He turned to a page depicting a crude charcoal sketch of a robed vrykul surrounded by jagged lines of green energy. "Malthrax of Clan Icevein. In life, he was ... *obsessed* is the polite word. He was a warlock who hunted souls. Captured them. Corrupted them."

"He sounds nice," Calvey said, peering over Gabe's shoulder.

"He worked in the Maw of Neltharion—still tainted by Deathwing, still whispering with Yogg-Saron's madness." Gabe frowned. "Whether the place corrupted him or he sought it out, I can't say. But his experiments grew increasingly brutal. Even the vrykul cast him out."

"Old God corruption." Mardagan shook his head. "Of course."

Gabe turned the page, revealing a glittering green gemstone embedded in a vrykul skull's eye socket. "His crowning achievement. His own ascension. How he did it, what that stone actually is—I don't know yet."

Vikstone leaned closer to the faded image.

"Worse still ..." Gabe shifted uneasily. "His experiments focused on souls of extraordinary strength. He targeted heroes. Powerful souls." A pause. "And their children."

"Are you saying he sought out Namarie and Lunara by design?"

“We don’t—we don’t have any way of knowing that. But it would be consistent with his methods.”

Vikstone was in his face before Gabe could step back. “Where is he.” His voice was flat, cold. “How do I kill him.”

“About that ...” Gabe winced. “We don’t know either of those things. Yet.”

“The lab. It still exists?”

“It does. I’ve got scribes pulling blueprints. We can mount an expedition at first light. With luck, we’ll find something about that gem. How he transformed.”

“I’m going now.” Vikstone turned toward the door and walked face-first into Mardagan’s armored chest.

“In the morning,” the paladin said, clapping him on the shoulder. “A good night’s rest will do us all well, and I’m not keen on exploring volcanic caves without a map.”

“At first light.” Vikstone looked toward the tome, where Malthrax’s emerald eye glared back at him.

Galakrond’s Rest

The sky over Dragonblight had gone dark, clouds pressing low against the plains. A blizzard was building somewhere to the west, and the temperature was dropping fast.

Vikstone trudged up the frozen ridge. Ahead, Gabe leaned on his staff near the edge, his silver beard flowing in the wind. The old priest had been here a while. He hadn’t turned around.

Dragon bones jutted from the snowy graveyard. Ribcages arched twenty feet overhead, wing-spars longer than masts, vertebrae the size of boulders mired in the frost. Hundreds of skeletons, maybe more, scattered across the valley floor in attitudes of rest and collapse. Some had died curled inward, tails wrapped around themselves. Snow had filled the hollows of their skulls and settled in the joints of their claws, softening everything.

In the center lay the skeletal remains of Galakrond himself, the Progenitor of Dragonkind, his colossal skull dwarfing all others. The rest of him stretched back across

the valley floor, until distance and snowfall made it impossible to tell where the bones ended and the landscape began.

“A humbling view, is it not?” Gabe said. “In the end, nature reclaims even the mightiest of creatures.”

“Some ends are worse than others,” Vikstone said, spotting a burnt and shattered ribcage buried in the snow. “How many of these creatures fell to their own kind?”

“Too many. Galakrond’s hunger was insatiable. He devoured his own kind—lesser dragons at first, then anyone who stood in his way. Obsession has a way of hollowing you out.”

“You know more about the undead than anyone I’ve met.” Vikstone stopped. “Gabe. Has anyone ever been ... turned back?”

“I asked myself the same after the attack. Knew this moment would come.” He sighed. “But no. It’s never been done. Zombies, ghouls—they’re usually raised after the soul has already departed. The body can sometimes be salvaged. Become Forsaken.”

“I would never do that to Namarie.”

“Of course not. And you couldn’t, anyway.” Gabe’s voice softened. “When the plague takes someone while the soul is still inside ... both are corrupted. Body and soul together. I’ve searched the archives, Vik. There’s nothing.” He looked away. “I wish to the Light there were.”

“No, no, you don’t understand. I saw Namarie last night,” Vikstone said, his voice breaking. “She was herself. Uncorrupted.”

“That was a dream, friend,” Gabe said, placing a wrinkled hand on the warrior’s arm.

He stared down at the valley of bones. “I can’t just let them go. I won’t.”

“Nor should you. You’ll carry them forever—that’s what love is.” He met Vikstone’s eyes. “But the notion that you can change them back? That you have to let go. Find them. Give them peace. Anything beyond that leads somewhere dark. And I won’t watch you go there.”

“There’s always a way,” Vikstone whispered, Namarie’s words echoing in his mind. With a last look at the skull of Galakrond, he headed back down the incline.

Wyrrest Temple

“I need to see Chromie,” Vikstone said to the steward at Wyrrest Temple’s grand entrance. Snow flurries swirled around the building, clinging to the elf’s crimson robes. Tariolstrasz tilted his head as if listening to a distant sound, then nodded.

“You are expected,” he said, leading Vikstone and Mardagan down a wide corridor with polished marble floors. Statues of Azeroth’s fallen heroes looked down at them from both sides. Namarie wasn’t among them. Vikstone’s mood darkened. Mardagan’s hand found his shoulder as they walked.

The air warmed as they entered a vast chamber. Golden strands of light wove overhead, the threads of fate, malleable in this place. The bronze dragonflight protected the sacred timeline. Their representative here was Chronormu, better known as Chromie.

Standing in the center of the chamber, the little gnome gestured like a conductor, the golden strands responding to her movements, weaving, parting, and tangling. A shock of blonde hair poked out unevenly from her oversized goggles, her flowing white-and-yellow silk robe twirling around her as she turned to greet her guests. “Vikstone. Sir Mardagan.” She clasped her hands together. “It’s been too long. Well, from your perspective, anyway.”

Mardagan dropped to one knee, bowing his head. “Thank you for seeing us, great Chronormu. You honor us with your time.”

Chromie nodded respectfully to the paladin, who still towered over her while kneeling, before looking up at Vikstone. “How may I help you boys?”

“I need you to send me back in time to save my wife and daughter,” Vikstone said. His words elicited a sharp gasp from Mardagan.

Chromie sighed, hanging her head. “You know I can’t—”

“Yes, you can. I’ve seen you do it. You sent us into the future to prevent your death. Remember? Namarie nearly died protecting your sacred timeline. You owe her. You owe me!”

Chromie smiled softly, unfazed. “If only it were that simple. When I sent you forward, it was to repair the timeline—a rupture that would have had catastrophic consequences.”

“What about my disrupted timeline, and that of my wife and daughter? You seemed perfectly willing to break the rules when it was your life at stake.”

Mardagan grabbed Vikstone by the arm to pull him back, but the night elf shook free of his grip, stalking toward Chromie. “Who did you turn to when the timeline needed protecting at Stratholme? Namarie. Who did you turn to when you foresaw your own death? Namarie. She answered every time. Now answer her. Send me back. Let me warn her. Let me die in Lunara’s place—I don’t care. Just *do something*.”

Chromie sighed as tears streaked Vikstone’s face. “I wish I could help you, truly I do, but I cannot grant your request. What you’re asking would tear holes in time itself. I mourn for Namarie just—”

“Do not speak her name.” Vikstone glared down at the gnome. “You are unworthy of it. She was a friend to your people, and what are you to her? Nothing. An honorless monster hiding in the guise of a gnome so people aren’t repulsed by your true—”

“Okay, good chat,” Mardagan said, stepping between Vikstone and Chromie before hauling Vikstone from the room.

Chromie let out a slow sigh as she turned back to the golden threads, her small fingers tracing a strand that shimmered differently from the others. Things were not as he believed. But to tell him would unravel everything, including the thread she’d spent centuries protecting.

Maw of Neltharion, Dragonblight

The sulfur in the air burned Vikstone’s lungs as he crouched behind an outcrop of volcanic rock. Chromie wouldn’t help. The archives were all he had left. The Maw of Neltharion opened ahead of them, the entrance to Malthrax’s old lair. Not a clean geological formation, but split and forced apart, the stone around its edges discolored and fused smooth, as if the rock itself had been melted and then frozen mid-scream.

Stalactites, fanged and uneven, hung in clusters, some of them catching the deep orange glow that pulsed from within the cavern.

Near the entrance, shadowy figures moved between crude stone altars, their chanting low and atonal. The sound carried strangely in the heated air, seeming to arrive before the mouths that made it.

“I’d like to go on record as hating this plan,” Mardagan said, as he removed his greatsword from his back and stashed it behind a rocky outcropping next to Vikstone’s axe and shield.

Gabe shrugged as he donned crimson robes stolen from Cult of the Damned loyalists, held in captivity at Wyrmmrest Temple. He pulled the hood down over his face to conceal his features as Calvey bound Vikstone and Mardagan’s hands behind them using fake cuffs with a secret release mechanism. “Cultists have been capturing locals and bringing them here for sacrifice,” he said. “My hope is they’ll let us stroll right in through the front door.”

Calvey tucked her tail up into her clothing to conceal it as she pulled her cultist garments tight around her. “I’m more concerned about the walking out part,” she said as she adjusted her grip on the chain binding her two ‘prisoners.’

“Can’t we just fight our way in?” Vikstone didn’t like the idea of entering the enemy’s lair unarmed.

“That’s what I’m saying,” Mardagan said, watching the dozen servants outside the cave. “We could rout their exterior defenses and breach the lair before they knew what hit them.”

Gabe cleared his throat, their complaints fading as they turned to listen to him. “And then what? Do you know where to find Malthrax’s old notes? And do you intend for the four of us to battle a magmawyrms?”

“A what now?” Calvey’s eyes went wide. “I thought we were dealing with *them*. No one said anything about dragons.”

“It is believed that the cult is trying to raise one, thus the ritual sacrifices,” Gabe said, his voice even and calm. “Allow me to do the talking. Vikstone and Mardagan, keep your heads down and say nothing. And if the situation does get out of control, be aware that this cavern is artificial, the magma flow regulated by titan machinery. Were any of that machinery to get damaged, the resulting eruption would likely kill us all.”

“And is this a bad time to point out that your plans never work?”

“Yes, it’s far too late for that.” Gabe rose from behind the cover of a boulder and led them down the path toward the Maw of Neltharion. Calvey followed at his side, with the chained Vikstone and Mardagan close behind.

Cultists looked up at the group, their chants fading as they approached from all sides. Under her breath, Calvey hissed to Vikstone and Mardagan, “Stay cool.”

“What have you, Brother?” a tall, thin cultist asked, moving to block Gabe and examine the procession.

“More sacrifices for the glory of Lord Malthrax,” Gabe said, trying to step around the cultist who again moved to intercept him.

“I wasn’t told of your coming.” The cultist leaned down to peer under Calvey’s hood. A dozen surrounded them, murmurs of discontent spreading.

Gabe lunged forward, clutching the stunned cultist by the throat and pinning him against a rock wall. “You dare question a direct order from Malthrax the Undying? I will have you executed for treason!”

“I think this one’s a paladin,” another said, poking Mardagan in the ribs with a spear just hard enough to draw blood. The paladin bristled, glaring at the cultist an instant before Calvey’s outstretched hand slapped him hard across the face.

“Head down, prisoner!” She stepped between Mardagan and the cultist to defuse the situation.

Gabe released the lead cultist’s throat, shoving him away in a surprising display of strength for a man his age. “Step aside, or answer to Malthrax for delaying his agents. I shall not warn you again.”

As one, the cultists stepped back, watching the procession as Gabe led his group into the orange maw of the cave’s entrance.

The cavern opened into a chamber, bathed in the rivers of fire that surrounded a pair of central walkways. They hurried about in a frenetic dance, carrying alchemical vials, chanting incantations, and carving runes into the cavern walls. The bones of giant wyrms littered the chamber. In the central pool lay an intact dragon skeleton, blackened flesh creeping outward between its ribs as they coaxed the beast back toward life with their magic.

Calvey flinched, earning a supportive chuckle from a passing cultist. “A glorious sight, is it not, Sister? Soon, Cinderak will again rise over Northrend, scattering our enemies like leaves in the wind.”

Calvey nodded, controlling her breathing as they continued farther into the cavern, the sulfuric air burning their eyes.

“Halt!” a voice commanded.

They turned to see a figure surrounded by a shimmering protective aura. A pair of eight-foot-tall demons flanked him. Gabe recognized him: Rothin the Decaying, one of Malthrax’s most loyal and trusted generals.

“We bring sacrifices to assist with the rise of Cinderak,” Gabe said, bowing to the wizard. “A human paladin and night elf warrior, both captured near Galakrond’s Rest.”

Rothin flashed a smile of rotten and jagged teeth. “Excellent,” he hissed. “Cinderak stirs in his eternal slumber, eager to awaken. We must sacrifice them now. Bring them to the altar.”

The demons seized Mardagan and Vikstone away from Calvey by their chains and dragged them into the chamber. Rothin followed at a leisurely pace.

“And how were you able to capture two fully armored soldiers unharmed?” Rothin’s black eyes were glaring dangerously at them.

“There was a third with them,” Gabe said. “A young boy. The paladin’s son, I suspect. We captured him and they surrendered in exchange for his release.”

Rothin stared. “And what incentive would they have to continue marching to their deaths after you released the boy?”

Gabe smiled. “He’s a paladin. He gave me his word, and so is honor-bound to follow through.”

“Fools and their honor,” Rothin said as they reached a narrow crossing surrounded on both sides by a roiling lake of magma. A large stone altar rose near the center of the lake, overlooking Cinderak’s corpse. Gabe was drawn to a tome lying open upon a dais, where demons chained Vikstone and Mardagan to upright slabs. A groove in the stone channeled blood across the lake into the soon-to-be reanimated dragon.

Rothin’s fingers traced the edge of it, as though savoring the secrets within. He turned back to Gabe and Calvey, his teeth bared.

“Malthrax will be pleased.” He gestured to a nearby cultist. “Fetch the mirror. Our master should witness the moment of Cinderak’s rebirth.”

Gabe stiffened, glancing at Vikstone and Mardagan. Calvey’s hand drifted toward the concealed dagger, but a subtle shake of Gabe’s head stopped her short.

A cultist scurried forward, carrying an ornate, full-length mirror, its surface swirling with an eerie green mist and framed with blackened, twisted iron. The cultist placed it on the altar beside the tome, chanting under his breath in a forgotten tongue as he backed away. The mist cleared. An image formed within the glass—angular, skeletal features framed by a black hood, a single eye of malevolent green from within.

“Malthrax the Undying,” Rothin said, dropping to his knees and pressing his forehead to the ground, as did the pair of demons flanking him.

Gabe and Calvey must have realized, an instant too late, that they should have done the same when the lich tilted his head curiously at them. Then he looked past them, locking eyes with Vikstone, who glared back, one finger resting on the hidden release mechanism of his cuffs.

A dry, croaking laughter escaped the lich’s throat. “Kill them all.”

“Now!” Mardagan roared, but Vikstone had already triggered his cuffs and covered half the distance. He brought his gauntlet down into the lich’s face. The mirror shattered, his fist bursting through the back of the frame as he destroyed the scrying device.

Flames burst from Rothin’s hands as he came back to his feet, shrieking, “Blasphemers! Defilers!”

Calvey struck with precision, her blade flashing as it found the soft flesh of Rothin’s throat from behind. The wizard’s flames arced from his fingers up into the roof as he fell, dead before he hit the ground.

“Calvey, cover me.” Gabe darted toward the altar, which was flanked by demons.

With a quick spin, Calvey shed her attire, drew her bow, and loosed her first arrow. It struck into the chest of the larger of the two demons, followed by a second arrow, then a third.

The smaller demon leapt at Gabe, but Mardagan intercepted it, both wrestling to the ground in a flurry of gauntlets, fangs, and claws. The paladin clung to the demon’s

horn with one hand to keep its jaws from his throat as he bashed its face again and again with his armored fist.

As Gabe stole the tome from the altar, the other demon grabbed his wrist before being blasted off its feet and into the fire pool behind him by Vikstone's dropkick to the chest.

The followers surrounded them, choking the walkways. The steady stream of blood flowed from Rothin's corpse along the sacrificial grooves in the floor ... and straight into the long-dead dragon. His first breath, perhaps a trick of the light, but his next breath shook the ground beneath them.

Cinderak was awakening.

"Gotta go, gotta go, gotta go," Calvey said while Vikstone hauled the demon off Mardagan. Gabe shuffled past while clutching the book tight to his chest.

Vikstone yanked Mardagan up. "Clear them a path and do not stop running. I'll catch up."

"Catch up? What are you ... oh no," Mardagan said as Vikstone turned toward the cluster of titan-forged machinery on the cavern's far wall.

"Run!" Vikstone lowered his shoulder to plow through a pair of cultists, sending them splashing into the pools.

"Light protect us!" Mardagan charged into the pile between them and the exit, throwing bodies aside. Close behind him, Gabe crouched, holding the tome tight in one hand and his staff in the other, incanting a protection spell for Vikstone. Calvey's bow was a blur, trying to slow the pursuing demons. One demon had emerged unharmed from the fire.

In the central pool, Cinderak stretched his claws for the first time in centuries, his low growl shaking the floor beneath them.

The heat from the surrounding magma burned Vikstone's lungs as he drove himself into the control panel, the warm blue of Gabe's protective magic shielding him at the moment of impact. With a thunderous crash of sparks and metal, Vikstone broke through the front of the panel.

They unleashed bolts of shadow at Mardagan, but the paladin consecrated the ground beneath each step, golden fire spreading where his boots struck stone. The

shadow magic broke against it like waves on a seawall. He never slowed, throwing enemies off the walkway as he pushed forward.

Calvey called from behind him, the demons gaining ground.

A creaking of metal filled the air, followed by an explosion that shook them off their feet. Roiling magma flowed over the walkways at the back of the cavern, the mechanism that restricted its flow now destroyed. Vikstone's escape route vanished beneath the flames.

Cinderak let out a deafening roar, his enormous body rising. Cultists fled in terror as the unstable cavern came apart, boulders falling from the ceiling to crush them. A jet of molten rock erupted from the floor, engulfing several in a wave of fiery death.

Their path to the exit momentarily clear, Mardagan pulled Gabe to his feet and shoved him toward the cave mouth. The pursuing demons were plucked up in one of Cinderak's talons and stuffed into his mouth. Calvey dove into a roll to avoid a falling stalactite.

Vikstone let out a quick laugh as he watched the scene unfold, then picked his path and sprinted toward the edge of the pit.

"No, no, no," Calvey said, as Vikstone launched himself halfway across the magma and into the wall, before springing off the wall into a tight roll. His leap would come up short.

"Do not drop me!" Calvey ran toward the pit, grabbed Mardagan's wrist, and flung herself toward Vikstone. The motion swung her legs around within reach of the elf, who clasped a desperate hand around her passing ankle. The three of them landed in a breathless heap at the edge.

They stumbled through the twisting passages, pulling each other along as the ground buckled beneath them. Cinderak's roar shook the chamber, a deafening crescendo as the mountain itself collapsed onto the beast, burying him under tons of rubble. The frigid night air greeted them like an old friend as they emerged—bloody, coughing, and soot-covered—onto the snowy slopes of Dragonblight.

The cave mouth snapped shut behind them, stone teeth grinding closed. The heroes rushed back to their stashed weapons and called for their mounts as lava burst from the ground in large plumes, flowing toward them.

Moments later, they flew free into the night sky, the *Tome of Malthrax* now securely in their possession.



CHAPTER 5

GRIZZLY HILLS

Darkmoon Island

Lanterns lit the winding forest path leading down toward the arched entrance of the Darkmoon Faire. Vibrant banners lining the path rippled in the warm evening air as the companions approached a bend in the trail, revealing a sweeping view of the midway below.

Calvey bounded ahead, her tail wagging as fireworks erupted overhead, painting the fairground in brilliant colors. Carnival attractions lined the midway, with a great wooden roller coaster towering above them all. The scent of roasting meat, spiced cider, and sugary confections mingled with the crisp ocean breeze.

“We’re going to have so much fun tonight, you’ll see,” Calvey said, beaming at Vikstone, who trudged along behind her, unimpressed.

“Oh, come on,” Mardagan said, punching the night elf on the shoulder. “Gabe needs time to work on the Tome. We could use a night off. Let the kid have her fun.”

“Kid? I’m ten times your age, silly human,” Calvey shot back, before turning to Vikstone. “Besides, I totally saved you from the lava, so you owe me, Vik.”

Gabe cleared his throat, wheezing as he struggled to keep up. “Magma, actually. It doesn’t become lava until—”

“I still can’t believe you slapped me,” Mardagan said, giving Calvey a playful shove as they followed the comically oversized red arrows pointing down toward the midway.

“You were about to start a fight and blow our cover.”

“After the guy stabbed me!” Mardagan said, drawing a chuckle from Vikstone.

They passed through an archway crowned with a glowing eye that tracked their every move. Calliope music drifted through the crowd, blending with the chatter of excited voices and the laughter of children.

“Ooooh, win me a stuffed animal.” Calvey dragged Mardagan toward a strongman attraction.

The paladin hefted the mallet, testing its weight, before bringing it down, nearly blasting the bell off the top of the attraction.

“Another winner! Step right up and try your luck,” the carnie called out as Calvey selected her prize—a small plush murloc.

The others moved to the next attraction. Vikstone lingered. A plush yeti hanging from a vendor’s stall had caught his eye. His mind drifted back to his last trip to Darkmoon with Namarie and Lunara, his daughter’s little face lighting up as he won her that same toy. He placed a few coins on the counter and tucked it into his pack.

“Vik, come on.” Calvey tugged his arm.

The midway swirled around Vikstone, its festive chaos at odds with the storm in his mind. Laughter rang out all around from happy families. A young elven girl gasped as her balloon string slipped free. His hand shot out, snagging the string and bringing it back down to her.

She clapped with glee as Vikstone knelt, tying the string to her wrist so it wouldn’t fly away again. “Thank you, mister.”

The girl’s mother smiled and led her toward the carousel. Vikstone watched them go, flashes of past visits with Lunara flooding back. The way she’d always hold her hands up high on the rollercoaster, except for the “scary parts.” The sound of her giggle. The way her eyes lit up when he won her a prize.

And then he heard it—the low roar of a crowd punctuated by the sharp crack of a fist meeting flesh.

He pushed his way through the crowd toward a purple tent—the Darkmoon Deathmatch Pit. A towering orc barker stood before the cage entrance inside, calling out to the crowd as mayhem unfolded within.

“And we’re underway! Remember the rules: No weapons, no magic, just good old-fashioned violence. Whoever opens the chest in the center of the ring claims tonight’s big prize! Jump in any time, folks, but if you exit the cage by any means, you are out of the fight.”

Vikstone’s lips curled into a slow, dangerous smile as he watched the battle unfold. Fighters of all shapes and sizes traded savage blows in a free-for-all. A pair of goblins clung to a troll’s back, bludgeoning his face with their tiny fists as they dragged him to the ground.

At the center of the ring, straddling the treasure chest, a tauren warrior waited. Bone rings banded his remaining horn; the other had been snapped to a jagged stump. His patchy grey fur revealed scars that ran down his chest and arms like forked lightning. With a deafening roar, the tauren tossed a flailing gnome clear over the cage and into the stands.

“Vikstone. Oh, absolutely not.” Calvey turned to Mardagan for help, only to find the paladin removing his sword belt.

Mardagan handed his greatsword to the ogre attendant. “Oh, this will be fun.”

“We were supposed to be having fun tonight,” Calvey said, looking back at Gabe, who simply shrugged. Exasperated, she sighed and handed over her bow. “Fine. But if we’re doing this, we better win. So, what’s our plan? Wait, where’s Vikstone?”

Vikstone ran in and launched himself off the top of the cage. He landed on the tauren’s back, clinging to its horns as the brute tried to buck him off. Mardagan laughed, dropping his shoulder to break the cage’s gate open as he threw himself headlong into the fray, a flustered Calvey close behind.

The barker called out, “Three new challengers have entered the cage. We’ve got five-to-one on the paladin, ten-to-one on the others. Get those bets in!”

Gabe hobbled forward to thrust a heavy pouch of gold into the barker’s hands. “All of it on the draenei woman.”

Inside the cage, Calvey rushed toward the rampaging tauren that Vikstone was strangling with his legs, clinging to the beast’s horns for leverage. The tauren swung wildly, clipping Calvey on the shoulder. The blow flipped her end over end. She landed face down in the muck in front of the chest, unmoving.

“Oooh, tough break,” the barker snickered. Gabe smiled.

Mardagan bulldozed through the chaos, grabbing smaller foes and flinging them over the top of the cage like sacks of grain.

“Catch me!” a goblin yelled mid-air, moments before slamming into the bleachers, uncaught.

Meanwhile, Vikstone tightened his leg hold, cutting off blood to the beast’s brain. The tauren punched up at him, thrashing, then clamped powerful hands around Vikstone’s ankle, prying him free.

“This is gonna be bad,” Vikstone said as the tauren hurled him into the side of the cage.

As chaos played out all around, Calvey slowly extended one hand toward the chest in the center of the ring, her movements patient and barely perceptible. Still playing dead, she worked at the knots sealing the chest.

The other combatants, realizing Mardagan and Vikstone were the major threats, piled on them in a flailing mess of limbs.

Calvey dropped her hand as an orc shaman made a run for the chest—only for a troll to tackle him mid-stride. They both went sprawling into the mud. With a quiet chuckle, the hunter went back to work.

“Hey, she’s opening the ch—” a goblin bystander started to yell before Gabe drove his staff down onto his stubby green foot.

“Terribly sorry,” Gabe said, leaning heavily on the goblin as if he’d stumbled, completely blocking his view of the action.

The tauren, snorting furiously, lowered its head at the pile of bodies—but froze at the blaring of whistles. The combatants untangled themselves, eyes snapping to the center of the ring. A grinning, mud-smeared Calvey stood in front of the open chest.

“So, I win, right?”

The bruised combatants groaned.

“Oooh, tough break,” Gabe said, extending a hand to the barker, who grumbled under his breath while counting out the priest’s winnings.

Ogre bouncers stormed the ring, breaking up the fights and escorting the winner out with her spoils. Vikstone and Mardagan dragged themselves from the heap and staggered out after Calvey.

“Did we win?” Mardagan’s left eye was purple and swollen nearly shut.

Outside the tent, Calvey threw open her prize chest, scooping out piles of gold and a miniature silver dagger trinket, which she pinned on her lapel with pride. Next to her, Gabe counted his winnings, his sack of gold now noticeably heavier.

Vikstone and Mardagan exchanged a quick look.

“Wait a minute,” Mardagan said, casting healing spells on himself and Vikstone. “How come the two people who got wrecked are the only ones who came away empty-handed?”

Calvey smirked. “Fight smarter, not harder, my dear. I do appreciate you boys creating a diversion for me, though.”

Vikstone chuckled, clutching his ribs as Mardagan’s healing magic flowed through him. The warrior’s rage had finally dissipated, burned out in the cage. “Yeah, a diversion. That was definitely our plan all along.”

As they wandered back onto the midway, Mardagan gnawing a turkey leg, Vikstone limping, Calvey gasped and pointed to a sign: *Sayge - Fortune-Teller*.

“Oooh, the fortune-teller. Come on, let’s go.” Calvey grabbed Vikstone’s arm and dragged him along.

The path ended at a purple-and-green tent, sewn with stars. Inside, a gnoll sat hunched over a crystal ball. His eyes flickered over each of them as they entered—then went wide upon seeing Vikstone.

“You,” Sayge rasped. “Come, sit. I sense a dark cloud surrounding you.”

“Not interested,” Vikstone said, turning to leave.

“The night lily is trapped in emerald slumber.”

Vikstone froze. The night lily was Namarie’s favorite flower, a sprig of which she always wore in her hair.

“What did you just say?”

The gnoll gestured to the chair, one ear swiveling toward something only he could hear. “I hear her cries ... and there’s another. Lost, but not yet gone.”

Vikstone dropped into the chair. “My wife and daughter. Where are they?”

Sayge closed his eyes, exhaling a long, slow breath as he placed his hands over the crystal ball. Green mist churned like a storm within the glass.

“I see a journey into a realm of nightmare ... betrayal ... death ... so much death ... oh no, no, no, no.”

Vikstone leaned in. “Tell me what you see.”

The swirling fog coalesced into a green light. The sky fractured by a great rift above a throne of petrified roots, blackened vines slithering across its surface. Before it stood a tall figure, facing away.

Sayge trembled. “He walks in the shadow of the Lich King, fueled by the madness of the Old Gods. You must abandon your quest before all is lost. Before he—”

The figure turned. A single green eye glowed from beneath its hood—Malthrax. A chill shot through Vikstone as he locked gazes with the lich. The monster who had taken everything from him.

The crystal ball exploded. Sayge stepped back, shielding his face from the shards.

“You have to leave,” the fortune-teller said, shoving them toward the exit.

Vikstone planted his feet. “Where are my wife and daughter?”

Sayge backed away, pulling the tent flap between them. “Lost in the Emerald Garden ... as will you be, if you continue on your course. Now begone and never return.”

Amberpine Lodge, Grizzly Hills

The giant redwoods of Grizzly Hills stretched skyward as Vikstone weaved his way through the forest on the back of Veridian. Mardagan followed close behind on Al’ar. At the rear of the pack, and gaining, Calvey cackled as she surged past Mardagan astride a great eagle. Gabe clung to her waist, wide-eyed and terrified, as they went into a barrel roll to avoid an overhanging branch.

They soared over the path toward Amberpine Lodge, a sturdy, timber-framed outpost perched on a cliff. Gabe had insisted on Amberpine—Hierophant Thayreen, stationed there, was one of the few scholars capable of assisting with the Tome’s ancient vrykul dialect.

Below, a logging camp sat beside the river as it wound southward toward Venture Bay. Smoke snaked upward from a chimney, carrying the scent of roasting meat through

the crisp autumn air. Unlike much of Northrend, Grizzly Hills was largely free of snow, its lower elevation providing natural shelter from the elements.

Vikstone descended. Calvey zipped past him, beating him to the landing zone. “I win!” Calvey laughed as Gabe stumbled off the giant eagle in his haste to touch solid ground. “And in distant third place, it’s the paladin.”

Vikstone raised a brow. “I didn’t know we were racing.”

“Wait, we were racing?” Mardagan said, dismounting.

“We’re always racing, and you always lose.” Calvey gave her eagle a quick kiss on the beak before dismissing her.

“It’s called guarding the rear.”

Once his legs stopped shaking, Gabe examined a pair of furbolg totems flanking the lodge’s entrance. Intricate carvings of bear and wolf faces adorned the ornamental poles, a reminder of an alliance the furbolgs once shared with the other denizens of Grizzly Hills. Before corruption had taken root.

Mardagan led the group into the bustling main room of the lodge, where adventurers and trappers shared exaggerated tales of their exploits over tankards of ale. The central hearth threw enough heat to fog the windows, and the whole room smelled of woodsmoke and meat. A goblin waitress hurried past carrying a roast boar. “Coming through,” she called out as Mardagan snatched a small potato off her tray and popped it into his mouth.

A familiar smell cut through the roasting meat and hearth smoke—rich, dark, unmistakable. Calvey stopped mid-step, her nose twitching. “Is that ... black lotus?”

“Can’t be,” Mardagan said, chewing his stolen potato. “Only one dwarf in Azeroth is mad enough to smoke black lotus in a pipe.”

“Well, if it ain’t the heroes of Westguard Keep,” a gruff voice said from the corner. Wopak, a stout dwarven warrior with a grey braided beard, sat with a battered iron pipe clenched between his teeth, a curl of dark, fragrant smoke drifting above him. His chain armor was torn, with bandages covering both arms and a fresh claw mark across his face.

“Wopak!” Calvey squealed, running over to wrap the dwarf in a hug. “I haven’t seen you since—I don’t even know how long.”

“Ye haven’t aged a lick, lassie,” Wopak said, ruffling her hair. The dwarf’s smile faded when he saw Vikstone approaching.

“I heard.” Wopak pulled himself to his feet with a pained grunt to clasp forearms with his old friend. “And when the time comes to march against the moldy bastard who done this to Namarie and yer little one, I’ll be right there beside ye.”

“As will we all,” Mardagan said, clapping the dwarf hard on the back and eliciting a wince of pain. Vikstone nodded his thanks as Calvey helped Wopak back to his seat.

“Who did this to you?” Her eyes narrowed.

“Karg Bloodfury.” Wopak settled back into his chair with a grunt as Mardagan flagged down the waitress for drinks.

Vikstone stiffened. “Karg is here?”

“Aye, and he brought friends. The four-legged kind. Dunno how he’s doing it. Wolves, dozens of ’em. Ferocious like I ain’t never seen. The caravan I was guarding got hit just outside Silverbrook. I fought till there was no one left to fight for, but we never had a chance. And all the while, Karg is pacing back and forth on the ridge above, barking out orders.”

Mardagan glanced at Vikstone. The table went quiet.

“Namarie and I crossed blades with Karg at Honor Hold,” Vikstone said quietly. “More than once. We lost good people.” He paused. “He doesn’t fight for the Horde. He fights for himself. The Horde just happens to point him at things they want dead.”

“Ye almost sound like ye respect him.”

Vikstone didn’t answer.

“What were you transporting?” Mardagan said.

“Weapons from Stormwind for Wyrrest Tower. Three big crates of ’em. I’m honor-bound to recover the cargo they hired me to protect and bring Karg to justice. Soon as I’m healed up, I’m taking up the chase.”

Calvey accepted the mug of ale from the waitress. “Sounds like fun. I’m in.”

As the others settled in around the table, Gabe hobbled over to Wopak. As the lead healer in their old adventuring crew, the priest had healed this particular group of friends more times than he could count, often single-handedly keeping them upright during botched raids. “Let me heal you.”

“No worries, I got it.” Mardagan waved Gabe away, touching the dwarf on the arm. The paladin’s sapphire pendant pulsed with a deep blue glow, the magical energy flowing down his arm and enveloping Wopak.

Wopak gasped in sharp pain as his wounds all sealed, leaving behind only faint silver scars. Gabe moved back to his seat, his brow furrowed. Mardagan had always been a competent healer, but never capable of such a casual display of healing prowess. The priest’s eyes followed the pendant as Mardagan slipped it beneath his armor.

“We’ll join you,” Vikstone said. “You’ll get your crates back, and I’ll get to settle some unfinished business with Karg.”

Wopak glanced around the table at familiar faces, eyes bright. He raised his mug high, the others following suit. “To old friends and new adventures. Huzzah!”

Silverbrook, Grizzly Hills

The covered wagon creaked as it trundled along the forest trail, pulled by a pair of unenthusiastic old draft horses. A crisp autumn breeze carried upon it the scent of pine and wild goldclover, but for all the beauty around them, the group rode in uneasy silence.

Vikstone sat on the wagon bench beside Wopak, both of them cloaked in hooded robes to conceal their armor and weapons. A heavy crossbow lay across the dwarf’s lap, hidden beneath a ragged blanket. Mardagan crouched in the back, greatsword at the ready.

Gabe had stayed behind at Amberpine Lodge, working with Hierophant Thayreen to translate the stolen Tome of Malthrax. Above them, Calvey watched the forest below on her eagle.

As they approached a rickety bridge spanning a small creek, Wopak readied his crossbow. “Right up ahead is where they hit us. Ready yerselves, boys.”

Vikstone fought to focus. Had Gabe found something yet? The uncertainty gnawed at him.

A nudge from behind. Mardagan had been talking to him. “Vik, you good?” Vikstone nodded, his hand dropping to the hilt of his axe.

“I’m not seeing anything,” Wopak said, guiding the wagon across the small bridge where his previous caravan had been ambushed.

Mardagan poked his head out from the back of the carriage, scoping out their surroundings. “So, what now?”

Wopak steered the horses right at a fork in the road, the trail to Silverbrook marked with skull-and-crossbones signs. A rusted gibbet hung from a tree, skeletal remains of a thief within.

“Now, we shake this village till the stolen crates fall out,” Wopak said. “Nothing to it.”

Loggers on both sides of the trail stopped their work, leaning on their axes as they eyed the approaching wagon. The main road into the village forked into a loop lined with timber-framed cabins and a large central mead hall. Archers peered down from a pair of tall wooden watchtowers as Wopak pulled the wagon to a stop near the mead hall’s bulkhead cellar door.

“Watch yerselves. I got a bad feeling about this place,” the dwarf said, casting off his cloak and slinging his warhammer over his shoulder as he hopped down from the wagon. Mardagan and Vikstone followed, the armed trio an imposing sight as they walked toward the hall.

Mardagan put a hand on Wopak’s shoulder as they approached the front door. “A little diplomacy might go a long way in a situation like this. If you’d like, I can ...”

Wopak rolled his shoulders, cracking his neck. “I’m nothing if not diplomatic.” He drove his boot into the center of the door, bursting it open.

“Now, *which* one of you mangy curs has me crates?!”

The bouncer, a bear of a man standing as tall as Mardagan and dressed in animal skins, pushed off his stool near the door to block their passage. “We’re closed,” he said, ignoring the dwarf and locking his intense gaze on the paladin behind him.

Mardagan looked around at the bustling mead hall, its tables packed with rowdy patrons, all of them now looking toward the door. “And when do you reopen?”

“For outsiders? Never,” the bouncer said, glaring back at him.

“We ain’t leaving without what was taken from us,” Wopak said, slinging his hammer down off his shoulder. “Our wagon was hit just outside Silverbrook three days ago. Give up them who done it, and no blood need be spilled today.”

Vikstone dropped a hand to the haft of his axe as a dozen villagers slowly stood from their seats to reinforce the bouncer. Infernos roared to life, hungry flames curling along its blade. Vikstone stepped forward to guard Mardagan's right flank while Wopak squared off against villagers approaching from the left.

A sharp whistle stopped the locals in their tracks, all turning toward a hooded figure at the end of the bar. The grizzled old trapper, Garrik, pulled back his hood to reveal piercing yellow eyes and a twisted scar running down the left side of his face and through his lip.

"Easy now, boys," he said, his eyes gleaming in the firelight. "It seems our new friends have questions. By all means, let's answer them."

With a low growl, the bouncer stepped back from Mardagan, both still eyeing each other as the trio made their way to the bar, trappers glaring at them from all sides.



Calvey crouched low as she moved alongside the log cabins, her keen draenei ears twitching at every sound. She glanced up at the silhouettes of the watchtowers, ensuring the coast was clear, before darting across the street toward a cluster of bushes surrounding the mead hall's padlocked bulkhead.

Wopak's gruff voice as he kicked open the front door was Calvey's signal to act. She snatched a wavy metal lockpick from her kit and raked it over the padlock's tumblers, popping it open as easily as turning a doorknob. The mechanism clicked. She smirked and let the bulkhead door creak open just enough to slip inside.

The cellar was cool and damp, the air thick with the sweet scent of aging mead barrels. A single lantern sat near the stairs. Rows of shelves stocked with provisions lined the walls. With her bow at the ready, Calvey slipped between the shelves, keeping to the shadows.

At the far end of the cellar, three large wooden crates caught Calvey's eye. She exhaled a long breath to steady herself as she traced her hand over the Stormwind crest burned into the wood. They'd found their thieves ... which meant her friends were likely walking into a trap.

Shouts echoed down from above, alongside the sound of chairs scraping across the floor.

Moving fast, Calvey heaved the crates onto a nearby sledge, the rope cutting into her hands as she hauled the heavy cargo toward the bulkhead door.

As she passed the central row of shelves, she froze in her tracks. A side room contained a large blood-stained prison cell. Multiple sets of rusty shackles hung from the wall, and humanoid bones littered the floor.

“Are you lost, little girl?”

Calvey whirled around to see a trapper standing between her and the exit. He smiled, showing too many teeth as he closed in, axe in hand.

“Wait, I can explain. Your boss sent me to check the umm ... oh, screw it.” Calvey raised her bow and drove a pair of arrows into his chest.

The man snarled, tearing the arrows free like a minor nuisance. Calvey’s eyes went wide as he began to transform. His body convulsed, bones cracking with sickening pops as his frame contorted unnaturally. Coarse grey fur erupted from his skin as his face elongated into a bestial snout, sharp teeth gleaming beneath feral eyes.

“Oh, come on!” Calvey dove into a quick roll to narrowly avoid a swipe. She bolted for the weapon crate, but the beast was faster. The impact shook the draenei off her feet as the werewolf pounced into her, jaws snapping inches from her face. Pinned beneath, she looked around for anything that could harm it.

It reared back, then lunged forward for the killing blow, just as Calvey tore the miniature silver dagger she’d won at Darkmoon from her lapel and buried it in the creature’s eye. With a sharp grunt, she struck the hilt with her palm. The dagger crunched into its eye, the werewolf’s growl twisting into a pained gurgle. Its body spasmed once, then collapsed, its dead weight pinning her to the floor.



Wopak leaned against the bar, his armored fingers drumming on the counter. Firelight from the hearth flickered across the trapper’s weathered face.

“Karg Bloodfury,” Wopak said bluntly. “He took something that ain’t his, and I aim to take it back. Where is he?”

“With the furbolgs at Grizzlemaw. Last I heard, anyway.” Garrik sized them up. “Who sent ya?”

Vikstone winced as the dwarf proudly declared, “No one sent us. I’m honor-bound to retrieve those crates. And so, I shall.”

“Honor.” Garrik rose from his seat and called out to the room. “You hear that, boys? The dwarf and his friends came here alone, out of a sense of honor.”

Vikstone looked at the crowd as laughter broke out, counting more than twenty, all of whom looked like they’d seen a scrap or two. He exchanged a quick glance with Mardagan, who seemed to be doing a similar calculation.

“I’ll just need to take a quick look around, and we’ll be on our way,” Wopak said.

“Yeah, that ain’t gonna happen,” Garrik said as they all got to their feet. The bouncer at the front door grunted as he lifted a heavy wooden bar and slammed it into place.

Vikstone’s hand dropped to the haft of Infernos, and Mardagan unsheathed his greatsword in a slow, deliberate motion, the scrape of metal on leather ringing in the tense silence. “Last warning,” the paladin said. “You’re making a terrible mistake. You have no idea who we are.”

“Don’t know and don’t care.” Garrik’s lips curled into something too wide to be called a smile. A crack echoed through the mead hall as his spine contorted, his ribs expanding with a series of pops. His fingers twisted, his skin splitting apart as thick grey fur forced its way through.

All around them, the others transformed. Vikstone looked around the room for exits and, finding none, crouched into a battle stance as the creatures howled and rushed to attack.

Tankards fell to the floor as Mardagan hurled a table into the wolfmen. A werewolf leapt over the table, lunging at him with drool dripping from its slaving jaws. Wopak swatted it out of the air and into the hearth, where its fur ignited.

Vikstone buried his axe in one wolfman and charged into the pack as Mardagan and Wopak fought back-to-back behind him. The paladin cut them down mid-transformation while Wopak’s warhammer sent broken bodies flying. For a moment, they were winning.

The mangled werewolf lay still for a moment, then its arm twitched. It reached up to seize its own contorted head and, with an awful, wet crunch, twisted. The neck bones reset with a pop. Its eyes flicked open, locking onto Wopak as it sprang back to its feet.

“By the gods,” Wopak said, unaware of Garrik clearing the bar toward his unprotected back.

The werewolf snapped backward as Calvey’s arrow punched through it, followed by another.

“This way!” Calvey yelled from the door, raising her bow to release another arrow.

“To Calvey!” Vikstone cried, his flaming axe sweeping a path as they fought their way across the main room.

Mardagan reached the cellar door and hurried the others through before slamming it shut, throwing himself against it as the pack pounded from the other side.

“Go. I’ll buy you time,” he said, his muscles straining.

Wopak looked around, then grinned wide as he found what he was looking for. “When I say run, you best be running, lad.” He broke a keg of oil with his weapon, the fluid coating the floor.

Calvey moved to the bulkhead door, exchanging arrows with the guards in the two watchtowers. “We gotta go!” She ducked behind the door frame as an arrow struck.

Vikstone extinguished Infernos and moved across the oil-slick floor and back up the stairs to help Mardagan in his losing battle against the door. Wopak raised his crossbow toward the lantern hanging at the base of the stairs.

“Now! Run, run, run!”

Vikstone and Mardagan released the door, which flew open immediately. A gang of werewolves was hot on their heels as they jumped down the stairs and sprinted across the cellar. Wopak fired a crossbow bolt, passing between them and shattering the lantern. The cellar went white.

As the others walked out, coughing and patting out flames on their clothes, Calvey hopped onto the wagon’s bench. She kicked the horses into action, setting the wagon rolling. “Hya!”

Mardagan grabbed Wopak by the scruff of the neck, tossing him up into the moving wagon as flaming werewolves poured out of the cellar. His axe roaring back to life,

Vikstone slashed diagonally, nearly decapitating the first as he tried to buy time for the slower-moving paladin to board the wagon.

An arrow from above tore through Vikstone's left bicep. He nearly dropped his axe as the impact spun him around. With a loud whistle, he called to Stormclaw, who bounded around the corner, vaulting over a pair of werewolves as they closed on Vikstone. Catching the great cat's saddle with his good arm, he swung himself up onto it, jaws closing on empty air where his legs had been a half-second before.

Mardagan took the reins as Wopak scrambled into the back of the wagon to help Calvey fend off the pursuing wolves. The dwarf cackled as he saw the stolen crates neatly stacked in the back. "Calvey, ye found 'em!"

"A little help?" Calvey said, firing an arrow into the throat of a werewolf. Wopak took up his crossbow, letting a bolt fly at the nearest of the seven in pursuit.

Stormclaw led the werewolves on a frantic chase around the village loop, buying time for the wagon to cross the bridge. She threw up clumps of dirt as they collided in pursuit.

Veering down a side path before the bridge, Stormclaw led the wolves along the riverbank and away from the crossing. Vikstone clung to the cat's neck as she arced away, then sharply turned toward the river, the opposite bank nearly forty feet away.

Stormclaw launched herself into the air, time seeming to slow as they sailed above the water, landing at the edge of the bank. Her rear legs hitting water, the cat clawed her way onto dry ground, looking back indignantly at the river. The wolves skidded to a stop on the opposite bank, howling in frustration.

Wopak let out a loud cheer as he saw Vikstone and Stormclaw come into view on the road behind them. The last of the wolves broke off pursuit.

"Just like I told ya." Wopak helped the injured Vikstone into the wagon. "Nothing to it."

Amberpine Lodge, Grizzly Hills

The fire in the lodge's hearth crackled, but Vikstone couldn't shake a chill as he leaned against the wooden table, eyes locked on the leather-bound journal Gabe had set before him.

Firelight flickered across the pages, shadows pooling in the faded text that was still legible to those who knew the vrykul tongue.

“Hierophant Thayreen helped me in the translation,” Gabe said, flipping a page. “Fascinating, really. Malthrax wrote in an ancient form of Vrykul that’s quite different from the modern tongue. For instance, the letter we now know as F was originally—”

Vikstone exhaled sharply, fingers drumming against the table.

“Right, of course.” Gabe spun the book toward Vikstone and Calvey. “We’ve only begun the translation, but we found one entry you need to see.”



*The whispers have led me here, to the corpse of Vordrassil. Its roots twist in agony, strangled by the power below. The druids claim the tree was sick ... that they culled it to prevent the rot from spreading. **Fools.***

*There was no sickness, no rot, only power. A power they feared. A power they could not control. Beneath the broken husk of this fallen giant lies the Shard of Yogg-Saron, a fragment of the old world. A remnant of a being beyond flesh and time. It is written that the shard does not merely destroy. **It dreams.** And those who stray too near are swallowed whole, lost in an endless nightmare.*

I must have it.

*The Lich King bestowed power upon me at the cost of freedom. His will is a noose around my neck, his commands shackling my fate in iron. I didn’t claw my way through the dark arts, sacrificing everything, only to be treated as a servant. True power is not given. **It is taken.***

This shard—this soulstone—is my key to ascension. Lesser beings call it a cursed prison, an echo of a dead god’s madness. They fear what they cannot master. Once I bend the nightmare to my will, the shard will be mine to command.

The others have grown suspicious. I see it in their eyes, in the hushed conversations that cease when I enter a room. They fear me, as well they should. After my ascension, I will return and claim the Maw of Neltharion as my own, bending them all to my cause. The vrykul who left me as a child to freeze to death on a mountain for being born ‘imperfect’ will die screaming, consumed by soulfire.

*I fear Lysandra may be lost to me, her memory a fading echo, growing fainter with each passing day. I know not whether her soul has already passed beyond the veil or is somehow lost in the wild, searching for home. If the shard can entomb a soul, perhaps it can also **find one**. And if it can find her, I can **bring her back**.*

I will not fail her again, no matter the cost. I will reach into the abyss and take back what was stolen from me. If I must surrender my own soul to the shard in order to bring her home, that is a price I will eagerly pay.

And if the nightmare proves stronger? Azeroth will tremble at the monster I become.



“And you know of this shard?” Vikstone slid the book back across the table.

“Regrettably.” Gabe sighed. “The Mad God was long ago imprisoned in Ulduar by the titans, but its tendrils stretch across Northrend, corrupting everything they touch. It was the focus of my research at Wyrmmrest. If Malthrax claimed this artifact, he may pose a greater threat than even the Lich King.”

Vikstone rose, wincing as he flexed his left arm. Gabe had healed the worst of the arrow wound, but his scarred bicep still burned. “We need to investigate Vordrassil. Now.”

“In the morning, Vik.” Gabe flipped open the tome, staring at the scrawled Vrykul text. “The others need rest. You need rest. And I have more work to do before I turn in for the night.”

Vikstone grumbled but settled back onto the bench, checking each potion flask on his belt and holding them to the firelight one at a time. Nearby, Calvey sat cross-legged on the floor by the hearth, fletching arrows from a bundle of hawk feathers. She hummed softly as she worked, trimming each feather with care. Wopak sat at the bar with his chain armor spread across the counter, threading wire through the torn links with thick fingers.

Mardagan returned from the bar carrying a tray piled with food and a fresh round of drinks, setting tankards in front of each of them. He dropped onto the bench beside Vikstone and immediately began working through a plate of roast boar.

Wopak watched with undisguised horror. “Does he even chew, or does it just go straight down like a crocolisk?”

“I’ve been studying his technique for years,” Calvey said, eyes on her fletching. “I believe the jaw is decorative.”

“A warrior’s body is a furnace,” Mardagan said through a mouthful. “You have to feed the furnace.”

“A furnace has an exhaust, and we’re downwind,” Wopak said, scooting his chair away.

Mardagan ignored them, pulling his breastplate onto the table and polishing it with a clean rag between bites. The man always polished his armor before a fight, the way a priest might pray. Which, Vikstone supposed, it was.

“So, we’re walking into a dead World Tree infested with corrupted furbolgs, hunting for an artifact of the Mad God, with a Horde warlord and his wolf pack sitting on top of it all.” Mardagan took a long drink. “Just another Tuesday.”

“It’s Thursday,” Gabe said without looking up from the Tome.

“It’s a figure of—never mind.”

Calvey held an arrow up to the light, testing the fletching with a gentle blow. “What happens if Malthrax already has the shard?”

The table went quiet. Vikstone’s hand paused on a flask.

“Then we take it from him,” he said.

Wopak snorted from the bar. “Aye, because stealing artifacts from a fifteen-thousand-year-old lich is famously easy.”

Gabe peered over the Tome at his companions and smiled faintly before returning to his translation. “Get some rest, all of you. Tomorrow will be a long day.”

Calvey rested her hand on Gabe’s shoulder. “You need rest, too.”

“In time.” He shifted the lantern to illuminate the tome, his eyes already back on the text before Calvey’s hand had left his shoulder. “Besides,” he murmured, almost to himself. “When else does a village priest get to wrestle with a dialect the Kirin Tor couldn’t crack?”

He fell quiet, turning a page. When he spoke again, the wonder was gone.

“Malthrax was born during the reign of King Ymiron, when children bearing markers of the Curse of Flesh were routinely executed.”

“Their own children? Why would they do such a thing?”

“Ymiron believed these ‘aberrant’ children were proof that the titans had forsaken the vrykul. Parents were ordered to kill their own young or face execution themselves.”

Calvey gasped. “And Malthrax survived?”

“Somehow.” Gabe looked up. “Rejected by his tribe. Left to die for being born imperfect. The lich’s rage has no bottom, Calvey. He won’t stop until all of Northrend suffers, as he once did.”

Grizzlemaw, Grizzly Hills

The World Tree loomed over them, its gnarled roots twisted and malformed. The druids had called it Andrassil once—Crown of the Snow—before its roots pierced something they should never have touched. They felled it and gave it a new name. Vordrassil, the Broken Crown.

What remained was a skeletal husk, bark blackened and split with age, the interior hollowed out and defiled. The stench of damp rot hung thick in the air, laced with something sharper beneath it that Vikstone couldn’t name but felt in his bones. Night elves were born in the shadow of World Trees. He knew what one was supposed to feel like. Something was wrong about this place.

The company approached with weapons drawn, picking their way through the underbrush. Above them, crude rope bridges and wooden walkways spiraled up the vast interior of the tree, and downward into darkness. The furbolgs had turned the husk of Vordrassil into their stronghold, nailing barricades across the trunk’s natural hollows, lashing platforms to branches that should have been too dead to hold weight. Pairs of red-glowing eyes blinked open in the dark, tracking their every move.

Mardagan ran a hand over a spiraling pattern etched into the bark. The twisting runes glowed faintly green, as though something deep within the wood still lived. He pulled his hand back.

“These markings ...” Mardagan said, glancing toward Vikstone. “These must be sigils of Yogg-Saron, the Mad God.”

“Malthrax was here. I can feel it,” Vikstone said, stretching out a cramp in his arm. “According to the journal, the shard was buried in the roots below ... or once had been, if Malthrax was able to recover it.”

Wopak scowled as he took in their surroundings. “Old gods, mad gods, dead gods—don’t much care whose tree it was. Where’s the orc?”

They approached the abandoned barricade in front of the tree’s main entrance. “Where are they all?” Calvey asked.

A low, rumbling chorus echoed through the tree. The shadows around them shifted, furbolgs emerging from hiding. They towered over Mardagan—the maws and claws of grizzly bears, but their eyes burned with the same green sickness that pulsed in the runes. Nearly a dozen came forward as one.

“Inside, go.” Calvey hopped up onto the wooden barrier, her bow a blur. The others pushed deeper into the dead World Tree as she covered their retreat.

They fought down the spiraling ramp, and the furbolgs drove them deeper with every step. Mardagan’s shield rang against the walls as he bashed them clear. Vikstone cut a path, but for every one that fell back, two more dropped from the platforms above or clambered over the barricades behind them. They weren’t defending their home.

“They’re herding us down!” Wopak called as three more furbolgs sealed the upward ramp behind them.

Vikstone willed Infernos to life and lit their way deeper. “This way, come on.”

A low grunt was Vikstone’s only warning before Karg Bloodfury came from the shadows.

The orc’s tusks had been sharpened to a razor’s edge, serrated metal spikes protruding from his heavy leather armor.

“Vikstone!” Karg smashed into the stunned elf, driving them both through the railing and into the darkness. Infernos fell end over end behind them.

As they tumbled, Karg clamped a hand around Vikstone’s neck, yanking him closer, tusks aimed at his face. Vikstone braced his forearm against the orc’s throat, stealing a glance downward moments before impact.

Darkness swallowed them as they fell through damp earth and splintered roots, breaking into an underground chamber. Something deeper than sound pulsed through

the stone beneath him, a thrumming that pressed against his thoughts, searching for a way in.

His vision blurred. The world tilted. He couldn't remember which direction was up, only that the earth was humming against his back, and his mouth tasted of blood and wet soil. He forced his eyes open at the sound of Karg grunting nearby. Haloed in ethereal light, Namarie looked down on him as he gasped for air.

"Vikstone, you have to move," Namarie said, leaning closer, her violet eyes narrowing. "You have to move right now. Wake up!"

He reached for her face. His hand closed on nothing.

Coughing, Vikstone rolled to the side an instant before Karg's warhammer cratered the stone beside his skull. The orc had fared no better, one tusk broken, blood sheeting down his face from a gash in his forehead. He was thinner than Vikstone remembered, armor hanging loose, eyes sunken but sharp.

Vikstone crawled to his knees, reached for the potion flasks on his belt—shattered. "Fantastic," he muttered, gripping the stone table to haul himself up. His axe hung tangled in the roots, fifteen feet above.

Karg tore his weapon free from the muck, his shoulders heaving. His bloodied face twisted into a glare. Vikstone scanned the chamber for weapons. Green runes glowed in the walls. No exit but the roots above. He staggered around the stone table, trying to keep it between them, while he shook out the cobwebs and regained his wits.

"I've been searching for you for years," Karg wheezed, pulverizing the table with a downward hammer strike. "The Butcher of Honor Hold."

The accusation caught Vikstone mid-step. The hammer came for his neck, and he threw himself aside at the last instant.

"You killed those prisoners!" Karg brought his hammer around for another strike. Vikstone froze. Dying screams in his head, the scent of burning flesh. The delay cost him, Karg's next hammer swipe clipping him on the shoulder. His left arm went dead from the elbow down.

"They were fel corrupted. Transforming," Vikstone said, shuffling backward. "I had no choice."

“All of them?” Karg stalked toward him. “You examined every last one? Did you check the boy? Did you check *my son* before burning him alive?”

Vikstone’s vision flashed to the caged prisoners at Honor Hold. Iron bars. Green fire. And a young orc staring defiantly at him as he threw the torch.

Karg’s son.

“I didn’t know. I swear, I didn’t know,” Vikstone said, backpedaling as the orc moved forward, his face a mask of blood and rage.

“You killed my boy!” Karg swept his hammer around in a diagonal smash that Vikstone flipped backward to avoid, slamming into the wall. Vikstone kept the table’s rubble between them, his dead arm swinging loose at his side.

Karg grunted, extracting his weapon from the wall. Vikstone hurried to the far end of the chamber, spotting Infernos in the roots above. Karg rushed forward. Vikstone met him in the center—and when the orc swung his warhammer in a horizontal arc, Vikstone leapt clear over it, planting one foot on Karg’s shoulder and launching himself upward.

His fingers scraped the haft of Infernos. Just short. He felt gravity reclaim him, felt the dead certainty of falling back into range of that hammer. Vikstone snarled, willing the axe into his hand. To his surprise, it obeyed. Infernos tore through the roots and flew into his grip as he landed in a crouch.

“Why won’t you die?” Karg continued his assault, tears streaming down his face.

The axe ignited in Vikstone’s hands. This time, Vikstone stood his ground. He brought Infernos down in a diagonal slash that cleaved through the haft of the warhammer and struck Karg’s shoulder. The axe sank deep into his torso.

Karg dropped to his knees, clutching at the wound as his life flowed from him. Still, he crawled toward Vikstone, determined to take the elf with him into the next world. “My ... boy ...”

Vikstone stood frozen as the dying orc reached for him. Not to strike. Not anymore. He crouched beside Karg. “Your son was brave. Right up until the end. You would have been proud.”

Karg choked on his blood, trembling as the color drained from his face. Vikstone knelt beside him. “Your ancestors are coming for you, Bloodfury. They’ll bring your son with them.”

Karg's hand found Vikstone's arm. His grip tightened once, then released. A faint smile crossed his blood-smeared face as he took his final breath.

Vikstone knelt there for a long moment. Then he lifted his head and roared, a sound that had no words in it, that filled the chamber and shook dust from the roots above. Then silence.

Mardagan broke through the weakened roots, leading the crew down into the ritual chamber, weapons drawn. Wopak's eyes darted across the sigils and broken ritual stones, his hammer raised.

Vikstone stood alone in the center of the chamber, staring down at the lifeless form of his old foe. Calvey nudged the fallen orc with her boot, frowning. "So much for taking him alive."

Mardagan looked around the ruined chamber, his brow furrowed. "This place reeks of old magic. We should go."

"Wait," Calvey said, kneeling beside a stone tablet and staring down at it wide-eyed. "This is where Malthrax became a lich."

The others gathered around, looking over Calvey's shoulder at the broken tablet, where the Ceremony of Ascension's rites were detailed. A ritual to bind the lich's soul to an object for safekeeping ... his phylactery. To truly kill a lich, you had to destroy his phylactery first. Its nature and location were a lich's most guarded secret.

Vikstone leaned closer as he examined the tablet. At the bottom was inscribed in the center of a perfect circle:

Lysandra. Bound in eternity, till death do us part.

The lich's phylactery wasn't some ancient artifact of unspeakable power. It was a ring. Lysandra's wedding ring. Malthrax had bound his soul to his lost wife.

Vikstone rose unsteadily. A smile crept across his face.

"I know how to kill him."



CHAPTER 6

ZUL'DRAK

The Skies over Zul'Drak

The winds of Zul'Drak howled past, shards of ice biting into their skin as the group flew over the blighted land. Temples and ziggurats rose from the frozen plateau in stepped tiers, their stone facades carved with animal gods: serpents, bears, leopards, their features eroded but still baring teeth at the sky.

Some of the temples were dark. Others glowed with a necrotic residue of power, the last light bleeding from gods the Drakkari trolls had butchered to fuel their losing war against the Scourge. Gundrak, their stone capital, hunched to the northeast. The smell reached them even up here, like fruit rotting from the inside.

Calvey led the formation toward the Argent Stand, where Crusade scouts had reported banshee sightings in the region.

Mardagan's phoenix flanked her on the right, wreathed in flames, Wopak riding in the passenger's saddle. Veridian held the left, her wings cutting the air in steady beats. After his last flight with Calvey, Gabe chose to ride with Vikstone, clinging to the warrior's back, stealing glances at the landscape below.

A sharp whistle from Calvey drew their attention as the hunter steered right. Far below, eight figures on armored steeds kicked up snow as they galloped in lockstep. Knights of the Ebon Blade. The death knights swept across the dirt, never breaking stride.

Mardagan scowled. The Knights of the Ebon Blade—former paladins, most of them, twisted into monsters by the Lich King they now claimed to oppose. Dangerous and unpredictable. Allies of convenience at best. What were they doing in Zul'Drak?

The others turned to Vikstone, who gave the nod to pursue. They didn't have to wonder long. A plume of black smoke rose ahead.

Light's Breach was under attack.

Light's Breach, Zul'Drak

The heroes dove as Light's Breach came into view. A tide of undead overran the Alliance outpost, the settlement's palisades breaking under the weight of the Scourge. Ghouls swarmed the walls, clawing their way over the fortifications. Skeletons in rusted armor surrounded a dozen human and dwarven defenders. A hulking abomination, its stitched flesh swollen taut like a drowned thing left in the sun, battered through a section of the outer wall.

And then the death knights struck.

The Ebon Blade riders lowered their runeblades, and their dark steeds charged across the ice without slowing down. The back rank of undead erupted in bursts of frost and unholy fire, bones trampled and snapping beneath the assault. The knights broke off into two columns, each circling wide before sweeping back to crisscross the battlefield.

"Get me close to the big one," Wopak said. He crouched low as they coasted across the outpost, then leapt, landing on the abomination's back.

Vikstone kicked free of Veridian, Infernos already burning in his grip. He twisted midair and came down with both feet on a skeleton's chest, hammering it into the ground in a shower of shattered bone.

"Bless the gods!" A dwarven chef in a grease-stained apron and tall white hat swung his iron skillet into a skeleton's face.

Mardagan rushed past to shield-block a trio of ghouls advancing on Gabe, who was tending to a fallen soldier. The impact sent two ghouls flying. Calvey picked them off from her perch atop a wall. Mardagan pulped the third against the stone with his shield, nearly dislodging her with the force.

“This was not me best idea!” Wopak clung to the abomination’s back, trying to strangle the creature with its own intestines. A pair of death knights broke formation and moved toward them. Wopak’s eyes went wide as they galloped straight at him. At the last second, the knights veered outward, their runeblades tearing through the abomination’s flesh from both sides.

The creature’s death throes tossed Wopak through two tents. He bounced through the encampment, tangled in torn canvas, muttering curses, before landing in a pile of crates.

“Oof.”

The dwarf hauled himself to his feet and took in the battlefield. The rout was already on. Death knights carved through the undead in pairs, thinning their ranks. The ghouls scrambled back over the palisade, pressured by Calvey’s arrows.

The last ghoul fled toward the treeline, its hunched frame bent over as it ran on all fours before a runeblade caught it mid-stride. A lance of icy blue magic impaled the monster, suspending it midair for a moment before the energy exploded outward. Its remains fell piecemeal into the bloodstained snow.

Vikstone lowered his axe, its flames extinguishing as the battlefield fell into silence. Scorched bodies, bones, and pools of necrotic sludge littered the encampment—or what was left of it. The remaining human and dwarven defenders, panting and bloodied, gathered near the ruined palisade, their weapons still tight in their grips as they warily eyed the black-clad Knights of the Ebon Blade.

The death knights had regrouped into two columns of four. Their leader, a broad-shouldered undead woman wearing plate mail etched with swirling azure runes, looked over the survivors and Vikstone’s crew.

Mardagan stepped forward to intercept her.

“Appreciate the help, but we’re all set now,” he said, burying the tip of his greatsword in the ground between them and leaning on the hilt.

The death knight looked down at him. “I am Dread Marshal Nightfang of the Shadow Vault.” Her voice was a dry rasp. “And you are known to us ... Sir Mardagan.”

“And the Knights of the Ebon Blade are known to me, so I’m going to thank you again for your assistance and invite you to move along now.”

The death knight's gaze turned to Calvey perched above, her bow lowered with an arrow nocked. Vikstone and Wopak fell in on either side of the paladin, the air around them taking on a blue glow as Gabe cast a protective shield over them.

Crossing his arms, Wopak looked up at the undead knight. "Yer a long way from the Shadow Vault. What business does the Ebon Blade have in Zul'Drak?"

The knight let out a low, raspy chuckle as she rode past them, her empty eye sockets seeming to linger on each of them. "Hunting."

The death knights wheeled their mounts and rode north without another word.

The Argent Stand, Zul'Drak

The Argent Stand had been built from whatever was available. Drakkari stonework pried from temple steps, timber hauled from frozen forests, sheets of hammered iron bolted over gaps where the masonry didn't meet. The walls were uneven and ugly, and they held.

Beyond the perimeter, stepped pyramids rose against the grey sky, their faces worn smooth by centuries of ice. Troll gods with hollow eyes stared down at the small crusader outpost, worshipped long before the Argent Crusade existed. Frayed banners bearing the Crusade's sunburst insignia snapped from the walls, their golden thread the only bright thing in the landscape.

The group descended to the outpost and landed near the main entrance. A contingent of crusaders approached, swords sheathed, but hands resting on hilts.

"State your name and purpose," the ranking officer called out. She stepped forward—a woman in plate mail, cloak edged with golden trim. She tucked her helmet beneath one arm, revealing a weathered face and blue eyes that swept over each of them.

Vikstone dismounted first, boots crunching on the snow. "Vikstone. We've come from Grizzly Hills on urgent—"

"And you?" She cut him off, scowling at Mardagan.

Mardagan let out a long sigh. He'd seen that look before, the disdain crusaders reserved for paladins who'd chosen the road over their ranks.

Wopak stepped forward with a curt bow. “Wopak of the Blackrock Clan, ma’am. With me is Lady Calvey of Telaar, Father Gabriel of Wyrmmrest Temple, and the big fella is Sir Mardagan of the Argent Dawn.”

The knight’s gaze locked onto Mardagan. “The Argent Dawn is no more.”

Mardagan met her eyes, one hand curling into a fist at his side. “I’m aware.”

“Then you should stop introducing yourself as ‘Sir.’ You want a title, you can serve the Argent Crusade like the rest of us and earn yours back. We’re in the middle of a war here and have no time for mercenaries. Be gone.”

“Mercenaries?” Mardagan said. “I serve the Light. If you doubt my link to the divine, let us test that assumption together.”

The knight affixed her helm, the crusaders around her baring their blades. Wopak and Vikstone followed suit as Calvey slipped away in search of an elevated perch. Gabe stood motionless, his prayer book open in hands that had forgotten what to do with it.

Mardagan and the knight stepped forward, drawing their greatswords in unison.

“Yer thinking to turn away them that saved Light’s Breach on the day they done it?”

A band of heavily bandaged dwarves pushed through the group from behind. The leader, whom Vikstone recognized as the chef from Light’s Breach, stormed up to the knight, stubby finger jabbing at her breastplate. “Ivette Dragonheart, ye’ll be letting them in and greeting them as the heroes they be, or you’ll be cookin’ yer own meals from now on.”

Ivette sighed and stepped aside, lips tight, gaze still fixed on Mardagan. “You may enter.”

The bonfire crackled and spat embers into the afternoon air, its warm glow pushing back the chill of the approaching storm. Around the fire, battle-weary soldiers nursed tankards and gnawed on hunks of dried meat. Crusade Commander Korfax sat by the fire, a grizzled paladin with a black goatee and tired, haunted eyes. Ivette took up position behind him, arms folded.

The dwarf chef led Vikstone’s crew toward the fire, snapping a salute across the blaze. “Commander Korfax, these are the heroes of Light’s Breach. I trust we’ll be givin’ them the aid they’ve earned.”

The commander gestured to an empty bench. “Come, heroes. Sit. There’s no game to hunt in this Light-forsaken region, so I can’t offer you a proper meal, but you’re welcome to what we have.”

Vikstone settled into the seat nearest the commander as the others dug through a tray of jerky. Calvey scrunched up her nose as she sniffed at a couple of pieces before deciding better of it.

“We heard rumors of banshees in the area,” Vikstone said. “Where are they?”

Korfax leaned back. “Why?”

“Respectfully, my business is my business.”

“In my territory, everyone’s business is my business,” Korfax said, drumming his fingers. “You will answer my question or be escorted from my camp ... respectfully.”

“Vikstone, let’s go,” Mardagan said, turning to leave. “We’ll find them ourselves. This was a waste of time, and we’re burning daylight.”

Korfax rubbed his face. When he looked up, the weariness was gone. His eyes were sharp, appraising.

“Vikstone.” His tone shifted. “You’re Namarie’s husband. I heard you damn near brought a mountain down onto Cinderak’s head in your hunt for your wife and daughter.”

“I’ve come to bring them home.”

“You know they can’t be—”

“So people keep telling me,” Vikstone said. “But to my knowledge, no one’s ever tortured a lich to find out for sure.”

Silence. Gabe and Calvey exchanged a glance.

Korfax nodded and rose from his chair. “It seems your course is set, then. If your wife and daughter are in Zul’Drak, my scouts will find them for you. I’ll just require a small bit of assistance in return.”

The Road to Sseratus, Zul’Drak

The road was little more than a cracked and frozen path, winding through ruins and toppled troll statues. The clouds hung low, threatening snow, and the wind carried the sounds of low, wet snarling from behind the ruins, the scrape of bone on stone.

Vikstone called the group to a halt as the fog-wreathed temple of the snake god Sseratus came into view. Korfax had said one of the Argent Crusade's scouts recently went missing while exploring the temple. Calvey slipped into the shadows.

"This is where we part for now," Vikstone said, leaving no room for argument. "Calvey and I will handle this one. Gabe, head back to Wyrmmrest and work on the tome. See if you can find any mention of where Malthrax might have hidden the wedding ring—his phylactery."

Gabe signaled to the sky, and his gryphon dropped down. "Be careful. The Drakkari have become desperate enough to sacrifice their own gods for power to wield against the Scourge. There's no telling what they'd do to an interloper caught in their temple."

Vikstone fished a rolled-up parchment from his pack, thrusting it into Wopak's hands. "I need you to bring this letter to Warden Alturas at the Violet Hold. Deliver it in person and tell no one else. The last thing we need is a welcoming committee."

Wopak glanced at the parchment, brow furrowed, before tucking it into his pack. "And if he says no?"

"Then I'll ask him again, when we arrive with company in tow."

Wopak barked a laugh. "Yer madder than a rabid furbolg, lad, but I do like the way you think. I'll deliver yer message."

"And I need you to return to Kaskala village," Vikstone said to Mardagan. "The tuskarr owe us for killing Gunvald the Drowned. It's time to collect on that debt. We need two silver-infused fishing nets, strengthened with every enchantment they have. We'll all meet back at Argent Stand in the morning."

"It will be done," Mardagan said, climbing into his saddle. "And try to keep Calvey out of trouble, eh?"

"First time for everything," Vikstone said, and jogged after her.

Vikstone matched Calvey's pace as they navigated the ruined outskirts of the temple. The Altar of Sseratus was ahead, a crumbling ziggurat swallowed by wilderness. Coiled serpent statues lined the approach with cracked fangs.

Calvey dropped into a crouch, darting behind a partial wall. She gestured for Vikstone to follow. A pair of Drakkari zealots patrolled the temple entrance, blue skin

painted with twisting snake patterns. They clutched snake-headed staffs, eyes burning as they incanted prayers to their fallen gods.

Keeping to the shadows, Calvey led them along the temple's outer wall. She moved with ease, slipping over rocks as she climbed to a vantage point overlooking the main courtyard. From here, they could see the mummified corpse of the serpent god Sseratus, easily a hundred feet long, draped across the ruins like a discarded husk. Its once-brilliant emerald scales were now dull and cracked, flaking off the murdered god onto the uneven stone floor.

A stone altar stood at the temple's center, the blood on its surface still wet, not yet turned dark. Small writhing snakes coiled around the altar, basking in the residual energy of their slain god.

"There," Calvey murmured, pointing to a motionless figure slumped against the altar. The Argent Crusade scout.

The scout's armor was torn and bloodied, his throat slit as a sacrificial offering. There would be no rescue, only retrieval.

Then, something shifted in the darkness beyond the altar. A creature uncoiled from the shadows—a tall figure with the body of a troll, and the elongated neck and head of a cobra. The creature moved gracefully, tongue flicking as it studied the dead scout.

Calvey's breath hitched. "What the fel is that supposed to be?"

The snake priest tilted its head. A slithering voice whispered into their minds.

You cannot sssteal back what was fairly taken. Thisss one now belongs to Sssseratus.

Calvey raised her bow. "So much for stealth."

Two more priests slid from the shadows—one crowned with a golden headdress, runes pulsing along its scales as it chanted, the other swaying with hypnotic gold eyes. The first snatched Calvey's arrows from the air and tossed them aside. They were fast—unnervingly fast—their coiling bodies twisting clear of everything she loosed. A serpentine staff caught Vikstone in the shoulder, its head coming alive to sink fangs into his flesh. An icy chill spread down his arm as Calvey tumbled from her perch, driven to the floor by the shaman's acidic spray.

Calvey panted, back to her feet as the snake priests continued their assault. "They're too fast."

“For you, maybe,” Vikstone said, letting out a sharp whistle as he parried a priest’s strike, shearing the writhing head off the staff.

Stormclaw burst into view, the great cat exploding through the air and into the golden-eyed priest. Vikstone and Calvey worked the remaining two. She aimed behind the priest he engaged, and he drove it backward into her arrow before closing the distance with *Infernos*.

The last priest clamped its fangs onto Stormclaw’s throat as it died, pumping poison into her. She let out a strangled yowl. Calvey helped untangle her from the dead priest. Gravely wounded, the cat slunk away. Vikstone dismissed her—she’d done enough.

A shockwave threw Vikstone off his feet. The temple air rippled as the shaman raised his arms, a bone-rattling hum filling the room.

“Ssssseratus, grant me your ssstrength!” The shaman’s transformation began.

Vikstone and Calvey gave ground as the shaman shed his troll form. The creature’s head nearly touched the broken ceiling twenty-five feet above, enormous emerald eyes locked on the intruders, forked tongue tasting the air.

“Uhh ... Vik?” Calvey said, backing away.

The Prophet of Sseratus reared up, the stone foundation cracking beneath its sheer weight. Golden runes along its scales pulsed in rhythm with the dead god’s corpse above, as if Sseratus’s heart had started beating again through the thing that killed him.

Calvey struck first, her arrows penetrating the Prophet’s scales. The shafts jutted out like tiny splinters as it thrust its head toward her.

“Keep it busy,” Vikstone said as he rushed toward the altar, throwing himself clear at the last moment to avoid a downward smash from the snake’s tail.

“Oh sure, just keep the giant snake busy.” Calvey scrambled behind a large statue an instant before the Prophet’s great maw snapped down, tearing the statue free and spitting it through a temple wall.

The temple groaned in protest, chunks of stone falling from the roof as Vikstone hopped onto the altar and tossed the dead scout over his shoulder.

“Calvey, run!”

Cornered and with her cover destroyed, Calvey raised her bow for one last shot, aiming for one of the Prophet's slitted pupils.

The snake's tail hit Calvey like a siege engine, driving the wind from her lungs and sending her flying into a weakened section of wall. She broke through it and disappeared in a cloud of dust and masonry.

"Calvey!" Vikstone dropped the scout's body near the exit and snatched up Infernos, its fire awakening.

The Prophet lunged for him. Its head smashed through a stone column, the temple shuddering beneath the impact. Vikstone looked up at the crumbling ceiling ... and grinned.

"Over here!" He drew the serpent to the center of the temple before hurling Infernos into the weakened ceiling. Great cracks spread outward and tons of stone crashed down.

Vikstone dove aside as a cascade of stone and ice rained upon them, burying the great serpent. He shielded his face through the dust storm and ran toward the remnants of the wall that Calvey had been hurled through.

"Calvey?"

A low groan was all the answer he received, Calvey's hand reaching out from a heap of stone. Vikstone limped toward her, hauling rocks off the pile.

"Stay still, I've got you," Vikstone said as Calvey's face peeked out from beneath the rubble, blood seeping from a gash along her brow.

"Ow," Calvey coughed, groggy. "Did we win?"

"For now," Vikstone said, hauling another chunk of stone free with a grunt. "Can you ride?"

"I ... think so." Calvey nodded, wincing as she crawled free from the wreckage, her right leg torn and bloody.

Vikstone whistled as he scooped up Calvey, her blue blood flowing down his arms. The walls came down around them as they fled the temple. Veridian flew down from above, the drake kneeling as Vikstone gingerly positioned Calvey into the passenger saddle.

"I don't ... feel so good ..." she said, before slumping unconscious over the saddle.

The Argent Stand, Zul'Drak

The Argent Stand infirmary smelled of herbal poultices and dried blood. Morning light filtered through the high, narrow windows, casting long beams across rows of cots occupied by injured knights. A low murmur of pained cries and hushed prayers filled the air as crusaders tended to the wounded.

Calvey lay on one of the cots, her right leg heavily bandaged and elevated. She winced, propping herself up on her elbows as Vikstone entered, with Mardagan, Wopak, and Gabe close behind. Calvey's face was pale, her lips tight.

"I can walk."

"You can hobble," Wopak snorted. "And even that's being generous."

"Not today." Vikstone ran his hand along Stormclaw's back in the cot next to Calvey. The great cat's breathing was uneven, her ribs barely rising beneath his touch. The snake's poison was still working its way through her system. He scratched the thick fur at the back of the cat's neck, earning a weak but grateful purr.

"I can still shoot," Calvey said. "Just prop me up somewhere. Seriously, I can help."

"And when the undead horde closes in, and we need to run?" Vikstone shook his head. "You're the best tracker in Northrend, but you're in no condition for a fight. We'll take this one."

Gabe nodded. "Mardagan and I have done all we can to mend your leg, but the break will require a few days to fully heal."

"I need to be there," Calvey said, her voice unsteady. "Namarie was my friend, too."

"I know, and I'm sorry, but—" Vikstone whirled at the sound of boots approaching.

Ivette Dragonheart stormed in. "We've found them. Your wife and daughter are in the Dead Fields."

"Vik, wait!" Calvey called after him, but he was already moving.

"Mount up," he said without breaking stride. "We ride for the Dead Fields."

Dead Fields, Zul'Drak

A stillness gripped the Dead Fields, as though the land itself had perished under the Scourge's corruption. The skeletal remains of withered trees jutted from the fractured, frostbitten earth. A thick fog drifted between gravestones and the ruins of what may have once been a small village.

Vikstone's boots crunched against the brittle grass as he led the group deeper into the ruins. No insects or wildlife. Not even vultures dared enter the Dead Fields. A distant wail drifted upon the morning wind.

Banshees.

Wopak pulled a lump of wax from his belt pouch, tearing off two clumps before thrusting it toward the others. "You'll be wanting to plug yer ears 'fore we head in any deeper. Learned that one the hard way during an unfortunate run-in with a mermaid."

The others followed suit. The wax wouldn't fully protect them, but it might blunt the effects. Mardagan walked beside Vikstone, fingers tight on his greatsword. Wopak followed a few steps behind, warhammer over his shoulder, with Gabe at the rear, staff glowing faintly.

"They weren't lying about this place," Wopak said. "Feels like the ground is trying to sap the fight right oughta ya."

Gabe nodded as he trudged along. "The banshees. Their grief corrupts everything they touch. The longer we stay, the harder the fight."

"Then let's get moving," Vikstone said, scanning the shifting mists ahead. "The scout said he spotted them near the old cathedral."

They hurried deeper, weaving their way around tombstones and broken crypts. Faint, ghostly shapes drifted at the edges of their vision, gone the moment they turned to look.

Then, movement.

A ghostly figure drifted above the ground, barely visible through the swirling fog. Long, flowing hair cascaded behind her like silk. Her tattered dress fluttered in the wind. The dress Vikstone had given her for their anniversary.

Namarie.

Even in undeath, she was hauntingly beautiful, her features intact, but her eyes were roiling pools of rage and sorrow.

As snow began to fall, a second, smaller figure materialized from the mist, floating just behind Namarie ... her movements synchronized with her mother's.

"Lunara ..." Vikstone gasped.

Mardagan grabbed Vikstone by both shoulders, forcing him to turn. "Steel your will, Vik. Let rage be your shield. You bury that pain as deep as you need to, because your wife and daughter need you right now. *We* need you right now."

The warrior checked Elarya's bracers, his gaze on Namarie and Lunara.

"We take them unharmed," Mardagan said. "Everyone knows their roles. Stick to the plan. We strike fast, and we're gone before the dead can gather."

Gabe tapped his staff on the ground, and a deep-blue protective aura surrounded them. He turned to Wopak, who was securing a fishing net beneath the priest's gryphon. Wopak gave the harness a final yank to test it and grinned up at Vikstone.

"Time ta bring yer girls home."

Vikstone exploded through the fog, his focus locked on his daughter. The spectral child tilted her head at his approach. She looked up at Namarie, who opened her mouth impossibly wide to emit a wail of grief.

Mardagan was faster.

With a flick of his wrist, a golden sphere of silence burst from the paladin's hand, enveloping Namarie's head. Her mouth remained open in a soundless scream, her face contorting as she clawed at her throat, trying to force the wail out.

"We've got wraiths." Wopak spun his warhammer and brought it down on the first shadow to slither from the fog. Dark, hooded shapes with no legs and no faces, just hollow mouths stretched open in perpetual hunger. The creature let out a wretched, gurgling scream as it evaporated into the mist. More wraiths coalesced around them. Wopak held them off.

Vikstone bolted past Namarie, lunging for Lunara. The little banshee shrieked as he tackled her, fishing for the enchanted bracers in his pouch. She carved bloody gouges across his cheek before he secured one wrist, then the other.

Behind them, Namarie came shrieking after Vikstone as he clambered away, dragging Lunara behind him. He didn't dare look back. He thrust the bound banshee into Gabe's arms and spun to find Namarie raking at his face.

“Vik, get down!” Mardagan dove into the sphere of silence. His shield caught Namarie mid-lunge, sending them both to the ground. The spell was disrupted.

As Gabe shoved Lunara into the net, she stopped thrashing. Her hollow eyes flickered. For the briefest moment, her monstrous banshee form melted away. No longer a wailing specter, she was just a scared child, looking up at the priest.

“Uncle Gabe?” she said, causing Gabe to hesitate for just a moment.

That was all the delay she needed.

Lunara pounced forward, her mouth unhinging, teeth glistening with hunger. Gabe raised his staff, but he was too late. She sank her teeth into his throat.

The banshee’s giggling drowned out Gabe’s gurgling voice, her body clinging to his flailing body as she drank from the wound. Wopak bashed a wraith away from Gabe, absorbing a strike in return. The strength drained from his limbs.

Namarie floated back to her feet, smiling as she screeched.

A piercing eagle’s cry shattered the air. Calvey swooped down, throwing herself into Lunara and tearing her off Gabe’s neck, pitching them both headlong into the net. Gabe attempted to heal his torn throat, slowing the bleeding as Calvey pulled herself from the mesh, dragging her ruined leg behind her.

“Up, now!” She stumbled toward Gabe and shoved the priest onto the gryphon’s back before hauling herself up. Gabe’s fingers trembled, struggling to form a healing spell, but the light flickered and died in his hands.

Vikstone yelled, ducking under a claw slash from Namarie, his body sluggish as the banshee’s wail seeped into his bones and leached the strength from him.

Calvey kicked the gryphon into motion. It lifted off, the net carrying the furious Lunara dangling below.

Vikstone’s chest heaved as he faced Namarie. Wopak and Mardagan fought back-to-back, their strikes slackening each time a wraith’s claws snuck through their defenses.

Vikstone’s vision blurred as Namarie’s wail drowned him in the depths of memories too raw to bear.

Namarie is sitting in the rocking chair on their front porch, a giggling Lunara in her arms. The heady, floral scent of Namarie’s hair as she presses close against him under the starry canopy of Ashenvale. He holds his daughter for the first time, so tiny and fragile.

Then the warmth bled away. His daughter crumbled to ash in his arms, Namarie's once-adoring gaze now filled with cold, seething hatred. His eyes rolled up, his head lolling back momentarily. The banshee spotted his exposed throat, her claws slashing downward to end him.

Vikstone pivoted and dove beneath her claws, bringing his hand up to snap the enchanted cuffs onto Namarie's right wrist. In the same motion, he yanked on the cuffs for leverage and sprang back to his feet, seizing Namarie's left wrist.

He snapped the second cuff shut.

The banshee wailed, but the cuffs stifled the power of her psionic attack. Vikstone whistled, and Veridian nosedived from above as he grappled with Namarie.

"Can't hold 'em much longer," Wopak said as he obliterated another wraith with his warhammer, only to absorb another strike.

A wave of agony ripped through Vikstone as Namarie's teeth tore into his arm. His breath hitched, and a numbness spread through his veins. Gritting his teeth, he dragged Namarie toward Veridian. He hip-tossed her into the enchanted net and cinched it tight.

A fresh wave of wraiths emerged from the mist, closing in. Wopak dropped to a knee, his warhammer dragging on the earth. Mardagan drove his shield into the wraith.

"Knights ... attack!"

The ground trembled beneath them as eight riders entered the battlefield. Each runeblade fell once per wraith. None fell twice.

Mardagan hauled Wopak back to his feet, rallying a burst of energy to help finish them off.

Vikstone beckoned to Veridian. "We have to go. We have to go now."

The knights were already dismounting, their glowing eyes fixed on the net dangling behind the drake. Their leader, Dread Marshal Nightfang, stepped forward, her runeblade smoldering with a light that blackened the dead earth where she stood. Her eyes settled on Vikstone, who stood between her and the net. Namarie fought within, bound by layers of powerful enchantments.

Wopak and Mardagan wobbled over to Vikstone, the three leaning on each other as they stared down the death knight.

"This one is ours," Vikstone said.

“Our orders are to kill them all,” Nightfang said, looking past Vikstone into the net.

Wopak snarled. “And I got orders to murder anyone fool enough to touch a hair on that lass’s head.”

Mardagan moved toward her. “You said I’m known to you. If you know who I am, you know I serve the Light, as most of you once did. We’re here to take down Malthrax the Undying. I ask you, from one knight to another, to leave us to our business. You cannot have her.”

The marshal looked closely at each of them. “You cannot stop us.”

“Try me,” Vikstone said, Infernos roaring to life. “Mardagan may be known to you, but you don’t know me. My axe hungers for undead flesh, just as it did when wielded by King Ymiron. Before it rejected him and chose me instead. Shall I demonstrate why?”

Her eyes bore into Vikstone. Wopak tightened his grip on his hammer, Mardagan struggling to stand beside him. The silence hung, broken only by the sounds of their heavy breathing.

Dread Marshal Nightfang raised a gauntleted hand, closing it into a fist. In unison, the knights sheathed their blades and mounted their skeletal steeds. The leader circled past Vikstone, looking down at him.

“Malthrax is a plague upon Northrend,” she said. “Should you succeed in your quest, his destruction would align with our interests. There is, however, no salvation for those claimed by the Scourge. But that lesson is yours to learn, not mine to teach.”

As one, the knights reared up on their mounts and rode into the dark.

Vikstone dropped to his knees. The bluff had taken everything he had. Mardagan grimaced as he helped Vikstone up and onto Veridian’s back, casting his final healing spell to slow their bleeding.

Vikstone wrapped the reins around his hand and slumped forward in his saddle. “To the Violet Hold.”

Veridian lifted off, the enchanted net dangling below her with Namarie writhing inside. Wopak and Mardagan mounted up and fell into formation behind the drake, flying with full haste toward Dalaran.



CHAPTER 7

SHOLAZAR BASIN

Violet Hold, Dalaran

Arcane wards pressed against Vikstone's skin the moment he stepped onto the bridge, a tingling weight that settled behind his eyes. The night sky above roiled with dark clouds as he crossed the narrow bridge leading to the high-security magical prison. Purple banners bearing Dalaran's arcane eye flanked the grand double doors, which swung open as he approached.

The vast chamber within was lined with arched cell doors, each sealed by powerful arcane barriers. A curved walkway stretched along the upper tier of cells, portions of it broken away from past breaches. Another corridor snaked downward beneath the waterline, aquatic monstrosities glimpsed through murky waters behind an iron portcullis. The interior smelled of old magic and scorched stone as the doors slammed shut behind Vikstone.

He made his way along the edge of the room. Behind each shimmering barrier waited a new horror. A spherical crimson demon with eight eyes and a maw of jagged teeth floated toward him as he passed, snarling as it bumped up against the barrier, triggering a sharp flash of violet sparks.

Some he recognized from his adventuring days—twisted horrors of the Burning Legion, writhing aberrations that reeked of the Void, wretched undead with stitched flesh.

Others defied naming. Too many eyes. Too many limbs. Insatiable hunger. They threw themselves against the barriers as he passed, their demonic screeches filling the chamber.

Then he saw them.

Two small cells, side by side, each sealed with a crackling violet barrier. His stomach clenched. Namarie and Lunara hovered within.

Their ghostly hair billowed as if caught in an unseen current, their tattered gowns fluttering behind them. They were still as beautiful as he remembered, but their eyes were sunken and hollow, voids of blue light. Namarie spotted him as he trudged forward, her lips curling back.

Vikstone stepped to the edge of the barrier, reaching out with one hand. Namarie slashed at him, her claws creating a shower of sparks as they struck the barrier.

“You did this,” she shrieked. “Your weakness got us killed.”

“Why didn’t you save us, Daddy?”

He crumpled to his knees, staring into the hollow eyes of his dead daughter. “I tried.” His voice broke. “I’m still trying. That’s why I brought you here.”

The cells darkened, the banshees floating back into the shadows as a wind came through, chilling him. A single word echoed through his mind.

Vik?

Her voice was soft, but terrified.

“Namarie?” He stared into the unlit cell, but the sound wasn’t coming from within. Thunder boomed overhead as a blizzard raged within the chamber, coating the floor with ice and snow.

I don’t know where we are, or how long we’ve been here. It’s so cold, and we’re being hunted by faceless creatures. We can only see you in your dreams, and barely then. I don’t know if this is really you or just another of the lich’s cruel tricks.

“It’s me, baby. I’m right here.” Lightning flashed, shaking the chamber. “Is Lu with you?”

Yes, but I don’t know how much longer I can keep her safe. The Faceless are tracking us. I’ve killed more than I can count, but they just keep coming.

Vikstone pressed his hand flat against the cell wall. “Where are you? What can you see? Are there any landmarks?”

There's a curved wall of emerald glass that stretches upward into a dome. We've followed it for what feels like weeks, looking for a way out. Lu is so scared, Vik. She doesn't understand what's happening. You have to get her out of here.

"I'm trying. I promise, I'm trying. What else can you—"

Vik, you're fading. You need to listen ... and remember.

The blizzard intensified into a whiteout, the icy wind howling to a tempest pitch. The prison walls melted into a swirling white void. And then, stillness.

The blizzard dissolved, replaced by the crisp morning breeze of Elwynn Forest. Pine and damp earth. The memory stabbed into him. A scream pierced the stillness. *Daddy, help.*

"I'm coming, baby!" Vikstone sprinted through the woods. The forest darkened around him, each breath carrying a sweetness no living wood should hold.

As he crested a small hill, his home came into view, surrounded by a horde of undead. A figure stood at the treeline, silhouetted against the deathly green glow of the advancing plague cloud. Malthrax the Undying.

The lich's robes were tattered, his visage twisted into a grin. His lone eye burned like a fel torch, the Shard of Yogg-Saron embedded in his socket. And beneath him, crushed into the dirt beneath his steel boots, Vikstone saw himself. Pinned down and helpless, as the plague cloud crept toward his wife and daughter.

Vikstone charged toward the house, but the ground turned to sludge, pulling at his legs. He fought his way forward, forcing himself through the mud one agonizing step at a time. "Namarie, run!"

But she couldn't hear him, and the sludge kept dragging him down, sapping his will, until he collapsed into the muck, defeated. Again.

Vikstone, watch.

"I can't." The screaming had begun. "I can't watch it again. I just can't."

You have to, Vik. It's the only way to save us.

He raised his head from the muck, forcing himself to watch. Malthrax was still crushing his former self into the mud as the plague cloud closed in. Then, a ray of sickly green light shot from the lich's eye to envelop Namarie and Lunara, who clung to her mother's leg as the cloud rolled up onto the porch.

And then he saw it. A flicker around his wife and daughter. For the briefest moment, two ethereal forms separated from their bodies, tethered by thin threads of light that stretched toward the gemstone in Malthrax's skull. Then the plague cloud swallowed them.

Vikstone awoke with a sharp gasp on the cold stone floor of the Violet Hold, between his wife's and daughter's cells. His hands were shaking. He clenched them until they stopped, and pieced together what he'd learned. The tall emerald walls Namarie described. The Shard of Yogg-Saron being a soulstone. Their souls stolen before the plague cloud hit.

Namarie and Lunara's souls were trapped inside the lich's emerald eye ... inside the Shard of Yogg-Saron.



The *Tome of Malthrax*: Final Entry

The deed is done. My ascension is complete, my living flesh rotting away to give birth to a new form. The power of the mad god Yogg-Saron courses through my veins. The shard's power is beyond anything I could have imagined, the veil between worlds parting upon my command.

I located Lysandra's spirit in the tempest of the Void and brought her home. What was left of her. She doesn't remember me, or herself, and she fears my new face, shrinking away whenever she looks upon me.

With my wife's body destroyed by the fire, I cannot fully bring her back into this world, so I have created another world for her. A secret Emerald Garden in my mind where she'll be safe ... where she'll be mine forever. In time, Lysandra will learn to love me again.

Arthas plans to breach Sholazar Basin, triggering a great avalanche that will tear through titan defenses, creating a pathway for the Scourge to invade. This is my opportunity to bury the ring where it will never be recovered, ensuring my immortality. Maker's Hollow will be lost to the ages, buried beneath an impenetrable mountain of snow.

Yogg-Saron's whispers show me visions beautiful and terrible. Cities burning, continents drowned, a world reshaped in my image. Each vision comes with a price: fragments of my memory slipping away. But what are mortal memories, compared to the power I now wield?

It tells me of the coming fall of Arthas. When he falls, I will seize his throne, and a new Lich King shall rise. I am the true God of Death. I alone decide what comes after. The vrykul elders who dared reject me as "unworthy" will be the first to fall. First Northrend, then all of Azeroth, will be mine.

A Hero's Welcome Inn, Dalaran

The fire in the hearth burned violet at the edges, its light playing across shelves lined with bottles that glowed faintly on their own. Vikstone had never gotten used to Dalaran. A city of mages floating above the world, and he was still just a soldier sitting in a tavern. Through the open balcony, the streets of Runeweaver Square bustled below.

Vikstone slid the *Tome of Malthrax* back across the table to Gabe, the man's neck still bandaged from the banshee bite. "Where is this Maker's Hollow?"

Gabe rolled a map of Sholazar Basin out onto the table, pointing a finger at a spot in the northeast. "I'd not heard of it either, but Arcanist Tybalin believes there were originally three titan facilities in Sholazar: Maker's Overlook in the east, Maker's Perch to the west, and Maker's Hollow to the north, now buried beneath the Avalanche."

Vikstone rubbed his eyes. "And how exactly am I supposed to recover and destroy the lich's phylactery, if it's buried under a mountain?"

Calvey grunted as she rose from her seat by the fire, hobbling on her splinted leg toward the table. "There's always a way, Vik." She eased herself into the chair beside him, and for a moment before she settled her expression, she looked as tired as he did.

Gabe cleared his throat. "I'm more focused on your dream last night. If Namarie and Lunara are truly trapped in a sort of dream state, I wonder if it might be possible to find a way into this Emerald Garden."

Wopak scoffed, banging his mug on the table. "Have ye lost yer damn mind, priest? We ain't fighting a lich in a nightmare realm of his own creation. We'll handle him here in Northrend."

“But we can’t actually harm Malthrax until we find and destroy his phylactery,” Calvey said. “Which is buried.”

“So, we unbury it.” Wopak shrugged as if it were obvious. “Hemet Nesingwary knows Sholazar like the back of his hand, and he owes me a favor or three. If there’s another way into this Maker’s Hollow, we’ll be finding it, lass.”

Vikstone turned to Gabe. “If what I saw in my dream is true, and Namarie and Lunara’s souls weren’t in their bodies when the plague cloud hit ...”

Gabe nodded, tearing up. “If their souls truly had been extracted before the cloud hit, they’re likely still intact ... and could be restored if we recovered that soulstone. We could bring them back, Vik.”

Vikstone strode toward the door. “I’m heading to Sholazar. Destroying the phylactery is the first seed of corruption that needs rooting out.”

“Vik, wait,” Calvey said, limping after him. “We aren’t ready for another fight, yet.”

“Then I’ll go alone.” He turned and bumped face-first into Mardagan’s chest as the paladin entered.

“We march on Icecrown Citadel in the morning,” Mardagan said, grinning at the group. “Alliance and Horde have agreed to a truce and will fight together to topple Arthas. We’re taking the fight right to his front door. Angrathar the Wrathgate will soon fall, followed by his entire empire.”

“Not my fight,” Vikstone said and pushed past him.

“It’s everyone’s fight, Vik. We can end this war, once and for all.”

“My mission lies elsewhere. I’m heading to Sholazar.”

With a grumble, Wopak hauled himself to his feet. “He’s gonna need my help. We’ll be at Nesingwary’s camp.”

Mardagan sighed, watching them go. “What’s his problem?”

Calvey settled back into a chair, propping her leg up on a stool. “We’ve located Malthrax’s phylactery, sort of. It’s buried under the Avalanche in Sholazar.”

“I see.” Mardagan crouched to examine her leg. “And how’s the leg?”

“Aside from being broken in a bunch of places, never better.”

Mardagan reached beneath his breastplate to pull out his sapphire pendant. “You never should have joined that battle.”

“You would have lost had I not.” Calvey grimaced as the paladin manipulated her splinted leg, shooting Gabe a concerned look.

“True enough,” Gabe said as he knelt with a soft grunt to join them. “Please know that I appreciate it, Calvey. That I appreciate you.”

As the priest and paladin laid hands on Calvey’s leg, Mardagan’s pendant throbbed, bathing the room in a blue aura. Gabe murmured a prayer to the Light, channeling its warmth into her leg, which he feared had been permanently damaged.

Calvey let out a low groan, slumping into her chair as blue and green auras surrounded her leg.

With a supportive clap on her shoulder, Mardagan headed toward the balcony. Gabe followed, eyes locked on the pendant as Mardagan tucked it behind his breastplate.

“Mardagan ...” Gabe paused. “I’ve been meaning to ask, where did you get that pendant?”

“What does it matter?”

“It likely doesn’t. I just, well, you’ve become a much more potent healer, as of late. I wasn’t aware of any artifacts that possessed such powers.”

Mardagan’s jaw tightened.

“Your healing powers now feel cold, instead of warm,” Gabe said. “I’ve felt a persistent chill in my neck ever since you healed me.”

“You were bitten by a banshee. How is that my fault?”

“I’m—I’m not saying it is, I’m just concerned that—”

“Are you concerned?” Mardagan’s eyes narrowed. “Or are you jealous that I’m now a more powerful healer than you are?”

“But your pendant—”

“Gives me power.” Mardagan pounded his fist on the railing. “Power that you want for yourself. It is *mine*. You cannot have it.”

Gabe stepped back. “I didn’t ... I wasn’t ...”

“The pendant is none of your concern, old man. Do not speak of it again.”

Gabe stood there as the paladin turned and stormed from the room.

Nesingwary Base Camp, Sholazar Basin

“Easy does it, girl.” Hemet Nesingwary scratched the massive war mammoth between her ears, a team of hunters struggling to strap her into a harness below. The dwarf swung down from the saddle, hopping the final few feet to the ground.

His team bustled about, wheeling a great ballista closer. Hemet climbed onto a crate, barking orders as they hooked the ballista to the mammoth for transport to Dragonblight. One ballista, one mammoth, and a handful of hunters to siege the most fortified citadel on Azeroth. He pulled his furs tighter as a cool wind blew in across the waters of the Seabreach Flow.

Hemet let out a startled yelp as a pair of arms locked around him from behind, lifting him into the air, his stubby legs flailing. Wopak cackled, swinging him around before unceremoniously dumping him into the dirt.

Hemet spluttered, grinning as he dusted himself off. “Wopak, you son of a beardless orc. I’d kick yer ass, but it looks like someone already beat me to it. What brings ya to the basin?”

Wopak nodded toward Vikstone, who was watching the hunters fight to control the mammoth. With an undignified shriek, a dwarf was sent flying into the underbrush by a casual flick of the mammoth’s head.

“My friend seeks info on Maker’s Hollow,” Wopak said. “You know of it?”

“Aye, but yer a bit late for that trek.” Hemet looked off toward the snow-capped mountains. “The Hollow’s buried under the Avalanche. Ain’t no getting in there now.”

“Suppose I had to,” Vikstone said, following the dwarf’s gaze. “Titan machinery requires ventilation. Might one of those passages still be accessible?”

“Yes and no.” Hemet waved for them to follow as he hurried up a tall wooden scaffold, atop which sat a mounted dwarven spyglass. “There’s a metallic glint I sometimes catch in the morning sun that I’ve pegged as a vent shaft, but it’s surrounded by the dead. See for yerself.”

Vikstone looked through the spyglass, adjusting focus until the distant peaks came sharply into view. Hundreds of undead covered the snowy slope, an army shambling down into the basin.

“And where’s this shaft?”

Hemet looked at Vikstone, then at the mountain, then back at Vikstone. “It ain’t visible from here this time of day, but the morning sun always catches it. More importantly, you’d have to be a raving lunatic to attempt such a thing, lad. If that place is still standing at all, it ain’t by much.”

Wopak clapped Vikstone on the shoulder. “Tomorrow, we march on Icecrown Citadel and topple Arthas once and for all. Then we’ll be finding a way into this Maker’s Hollow, no worries there.”

“I’m going alone ... tomorrow morning, while the rest of you attack the citadel.” Vikstone kept his eye to the spyglass. “While Malthrax is distracted.”

Balargarde Fortress, Icecrown

Snow fell on Balargarde without sound. The fortress had that quality. It swallowed noise the way deep water swallows light. The tattered banners along its parapets twisted, slow and directionless, like things drowned and drifting. The skeletal fist sigil on their faces was barely visible beneath the ice that had crusted over the cloth.

On the high balcony overlooking the valley, Malthrax stood motionless, his fingers curled around the wrought-iron railing.

“Soon.”

Through the veil of snow, the dark shape of Icecrown Citadel filled the northern horizon—Arthas’s monument to himself. *Soon to be mine upon his fall.*

Ghouls. Abominations. Death knights with wills bound in iron. Meat. Arthas saw only meat.

When I am finished, there will be no more waste. Every soul worth keeping will be kept. And the rest ...

A faint shuffling sound disturbed his contemplation. Without turning, he acknowledged the intruder, the air growing colder with each syllable. “You are late, Vashka.”

The necromancer stepped from the shadows, her violet robes whispering against the stone floor. Her pale face bore a chilling smile. “Our preparations are complete,

my lord. The trap is set. Tomorrow will live in infamy, the day the Alliance and Horde came together as one ... and were destroyed by the Scourge.”

Malthrax turned to face her. The smile faded under his withering gaze. Vashka’s breath caught. As if plucking something from her mind, the lich hissed a single word.

“Vikstone.”

Vashka stammered, cold enveloping her as his gaze intensified. “W-we last spotted him in Dalaran, at the Violet Hold, Master. He’s still in the company of the paladin.”

“Excellent,” Malthrax said, turning away. “Go now. Execute my plans tomorrow and all will be forgiven.”

The blood draining from her face, Vashka fled the chamber, bowing as she went. As her footsteps faded, Malthrax swept from the balcony, descending into the bowels of his fortress, his robes trailing behind him like a shroud of black smoke.

He entered a darkened chamber lined with unlit candles. With a wave of his hand, they burst to life with a flickering blue glow, illuminating a pedestal in the center of the room. Draped over it lay a black silk cloth concealing something that flickered beneath.

Malthrax removed the cloth, revealing a sapphire shard whose light had nothing to do with the candles around it. He extended a clawed finger, tracing arcane symbols in the air.

The crystal’s surface clouded over, then sharpened into a clear image of Mardagan sleeping in his bed. The paladin’s pendant flared in time with the shard.

“You know what you must do,” Malthrax said, his voice penetrating deep into the sleeping paladin’s mind. “Bring Vikstone to the Wrathgate. Vikstone is the key to your victory. Without him, your comrades will fall. Without him, all hope is lost. Bring Vikstone to me ... *bring him to me* ...”

Mardagan thrashed in his sleep, veins raised along his neck and clutching his throat as his brain flooded with images of a massacre. Wopak, impaled on a vrykul spear. Gabe, slaughtered in a pool of blood. Calvey, crying out, crushed beneath an abomination’s foot.

Malthrax observed, savoring each agonized gasp, each spasm. He replaced the black cloth over the shard, concealing the image of Mardagan sobbing and writhing in his tent. A cold and hollow laugh rattled off the walls.

Nesingwary Base Camp, Sholazar Basin

The first rays of daylight breached the eastern mountains. Vikstone stood atop the wooden scaffold, eye pressed to the mounted spyglass, peering toward the snow-covered slopes of the Avalanche. Amid the undead swarm, a sharp glint of reflected sunlight flickered, exactly as Hemet promised.

The camp lay quiet, abandoned by Hemet and his dwarven hunters, who'd left during the night to join the march on Icecrown Citadel. He heard footsteps approaching in the familiar uneven rhythm of Calvey's limp.

"You find it?" Calvey asked, braced against a wooden support beam.

"It's surrounded, but it's there." Vikstone's eyes dropped to Calvey's splinted leg. He had done this to her. If he hadn't dragged his friends into this, none of it would have happened.

"Then it's settled," Mardagan said, stomping up the ramp in his armor. "Once the Lich King is defeated, we'll return and destroy Malthrax's phylactery."

"No." Vikstone turned from the spyglass. "While you distract him at the Wrathgate, I'll enter Maker's Hollow and destroy the phylactery. Alone."

"You aren't listening, Vik. We need you there. The vision was clear. Without you, we fall."

"The vision? What vision?"

Mardagan ignored his question. "We need every capable fighter at those gates, you among them. If we can't stand together with the fate of the world at stake, what are we even fighting for?"

"I'm fighting for my family. I'm fighting for Namarie. I'm fighting for Lunara."

"We can take down both liches at once." Mardagan clamped a heavy hand on his shoulder. "He'll call all his generals to the gate once the attack begins. Including Malthrax."

"... Who is invincible until his phylactery has been destroyed," Vikstone said, shrugging off the grip. "What precisely do you think I could do at the Wrathgate that's more helpful than stripping immortality from one of its strongest defenders?"

"Damn it, why won't you ever listen?"

“Easy there, lad.” Wopak stepped between them. “We’re all on the same side here, aye?”

“I mean, what Vik said does make some sense,” Calvey said.

Mardagan pushed past the dwarf, towering over Vikstone, jabbing a finger into his chest. “You’re selfish. You always have been. Your obsession with revenge blinds you. It is your duty to march with us against the Lich King.”

Vikstone turned away, shaking his head as he walked toward his netherdrake. “My duty is to my family. May the gods be with you today.”

With a growl, Mardagan stomped past him, snatched the reins of his phoenix, and swung into the saddle. “Fine, do what you want. You always do.”

Calvey limped after Vikstone as the paladin tore away, trailing embers. “Vik, wait.”

“I have to—”

“I know.” Her violet eyes locked onto his. “I wish you could wait until my leg heals so I could go with you, but I understand that you can’t.”

“I’ll be fine, kiddo. I always am.”

“Well, you better be,” she said, forcing a smile. “If you don’t come back to us, I’ll have to go in there to find you, bum leg and all, and then you’ll get us both killed.”

Gabe hobbled out of a nearby tent, dressed in his royal-blue battle robe. “May the Light watch over you, friend.”

“You as well,” Vikstone said. “Keep an eye on Calvey during the fight, okay?”

“You have my word.” The priest handed over a small iron flask. “Drink this once you’re inside. It will allow you to sense magical auras. An artifact as powerful as a phylactery should draw you right to it.”

Wopak took a long draw from his pipe, the dark smoke curling above them as he clasped forearms with Vikstone. “Alright, elf, listen up. Yer the scrappiest bastard I ever met, but some things can’t be fought head-on. Stick to the shadows and keep moving. You’re faster than any lumbering machine, which is yer only hope down there. Don’t be trading blows with a golem, you hear me, boy? You find that lich’s ring and I swear on my mother’s beard, we’ll help you bring yer girls home.”

“Thank you, friends.” Vikstone turned toward Veridian. “We’ll make it through this.”

“Aye.” Wopak’s smile was grim. “That we will.”

Calvey wrapped him in a hug. “Please be careful, Vik.”

Vikstone wiped a tear from her cheek. “This isn’t goodbye,” he said.

“Then why does it feel like it is?”

She removed her spiderweb amulet and placed it around his neck, then kissed his cheek. “This will help you climb. Two charges left—enough to make it back up.”

“I’ll see you all tonight.” Vikstone mounted up, eyes on the northeastern peaks.

The Avalanche, Sholazar Basin

Arctic wind whipped past Vikstone’s face as Veridian kept low over the Avalanche. An army of the dead shuffled below, making their way down the steep embankment in an invasion of Sholazar Basin. One of the five titan-made pillars sustaining the basin’s lush ecosystem had already fallen to the Scourge. Its loss created a dead, blighted region, now known as the Lost Lands.

The metallic glint was clear now in the morning sun. He unclipped his dragonscale shield and climbed onto the side of the saddle. Veridian gained speed, flying just above the sea of undead toward a level stretch of land near the shaft’s entrance. After a deep, steadying breath, he launched himself off his drake.

He hit the cold earth on his shield, using it like a sled as he zipped across ice and snow, straight into a thick cluster of undead. Skeleton legs smashed, ghouls toppled, and zombies flailed as he raced through their ranks.

With the ventilation shaft directly ahead—a yawning, dark hole in the snow—he shifted his weight forward, crouching low to avoid swiping ghoul claws as he guided his makeshift sled toward the opening. In the final moments before impact, he realized he was moving too fast. He dragged his feet, kicking up a spray of snow, trying to slow himself.

He plunged into the icy gap, colliding with the walls before tumbling into darkness.

He twisted midair, spreading his arms and legs wide, sparks shooting off his boots and gauntlets as they scraped the smooth metal walls. But it was no use—his speed only increased as he careened off the walls. As the light above faded to a pinprick, he clasped a hand around Calvey’s spiderweb amulet, expending one of its two remaining charges.

He continued falling, but slower now, his body sticking momentarily to each wall before he regained control. He came to a stop wedged in the shaft, feet pressed against one wall, back against the other. He caught his breath, then forced himself downward.

A bang from above. Then another, and another. A skeleton bouncing off the walls. He braced himself as it collided with him, sending a shower of bones raining down. Moans carried from above as more undead crawled in after him.

He pushed downward as the banging began again, more creatures toppling down. “Infernos,” he said, and the axe burst into flames as he dropped it down the shaft. It illuminated the passage as it fell another fifty feet, cutting through a vent cover and thunking into the ground below.

Too far to drop, too slow to climb. He dismissed Calvey’s enchantment, angling his feet against the walls as he slid rapidly down.

A furious snarl from above—then a ghoul struck him, jaws snapping as they grappled along the sides of the passage. He kicked off a wall for leverage as they burst through the vent cover into an antechamber. He repositioned the ghoul beneath him as they fell toward the floor.

With a squelch, he pulped the ghoul between his shield and the stone, showering himself in gore. The impact punched the air from his lungs. Pain lanced through his ribs as he rolled off the ghoul’s ruined remains.

He wiped blood from his eyes. Infernos was wreathed in flames and embedded in the floor. Before he could reach for it, a zombie hit the ground next to him, exploding. Retching, he backed away and extended one hand toward the axe, which came free and flew into his grip.

He slumped against the wall. Large stone double doors stood at one end of the antechamber, the other side buried under rubble and ice, a casualty of the avalanche that had destroyed the titan-built facility. Toppled statues lined the walkway, great cracks creeping down marble columns carrying far more weight than they were ever intended to.

A chill crept down his spine as silence settled over the chamber. The weight of tons of ice pressed down on him. The air was stagnant and suffocating. He gritted his teeth, unstopped the iron flask Gabe had given him, and downed the foul-tasting concoction.

His vision shifted, the walls taking on a low glow, and Infernos radiating so brightly that he had to will his magical-detection powers to ignore the axe entirely. He pushed through the cracked doors, entering a hall lined with stone sentinels, eyeing them as he passed. He turned left at the first intersection, then right at the next, pulled by a gravitational attraction toward the largest nearby source of magic.

The hall opened into a sprawling chamber, the reflecting panels warped to create an infinite web of distorted reflections. A maze of mirrored walls filled the room. The light from Infernos danced around him. He navigated the labyrinth as if he'd designed it himself, the potion's enchantment guiding him toward the artifact.

At the maze's center sat a sarcophagus carved from polished obsidian, its surface etched with glowing runes. The phylactery called to him from within, its ancient voice slithering into his brain.

Wear the ring.

He shook his head, dismissing the potion's enchantment so he could focus. The magical glow faded from his vision, leaving only the light of his axe's infinitely reflected flames. The voice bored into his mind as he examined the sarcophagus.

I can give you Namarie back. I can give you Lunara. Wear the ring. Join ussss ...

He paused, steadying his breath before pushing the heavy lid aside with a grunt. Stone scraped against stone. Within lay a slender man, pale as moonlight, eyes closed peacefully, hands folded across his chest. Beneath them gleamed a sapphire-encrusted ring. He hesitated a heartbeat, then snatched it.

Cold fingers shot upward, clamping around his wrist like a vice. The vampire's eyes snapped open, twin pools of burning crimson, fangs bared in a hiss. Vikstone tore free and brought his fist around in a roundhouse punch that snapped the monster's head back, cracking one of its fangs.

An alarm blared, and bright strobe lights erupted from hidden recesses, flashing white and red in alternating bursts that killed his night vision. Blood flowed from a deep gash in his forearm. Blinded by the strobes, he staggered into a wall.

"Leaving so soon?"

He whirled, axe slashing through empty air and into a mirror. The ring pulsed.

Wear the ring, Vikstone. Wear the ring or die.

The vampire hammered into him, taking him through two walls. The ring slipped free. He went after it, fingers closing around the phylactery just as the vampire grabbed his ankle and whipped him face-first into another wall.

Vision obscured by blood, Vikstone extended a hand. “Infernos!”

The axe shattered mirrors as it flew across the room into his grip. Fury surged through him, the axe’s hunger washing over him and guiding his movements. He brought it down, severing the vampire’s hand at the wrist—its claws still latched tight around his ankle.

The vampire shrieked and burst into a frantic cloud of bats, scattering throughout the room. Shards of glass studded Vikstone’s face and arms. With a grunt, he let Infernos fly, destroying one mirror after another as the axe cleared a path through the carnage.

He hurried out into a hall lined by sentinels, which were coming to life all around him. He called Infernos back, sprinting down the hallway and sliding under a colossal stone fist that smashed into a marble pillar.

Wear the ring. Your daughter is waiting, trapped and afraid. She screams your name in the night ...

He scanned the room, spotting a sturdy titansteel panel protecting the facility’s mechanical systems at the far end. He dashed for it, diving between a sentinel’s legs as the lumbering golem reached for him.

He slid to a stop at the panel and waved at the nearest sentinel. “You want me? Come and get me.”

Wear the ring. Wear the ring.

A slow smile spread across Vikstone’s face as he stepped in front of the indestructible panel, waving the sentinel closer.

I will boil Lunara in a lake of blood. Wear the ring. Now. Obey me!

He reeled at the power of the psionic command, vision swimming as his legs buckled, consciousness slipping.

“Daddy, duck!”

Lunara’s voice cut through the haze, snapping him back to alertness. As the sentinel’s fist thundered toward his face, he dropped flat and flipped the ring into the air where his head had been.

No—no—NO!

The sentinel's fist collided with the titansteel panel, trapping the ring between an irresistible force and an immovable object. The explosion rattled his senses and blasted the sentinel's arm off. The golem toppled. Groaning, Vikstone pulled himself upright as the chamber began to tremble, ice and rock raining down.

He ran toward the exit as walls fractured around him. He triggered the final charge on Calvey's amulet and leapt onto the wall, hands and feet sticking to the stone as he clawed his way up into the shaft.

With a hiss, the vampire entered the shaft below him, attacking with its one remaining hand. It caught him across the back of the calf, and he kicked his way free before continuing upward. Far above, the first glimpses of daylight were barely visible.

The vampire snarled as the shaft distorted around it, then collapsed under the mountain, nearly crushing Vikstone's foot. He climbed upward, praying Calvey's enchantment would last until he reached the top.

Finally, he pulled himself over the lip, reaching onto solid ground just as the twisted passage broke free into darkness. All around him, every dead eye on the slope found him at once.

The ground buckled. He looked up—a wall of snow and ice rushing toward him.

He ran through the undead toward the nearest drop and called to Veridian before jumping over the edge.

He landed hard on his shield, bouncing down the steep embankment while clinging for life to its straps. He skipped along the surface on his shield sled, looking back in horror as the avalanche closed in.

A sharp bump nearly knocked him off his shield as he reached another drop, this one much larger than the last. The ground sank away, and he tumbled out of control toward a rocky protrusion fifty feet below.

A pair of claws clamped onto his shoulders, tearing into his flesh. Veridian strained to slow her master's fall, carrying him safely above the avalanche. He hauled himself into the saddle, barely conscious. Behind him, the mountain trembled and swallowed Maker's Hollow.

Ahead lay the Wrathgate, and whatever remained of his friends.



CHAPTER 8

THE STORM PEAKS

Angrathar the Wrathgate, Dragonblight

Calvey sat astride her eagle on the ridgeline above Fordragon Hold, one hand on the reins, the other shielding her eyes against the driven snow. Below, the assembled forces of the Alliance and Horde waited at the valley's entrance, an uneasy coalition, united against the Scourge. The massive saronite walls of Angrathar reared up ahead, the gate forged in the image of the Lich King's own helm, its knife-edged battlements black against the grey sky. A horde of undead monsters stood thousands deep in defense of the fortress.

She scanned the front lines where Mardagan had taken his place among the paladins. Wopak and Gabe were lost somewhere in the ranks, three faces in a sea of thousands. A long procession of siege engines stretched down the center of the formation, catapults and battering rams flanked by columns of infantry. She should be down there with them. Instead, her injury had her strapped into the saddle, legs bound tight so she could draw with both hands while flying.

She didn't like the valley. The cliffs on both sides funneled everything into a corridor barely wide enough for the siege engines to pass two abreast. Good for concentrating force against the gate. Bad for maneuvering if things went wrong. One way in, same way out.

A deep horn blast echoed through the valley, and the ground shook beneath the thunder of thousands of marching boots. She nocked an arrow, bowstring taut, as her eagle lifted off and carried her over the battlefield.

As the siege engines rolled toward the gate, night elf and blood elf archers loosed a volley together, the ancient rivals sending the dead back to their graves. Dozens of zombies dropped under the barrage, but the skeletons and greater undead shrugged off the arrows and kept coming. From above, she could see what the ground troops couldn't—the Scourge wasn't fighting back. The front ranks were fodder. Zombies and rotting skeletons stumbling forward to absorb arrows and blunt charges. Behind them, ghouls crouched low against the frozen ground, packed tight and still, waiting for the lines to close.

The two armies collided and the valley floor disappeared under a rolling mass of bodies. A paladin in golden plate led the Alliance vanguard, his hammer trailing Light with every swing, and for a few minutes, the living pushed the dead back toward the gate. The center was holding. The right flank was strong, anchored against the cliff face. But the left flank was stretched thin, infantry spread too wide trying to keep pace with the center's push, gaps opening between shield walls.

That's where the ghouls hit.

They came fast and low, pouring into the seams between formations. She'd seen wolves hunt the same way—ignore the herd, find the straggler. The left flank buckled.

Calvey dove. She put three arrows into the gap in as many seconds—a ghoul mid-lunge, another clawing at a downed soldier's shield, a third scrambling over the bodies of the first two. It bought the infantry ten seconds to close ranks. Then the ghouls filled in again.

She pulled up and circled, looking for targets that mattered. An abomination hauling a barricade toward the front line. She sank an arrow into its knee joint and it stumbled, blocking a column of skeletons stacked behind it.

Arrows she would have sunk into a wolf's eye at two hundred yards. Against this, she was plugging holes in a dam with her fingers.

Then Angrathar opened.

The saronite gates ground apart and frost vrykul poured through, encased in blackened armor, swinging greatswords and war axes built for hands twice the size of a man's. They hit the Alliance center. She watched soldiers thrown back, formations folding inward as the vrykul drove a wedge straight through the middle of the line. The first vrykul to breach the formation brought his greatsword down on a shield-bearer and the man didn't fall so much as come apart—shield, armor, and the body inside it crushed into the frozen mud in a single wet stroke. The soldiers on either side of him stopped, staring at the stain where their friend had been. The vrykul killed them both before they remembered to move.

A Kor'kron horn answered from the opposite ridge. An orc warlord in heavy plate led a column of wolf riders down the slope, their mounts tearing into the Scourge from the eastern flank. The impact rippled through the undead line. Ghouls turned to meet the new threat, and the pressure on the center eased. The vrykul advance ground to a halt as orc riders circled behind them and cut off their momentum.

Calvey spotted Wopak below, fighting alongside one of the orc riders against a trio of oversized ghouls. She placed an arrow through the eye socket of the nearest and dropped it. Wopak gave a quick wave as she flew past.

She banked to follow the wolf riders as they drove deeper into the Scourge flank. *They were pushing too far.* The valley was too narrow for cavalry to wheel back, and the undead were already closing behind them.

Then she saw it. Near the left flank, where the ghouls had broken through minutes earlier, fallen soldiers were moving. Jerking upright, their eyes already gone. Everywhere the dead piled up, the piles were thinning. The Scourge was making reinforcements from the soldiers who'd come to destroy it.

A hurled boulder clipped her eagle's wing and sent them into a spiral, saddle straps biting into her ruined leg as she hauled on the reins. She leveled out just short of the cliff face and climbed hard. Below, the wolf riders disappeared under a wave that closed over them.

Each kill felt like bailing water from a sinking ship. For every creature that fell, three more clambered over its corpse. Rising out of range, she spotted them.

On the clifftops, figures in violet robes appeared out of the morning fog, dragging iron-bound cauldrons toward a line of catapults at the cliff's edge. Each container roiled with a sickly green sludge, toxic steam hissing through their cracked lids.

The Forsaken had arrived.

“Vashka,” Calvey hissed, recognizing the robed figure standing alongside Grand Apothecary Putress. The Forsaken stood motionless behind his beaked plague mask, watching the battlefield below. She had crossed blades with the clever necromancer during the Burning Crusade and barely escaped with her life.

What are the Forsaken doing at the Wrathgate?

Vashka’s lips curled as she cracked her whip to hurry the cultists hauling the plague cauldrons.

“No, no, no, no!” Calvey veered into a sharp dive, her eagle’s wings slicing through the freezing air as she plummeted toward the front lines.

“Mardagan!” She swept the throng below, trying to spot her friends. “Plague cauldrons above! Fall back!”



Gabe turned toward Calvey’s voice just as an arrow sank into and through his chest. His mouth opened. Nothing came out. Just a sharp intake of air as his knees buckled, dropping him to the bloodstained ground.

“Gabe!” Mardagan dove to cover the priest’s body with his own as another volley of arrows rained down on them. The paladin cried out as one pierced his right calf muscle. The rest bounced off his armor.

“Hang on, Gabe. I’ve got you.” He fished his sapphire pendant from beneath his breastplate. The arrowhead protruding from Gabe’s back dripped with black sludge. His stomach turned.

We’ve been poisoned.

Channeling his powers through the pendant, he laid his hands upon Gabe’s chest and invoked his most powerful healing spell. The pendant flared to life, then flickered, its glow sputtering out as tendrils of black rot consumed the sapphire from within.

Cruel laughter echoed through his mind as his healing powers failed him.

Malthrax.

He tore the pendant off, hurling it away as if it burned his hand. He clenched his jaw, pouring every ounce of his faith and fury into his healing spell. The Light failed to answer his call. In that terrible moment, he understood: he had become so reliant on the artifact that he could no longer feel the Light within him.

“You have ... to go ...” Gabe rasped, reaching toward Mardagan’s face. “Save ... the others ...”

“You’re gonna be okay, I promise.” Mardagan tore off his gauntlets to apply pressure to the gushing wound. “Stay with me, Gabe. Stay with me. Gabe ...?”

Gabe shuddered with a final labored breath before falling limp.

Mardagan’s voice cracked. He scooped the old man into his arms. “I need a healer. Someone help us!”

A pair of ghouls broke through the line of defenders, rushing at the paladin’s undefended back. Wopak crashed into them, shattering one with his hammer and dragging the other to the ground, where he caved in its skull.

Wopak called for his griffin, passing the reins to Mardagan. “Take Gabe and go. I’ll warn the others.”

A strange silence fell over the valley, the battle pausing as all eyes turned to the sky. The first green tendrils of the mist crept down from the cliffs.

“It’s a trap!” Wopak fired off a flare as he scrambled up onto a supply cart. “Fall back. Retreat!”

The Howling Flagon Inn, Frosthold

Gunda Boldhammer hurried through the narrow hallways of the Howling Flagon Inn, arms stacked high with linens. She shoved them into the hands of a frantic chambermaid. “Line the cots in the common room, then flip every mattress in the guest rooms, so the bad side’s up.”

The old dwarf didn’t wait to see if her orders were followed. She stomped downstairs into the taproom, where Explorer’s League agents were scurrying around, transforming the inn into a makeshift triage station. “Rutner, I need those tables out of here, now. We’re gonna need every inch of floor space. And where’s Corig? Someone find me Corig.”

A loud crash came from the back of the inn, followed by a string of muttered curses in thick dwarven. Frosthold's resident surgeon and alchemist, Corig the Cunning, emerged from the cellar, arms overloaded with clinking vials, tattered linens, and smoldering flasks. "I'm coming, I'm coming," he grumbled, climbing onto a stool and dumping his supplies on the bar.

The Howling Flagon had seen its share of injured mercenaries and frostbitten adventurers over the years, but nothing like this. Ravens incoming from the Battle of Wrathgate carried word of a disastrous failure.

Mass casualties at Wrathgate. Wounded inbound to all Northrend settlements. Do what you can.

Corig read the message twice. *Do what you can.* Four words that meant the same thing they always meant: too many wounded, not enough hands, and someone far away wishing you luck from the comfort of a desk.

He'd worked triage after the tunnel collapse at Ironforge South, after the gas pocket blew through Grim Batol's lower galleries. He knew the math. You don't save everyone. You save who you can, and you make that decision in the first ten seconds, and you live with it after.

But a battlefield meant plague. If the Scourge was involved—and the Scourge was always involved—some of these soldiers would be carrying the toxin in their blood.

"Gunda." The grumbling was gone. "Any soldier comes through that door with green on their skin goes upstairs. Separate from the rest. And nobody touches 'em bare-handed."

"We haven't the room to—"

"Make the room." Corig was already sorting his vials, fingers working without his eyes. Clotting pastes to the left. Firebloom tinctures to the right. He counted the doses twice, lips moving. Not enough. Never enough. "If this thing passes by touch and we've mixed 'em in with the bleeders, every man in this building is dead by morning. Upstairs. No exceptions."

Gunda held his stare for a beat, then turned and started clearing the upper floor.

The front door flew open as a breathless human soldier rushed in. "Transport drake incoming, and more are approaching from the west. Lots more."

The inn shook, bottles falling behind the bar as Veridian crashed hard into the snow outside, sliding across the frozen ground until her head forced its way through the doorway. The netherdrake unleashed a terrible squeal.

As medics rushed over, she dropped flat to the ground to allow them to unstrap the unconscious Vikstone from her back. Shards of broken mirror studded the elf's head and neck, his face pale and streaked with blood.

Corig pressed through the medics and took the elf's wrist. The skin was cold as stone, but a pulse threaded beneath his fingers—fast, thin, desperate. He pressed a thumbnail into the elf's fingertip and watched the color drain and return. Sluggish, but it returned.

The pallor worried him. Could be the cold or the blood he'd clearly lost, and plenty of it. The two called for different things. Warm a frozen man too fast and the blood pools wrong, thickens in the gut while the heart starves. But if he was bleeding inside and you kept him cold, the blood wouldn't clot at all. He'd just drain out, slow and quiet, while you waited.

He didn't have much time to sort it out.

"Get him down off there," Corig barked. "Careful now, lay 'im by the hearth. Slow warming—blankets first, not the fire direct. And get clean water into 'im, warm if ye can manage it. Nobody pulls those glass shards till I've had a proper look."

The medics didn't argue. They'd learned that much.

Vikstone didn't stir as they cut the straps and slid him down off the drake, who watched their every move. As they carried the elf inside, griffins landed all around them, each bearing critically wounded soldiers.

"Healer!"

Gunda looked up as a griffin dove toward them at breakneck speed, Mardagan screaming at the top of his lungs as he came in for a rough landing. Across his lap lay Gabe, the poison arrow still protruding from his chest.

The paladin jumped from his mount, dropping the final ten feet to the inn's doorway while cradling his friend. His injured right leg buckled under the impact, taking him hard to one knee. His armor was slick with blood, none of it his own. "Healer." His voice was raw. "He needs a healer."

“Father Gabriel!” Gunda cried out, helping move the old priest. The common room exploded into a frenzy as more injured arrived.

Corig rushed over, pressing two fingers to the side of Gabe’s neck. Nothing. He tilted the old man’s head, checked his pupils by the firelight. Fixed and wide, both of them.

“Already gone.” With a quick shake of his head, he turned toward the next incoming victim. “Get ’im out of here, we need the bed space.”

Mardagan stared down at Gabe’s lifeless body. He lifted the man into his arms, trudging into the common room. On a cot in the corner, he spotted Vikstone being tended to, a medic carefully cleaning the blood from around the glass shards still embedded in his face.

The door swung open again as medics carried in more soldiers. Mardagan let out a soft cry when he saw Calvey and Wopak among them. Both were unconscious, their skin tinged green.

Gunda pointed at the stairs, guiding the medics. “Put the plague-infected upstairs for now. And burn the dead. We can’t be risking an outbreak.”

Mardagan stood frozen in the chaos, Gabe’s body heavy in his arms. *It was all his fault. He had turned his back on the Light, tempted by the power of the cursed pendant. And he led his dearest friends straight into the lich’s trap.*

“Paladin, either help or get outta the way,” Gunda said, shoving him toward the door.

He stumbled out, whispering between sobs, “I didn’t know. I didn’t know ...”



Sometime after midnight, Corig made his rounds upstairs.

The cavalry soldier from Lordaeron had been talking when they brought him in. Asking after his horse. Corig had liked him for that. Now the man lay still, the tremors that had wracked him for hours finally gone. Corig tilted the flask he’d placed beneath the cot to catch what the man’s kidneys had left to give. Dark as steeped tea, and barely a mouthful in it. He set it down without checking again.

He'd seen this trajectory before. Miners pulled from collapsed shafts, their crushed limbs flooding the blood with the wreckage of dead muscle. The body's filter choking on what the dying flesh dumped into it. Once that filter went quiet, the poison had nowhere to go.

At the next bed, a medic was spooning shoveltusk broth into a shaking woman. Corig crossed the room and pushed the ladle aside. "Not the broth. Clean water. Nothing else."

He moved to the firebloom tinctures on the windowsill. Fourteen doses. Over thirty patients. He measured a half dose into a clay cup, counting the drops under his breath. "Half doses on the cold ones," he told the nearest medic. "Space 'em out. I don't care how bad they're shaking. Ye warm 'em slow or ye kill 'em fast. Those are the only two choices."

Some of these soldiers still had a window. Narrow, closing by the hour, but there. If only a healer with real power arrived before the body gave out, anyone who could reach in and burn the toxin clean.

He passed the cavalry soldier on his way to the stairs. The man's chest had gone still. Corig pulled the blanket up and signaled for the bed to be cleared.



The first thing Vikstone felt as he drifted back into consciousness was the oppressive heat. Stifling and feverish, like lying inside a forge. His mouth was dry, his throat raw. When he tried to shift, pain flared across his ribs and jolted up his spine.

Relief washed over him as a cool, wet cloth was laid across his brow. "Easy, Vik," Mardagan said, squeezing more water onto the elf's feverish forehead. "Try not to move."

Vikstone forced his eyes open and immediately regretted it. He groaned and tried to roll to his side before thinking better of it.

"Did you find it?"

Vikstone managed a nod. "Yeah, got caught ... in the ... blast."

"From what I hear, you damn near brought the mountain down on top of you." Mardagan forced a smile.

“Did you ... kill Arthas?” Vikstone croaked through parched lips.

The silence stretched until Vikstone opened his eyes again. The paladin looked like he hadn't slept in days. His armor was gone, replaced with a wrinkled, stained linen shirt.

Vikstone took in his surroundings. The inn-firmary was packed wall to wall with soldiers, dwarven medics scurrying from cot to cot. “What ... what happened?”

“Wrathgate was a trap.” Mardagan's head hung low. “The Forsaken, led by Grand Apothecary Putress and Vashka Mournblade, betrayed the living and dead alike, unleashing plague cauldrons into the valley.”

Vikstone pushed himself upright. His heart sank as he spotted Calvey a few beds away, her complexion grey, and her breathing shallow. Next to her bed, Wopak kneeled in prayer, something Vikstone had never before seen from the old dwarf.

“Calvey?” Vikstone swung his legs off the cot. “Calvey, no ...”

Her hand felt cold in his as he crumpled at her bedside, looking back and forth from Mardagan to Wopak. “What ... how ...?”

“I got myself trapped between plague clouds in the fighting,” Wopak said. “The damn fool flew straight into the maelstrom to save me.”

“How are you standing?” Vikstone looked the dwarf up and down. Wopak's skin still held a faint grey cast, but his eyes were clear, his hands steady.

“Corig says me blood fought it off. Some old earthen stubbornness buried in the bones, he called it. The toxin tried to take hold and me blood turned it t' stone before it could settle.” He looked at Calvey. “Should've been me in that bed.”

“Will she ...?”

“Too early to say.” Wopak stared blankly into the fire. “Still waiting on the all clear to transport her to the Argent Vanguard, where they'll be better able to treat 'er.”

Vikstone looked around the common room. “Where's Gabe?”

Mardagan looked away, a sob catching in his throat. “He didn't make it.”

The words didn't land at first. They sat in the air between them like something spoken in a foreign tongue. Vikstone looked at Mardagan's face for the lie, for the correction, for the part where the paladin said *but he's stable* or *but they think he can pull through*. It didn't come.

He walked to the cot where Gabe had been laid. Someone had crossed the old priest's hands over his chest and closed his eyes. His silver beard was matted with dried blood, but his expression was peaceful—the same gentle face that had lectured them on vrykul etymology while they squirmed, that had shielded them with magic while barely able to stand, that had stepped between Vikstone and his worst impulses more times than either of them could count.

Gabe is dead, Calvey mortally wounded. He had repeatedly placed his personal mission over the safety of his friends. Had he killed Vashka Mournblade, instead of letting her go in exchange for information on Malthrax.

Vikstone pressed his forehead to Gabe's. He stayed there for a long time. When he finally straightened, his eyes were dry. He moved toward the front door, unable to breathe. Mardagan followed, catching the elf's arm as he lurched out into the Northrend air.

"I should have been there," Vikstone said, sagging against the wall of the inn, burning up with fever.

"Wouldn't have mattered. The whole thing was a setup. Malthrax lured us into a trap. And I helped him."

"You did what?"

"I didn't know. I would never ... but it turns out my pendant was cursed—"

"You've been wearing a cursed artifact this entire time?" Vikstone spat, triggering a coughing fit.

"I didn't know it was cursed! I kept having dreams that I thought were divine guidance, but it was Malthrax."

"He's been in your head *this whole time*? How long have you had that pendant? Did you lead that monster to my family's doorstep back in Elwynn?"

Mardagan stammered, stepping back. "Long enough. I don't know."

Vikstone took him by the throat, pinning him against the wall of the stables. "Is he still in there?"

"No, I don't think so. I got rid of the—"

"Go." Vikstone shoved him into the stables. "And do not return. Gabe trusted you. I trusted you with my life, with their lives."

“I’m so sorry, V—”

“Go. Now!”

Mardagan swung himself into Al’ar’s saddle, failing to find any words. As the phoenix flew away in a trail of embers, Vikstone collapsed onto a pile of hay bales.

The Howling Flagon Inn, Two Weeks Later

Vikstone stirred in his bed, groaning and clutching at his eyes against the daylight pouring in through the windows. The light seared into his brain, still damaged from the explosive blast beneath Maker’s Hollow.

“The dead live,” Corig said, hurrying over to the elf’s bedside. “You’ve been drifting in and out of it fer days now.”

Pulling his pillow over his face, Vikstone rolled onto his side. “What’s wrong with ... my eyes?”

“It ain’t yer eyes, lad,” Corig said, pulling the heavy blind closed. “You got yer head rattled by that explosion you got yerself caught in. Is it true you destroyed his phylactery?”

Vikstone gripped the bedpost, hauling himself into a seated position. “I have to find Namarie.”

Corig grabbed him by the chin and leaned close. “Not happening. Yer brain’s all scrambled, not to mention the rest of ya. Yer on the sidelines for another week, anyway.”

“I don’t have a week. I don’t have a day,” Vikstone said. “You know what I’m after. What you may not know is that my wife and daughter are being hunted in some sort of hell dimension by Malthrax, who is now vulnerable for the first time. I have to strike now before he can recover.”

Corig let out a long breath, picking at his beard in thought before finally speaking. “Ever heard of the Battle of Wyrms’ Bend? During the fall of Grim Batol, twenty Wildhammer dwarves held the pass fer three days against the whole Dark Iron army. Saved thousands of lives by coverin’ the Wildhammer retreat. This was back in the old days, when dwarves fought until their hearts gave out.”

“What does this have to do with me?” Vikstone covered his face to block out the afternoon sunlight.

“There’s a reason there were only twenty of ‘em at Wyrms Bend,” Corig said, casting a quick glance in both directions. He leaned forward with a conspiratorial whisper. “That’s how many doses they had.”

“Doses of what?”

“Death’s Howl.” He let the name sit. “A berserker brew that’ll keep a dwarf upright through hits that would drop a yeti. Banned in every kingdom, and fer good reason. It’ll keep you swingin’ fer three days straight, but the crash at the end is often fatal, even fer dwarves.”

Vikstone reached for him, hand closing around the dwarf’s lapel and pulling him face-to-face. “And you have access to this?”

“Access to it? I’m the only living dwarf who knows how to make the Howl.”

“I need some. Now.”

“Understand, lad. If you do this, it may well be a one-way trip. To my knowledge, none but dwarves have ever taken the Howl and damn few lived to tell the tale.”

“Three days is all I need.”

Corig took another drag off his pipe, exhaling a thick plume of colored smoke. “Even if you save yer wife and wee one, you may not be around to enjoy their company. Is that a trade yer willing to make?”

“This isn’t about me,” Vikstone said. “Whatever the price, I will gladly pay it a hundred times over. Just get me back in the fight. I beg of you.”

Corig’s Laboratory, Beneath Frosthold

The room reeked of sulfur, lamp oil, and dried blood.

Vikstone walked down the steep wooden steps, one hand pressed tight against his aching ribs, the other clamped onto the railing. He ducked low under a ceiling strung with bundles of dried herbs and bat carcasses wrapped in thin strips of copper wire. Floor-to-ceiling shelves held jars of pickled eyeballs in murky brine, vials of glowing liquids, and dozens of bones and organs floating in viscous fluids. Near the bulkhead doors stood a pair of life-size bronze bulls, coated in dust.

“This is your lab?” he asked, clutching the wall for support.

Corig pushed past him, lighting sconces with a flint striker. “It ain’t the Legerdemain Lounge. I do what I can with what I’ve got. This way.”

The dwarf led him deeper into the chaos, past tables crammed with dusty alchemic gear, toward a small round door in the back. Vikstone crouched through, entering a cramped circular chamber with a thick stone slab bolted to the floor. Heavy leather restraints hung loose on each corner, stained crimson.

Corig wiped down the slab with a rag only marginally cleaner than the surface itself. “You’ll need to lie down.”

He grunted and collapsed onto the slab. “How long until it works?”

“Minutes.” Corig strapped in his right leg. “But yer too busted up to be movin’ about until the Howl’s had a chance to patch you up a bit. You may well be able to handle the pain, but there are limits to what flesh can take before giving out, and you’ve reached yers, lad.”

Corig locked down his other leg, then his right arm, cinching the restraints tight.

“Is all this really necessary?”

“Yep.” Corig grabbed his left arm and wrestled it into position before binding it as well, leaving him securely fastened to the slab. “Yer gonna fight like a banshee to get free once the Howl takes a hold of ya, but I’m leaving you down tight to heal till morning. Then you can go deal with yer lich friend.”

“No, no, I don’t have time for that.” He strained against his bonds.

“That’s my offer, take it or leave it. I ain’t setting you loose in a berserker rage with a broken body. You’d shake yourself to pieces in no time. You want the Howl, those are the terms. So, what’ll it be?”

He glared at the dwarf. “Fine. Release me at first light.”

Corig turned to a safe embedded in the stone floor, pulling the lid open with a grunt. From within, he withdrew a small crystal vial filled with a red glowing substance. “This concoction is older than the both of us,” he said. “I’ve been tweaking the recipe for decades in an effort to make it more stable, but the Howl is what it is. You sure you want this? There ain’t no going back.”

Vikstone nodded, jaw clenched. “I’m sure.”

Corig removed his belt, stringing it across Vikstone's forehead and strapping his head down tight against the slab. After unstopping the vial and inserting a hypodermic needle, the dwarf turned back toward his patient, movement slow and deliberate, as if carrying a bomb.

"Yer gonna hate this and yer gonna hate me, not necessarily in that order." Corig brought the needle to the side of Vikstone's neck. "Last chance to back out."

Vikstone gritted his teeth. "Do it."

Corig inserted the needle and pushed the plunger.

Vikstone's world erupted in agony.

His back arched, his body convulsing as the liquid burned through his veins. His scream shook the vials on the shelves. A series of pops and cracks echoed through the lab as his broken ribs shifted, snapped, and re-knit at unnatural speed. Blood vessels bulged beneath his skin, his lips peeled back in a feral grimace.

Corig wiped his brow before replacing the vial and needle in the safe. He stopped in the doorway, looking back at Vikstone. "Sleep if you can. You've got about ten hours 'til sunrise, give or take. Try not to die."

Vikstone thrashed as the dwarf swung the door closed, sealing it from the outside with a heavy iron bar.

The world burned. Vikstone floated, adrift in a sea of molten pain. In his mind, he stood in the ruins of Wrathgate, bodies torn and scattered all around. Gabe lay crumpled before him, a black arrow through his chest, eyes vacant. Calvey dangled lifeless from her eagle's harness, her pale skin laced with green glowing veins. Mardagan reached toward him, crumbling to ash, carried away on the wind.

Standing before the gate in violet robes, Vashka Mournblade laughed at him. The laughter grew louder, filling his mind until it shattered like glass, his vision going dark. His muscles knotted as he fought against his bonds.

A soft voice pierced the darkness. *Oh, Vik ... what have you done?*

The door opened, flooding the small room with lantern light. Corig peered in, not daring to enter fully. "Still with us?"

"Let me out." Vikstone thrashed against the restraints. "Now!"

Corig inched closer. “What’s yer name?”

“Vikstone.”

“Where are you right now?”

“Wherever Veridian brought me. I’m in your basement lab. I don’t know what town this is.”

Corig nodded, satisfied that he hadn’t fully lost his mind just yet. “Yer in Frosthald. Wopak took yer draenei friend to the Argent Vanguard last night. They’ve had a bit of luck treating folks like her who only caught a glancing blow of the cloud.”

As Corig removed the first restraint, Vikstone tore his arm free, reached over to unbind his other arm, then his legs, and hopped off the slab. He glowered. Corig held up both hands.

“Easy now, lad.”

Vikstone was no stranger to berserk rages, but Death’s Howl was an entirely different beast. His pulse hammered behind his eyes, every breath feeding something that wanted out. He hissed through clenched teeth. “Malthrax.”

Corig stepped between him and the stairs, backpedaling as the elf bore down on him. “And do you know where to find this Malthrax?”

“I will tear Icecrown apart with my bare hands until he shows himself.”

“Right, sure, but you will definitely die if you do that, so hear me out.” Corig stood his ground, staring up at the elf. “Thorim’s the one you’ll be wanting to talk to. Wopak said this Malthrax of yers was a vrykul once upon a time. If so, Thorim will know where to find ’im.”

“Where can I find this Thorim?”

“The Hyldnir up in Brunnhildar can get you in to see ’im. The frost vrykul aren’t exactly known fer their love of menfolk, but a vrykul turned lich is an abomination in their eyes. They have some drake-riding combat trial called the Drakkensryd happening today, and the winner gets an audience with Thorim.”

“Brunnhildar it is.” Vikstone pushed past him, fists clenching as he ran up the stairs.

Brunnhildar Village, Storm Peaks

Vikstone's boots crunched across the frost-covered ground as he sprinted toward Brunnhildar, leaving Veridian in a nearby clearing.

In the village, warrior women in thick, fur-lined armor gathered around an open square, their stern faces turned skyward as lightning-blue proto-drakes swooped down.

"I require an audience with Thorim," Vikstone said, stopping near the largest group of hulking Hyldnir warriors, each standing nearly twice his height.

A hooded warrior, Astrid Bjornrittar, stepped forward, casually wielding a spiked club about his size. "Thorim grants audience only to she who proves herself in the Drakkensryd. No man may compete, much less an elf."

Bouncing on his toes, suppressing his rage, Vikstone let out a sharp breath. "Give me one and I'll prove myself."

The gathered warriors laughed. "The proto-drakes accept only daughters of the storm, little elf. Your kind cannot tame them."

"Then I'll use my own," he said, barely suppressing the urge to reach for Infernos.

The warrior shook her head. "It is forbidden. Only those chosen may ascend to Thorim's temple."

He growled low as he looked past her. Hyldnir combatants were climbing onto the proto-drakes. The great beasts unfurled their wings.

The riders lifted off one by one, rising to a chorus of cheers. Vikstone fixated on the last drake, its wings extending, legs coiling beneath it.

He burst through the crowd, sprinting toward the final drake as it launched. He cut toward a tall, slanted wooden beam carved into a dragon's head at the top, overlooking the square. He dashed up the beam and threw himself off.

One hand clamped around its talon, he flailed beneath it. The beast banked sharply, trying to shake him, then righted itself and raced to catch the pack. The ground fell away as he reached for a grip.

He clenched his jaw as the icy winds battered him, legs swinging over the dizzying drop. His muscles burned, but it only fueled the fire in his veins. Blindly, he wrapped his free hand around the stirrups and pulled himself upward.

The rider jabbed down with her spear. He caught the shaft, bracing his legs against the drake's flank. He yanked. The warrior toppled from her seat, past him into open air as he scrambled onto the drake, eyes on the next closest rider.

He dug his heels into the drake's side, earning a furious shriek. It bucked and fought his commands. Ahead, the other competitors glanced back in surprise before urging their drakes into a tighter ascent toward the distant temple.

He closed on the nearest drake as his own fought beneath him, its head snaking back to snap at his legs. He ran up its neck and leapt as his stolen mount peeled away.

Vikstone slammed into the back of the nearest rider, iron gauntlets raining down blows on the base of her skull. On the third strike, her neck gave way with a crunch. She toppled forward and slid free.

The remaining six drakes bunched close together as they approached the summit, a ring of great stone pillars surrounding the Temple of Storms. He spurred his mount onward. Sensing it had reached the limits of its patience, he crouched low, preparing to pounce as he closed on the pack.

With a roar, he sprang into the air just as his proto-drake dropped away in a barrel roll. He barely snatched onto the harness of a rival drake, dangling from it. The Hyldnir rider stabbed at him with her dagger. He slid, grabbing at the stirrups on the opposite side as the dagger slammed into her own mount. The drake buckled hard.

The impact hurled him into the air. He snatched the reins of another drake and swung beneath its snapping jaws. At the full extension of his swing, he released the reins, twisting mid-air to land behind a towering Hyldnir. She reached back to grab him. He seized her wrist and circled the opposite way. Bracing both feet on the beast's ribs, he yanked hard, strangling her with her own arm and wrenching her from the drake.

Her dying screams echoed up from below, but Vikstone was already sprinting up the drake's neck. Some buried part of him recoiled. These were warriors, not Scourge, but the Howl burned the thought to nothing before it could slow his hands. For a single heartbeat between kills, the world opened beneath him—the Storm Peaks sprawling in every direction, lightning forking silently between columns of stone that dwarfed the

temple, the sky above them dark and boiling with thunder that never stopped. He was higher than he'd ever been, and still climbing. He dove toward the lead mount.

He latched onto its tail, clinging tight as the remaining Hyldnir engaged in aerial combat around him. He inched his way up the spiked tail, ditching his gauntlets in exchange for a better grip.

Up ahead, the finish line came into view—a thick red ribbon stretched between stone columns. The rider turned, jabbing at him with her giant spear. He swung beneath the drake to avoid the spear, latching onto the bottom of the harness, legs dangling free.

His arms burned with exhaustion as he clung to the harness with one hand while the other unsheathed his dagger. He slashed the blade down the center of the harness, severing it. The rider's saddle slid sideways off the drake with her still in it. Clinging to the opposite side, he was yanked up onto the drake as she fell away with a shriek.

Vikstone seized the reins in triumph, heart racing as the finish line approached.

Then the creature rolled.

The world spun as he was flung free, fingers clawing at empty air. The temple platform rushed up to meet him. He slammed onto the stone tiles. The force skidded him across the polished floor, through the ribbon, and into the base of an enormous throne.

Panting and bruised, Vikstone slowly lifted his head. An immense construct of stone and metal loomed over him, at least thirty feet tall, electricity crackling through its frame. Thorim studied the breathless elf as Hyldnir warriors landed all around them, weapons drawn.

Astrid bowed. "We'll have the elf eviscerated for disturbing you, my lord."

Thorim raised a hand, his deep voice rumbling. "Peace, Astrid. The elf has come far. Let him speak."

With a grunt, Vikstone hauled himself to his feet. "I seek Malthrax," he said. "He was vrykul once. Clan Icevein, a noble house. Now transformed into a lich. He has taken my wife and daughter. I need to know where to find him."

Astrid's demeanor softened. She dipped into a curt bow before leading the other Hyldnir back to their drakes.

Thorim studied Vikstone in silence, lightning crackling behind the construct's eyes. "Malthrax the Undying," he said. "A name forever cloaked in shame. His path is dark and filled with treachery ... as is your own."

"Where can I find him?"

"Your blood burns like wildfire, elf. A poison with purpose?"

"Death's Howl. It's keeping me upright long enough to take down the lich. I have two, maybe three days left, and I need your help."

Thorim bent to examine him more closely, poking him in the shoulder with a giant finger. "You are not strong enough to survive the horrors of Malthrax's lair. The lich is indestructible so long—"

"I already destroyed his phylactery. Where is he?"

Thorim's chuckle shook the ground. "Perhaps I was mistaken, elf. You will find Malthrax in Balargarde Fortress, surrounded by an army of the dead."

Vikstone whistled. Moments later, Veridian landed beside him, tilting her neck at the construct.

"You will need allies," Thorim said as Vikstone climbed onto his netherdrake.

He shook his head, digging his heels into Veridian. "Tried that and got them all killed, or nearly so. I'll not see another friend fall for my cause."

Thorim's voice followed him into the air, quieter now. "I lost my wife to my brother's treachery. I turned on those closest to me and faced the betrayer alone. It cost me everything." A pause. "Do not repeat the mistakes of a god, little elf. You cannot succeed alone."

Vikstone called back over his shoulder. "Watch me."

Royal Bank of Stormwind, Dalaran

The arcane seal shimmered and clicked as Vikstone pressed his palm against it. The stone door rumbled aside, revealing his and Namarie's personal vault. Racks of enchanted weapons lined the walls, chief among them Thori'dal. Namarie had set aside her prized longbow when they made the mutual decision to retire from a life of adventure. The decision that sealed their fate.

If only we'd kept our weapons close. If only we'd fortified our home. If only we hadn't turned our backs on the war against the Scourge.

He moved quickly, feeling the dwarven concoction roiling inside him. He grabbed Thori'dal off the rack, slinging it over his shoulder. Next, he selected a small silver buckler and Moondancer, Namarie's dreamsteel scimitar, gifted to her by the Cenarion Circle. If he managed to find them in this Emerald Garden, he'd need Namarie's help fighting their way out.

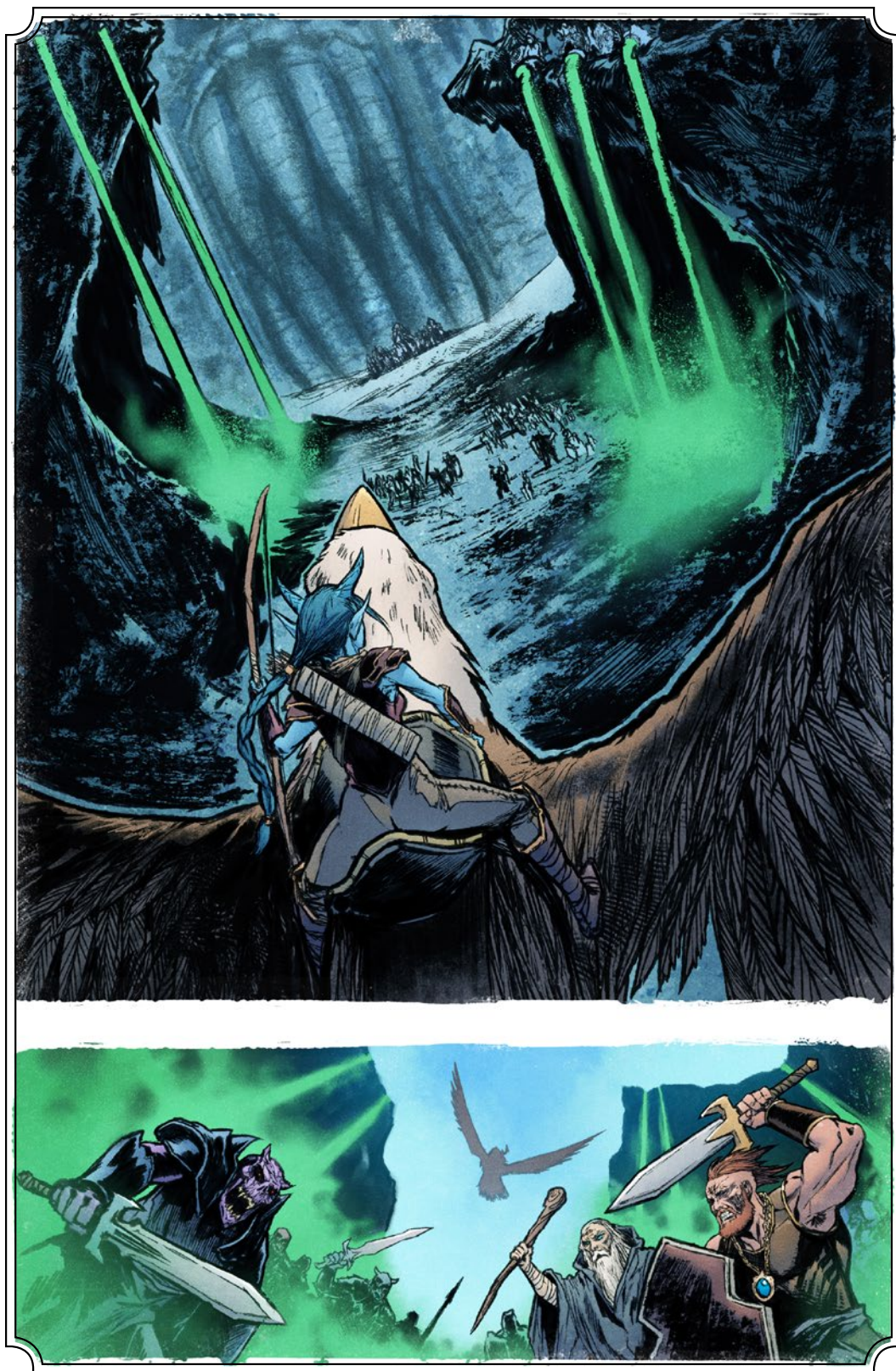
He turned toward an alcove to grab gauntlets to replace those he'd lost on the Drakkensryd, and caught his reflection in the mirror on the back wall.

A stranger stared back.

Fresh scars crisscrossed his face, the worst splitting the bridge of his nose, which had been bent to one side. His right shoulder hung lower than the left, his posture twisted.

He stepped closer, squinting at his reflection. Reached out slowly, pressing his hand to the glass, half expecting it to pass through like some cursed portal. He shook his head and turned away, the Howl pulsing through his veins as he headed for the vault door.

Balargarde Fortress awaited.



CHAPTER 9

ICECROWN

Balargarde Fortress, Icecrown

Snow fell sideways across the jagged spires of Balargarde, driven by a wind that never stopped. Malthrax stood motionless on the dark stone balcony overlooking the valley. Far below, an endless sea of undead monstrosities gathered for war as a flash of lightning lit up the night sky, illuminating the fortress.

Footsteps approached from behind on the cracked stone. Vashka Mournblade moved with a confident grace, her tattered violet robes billowing in the wind, a jeweled dagger on her belt. The necromancer dipped to a knee and lowered her head, holding her posture until Malthrax gestured for her to rise.

“My lord.” Vashka’s voice was silk. “The Wrathgate still burns. Tens of thousands lay dead. And all blame is falling on the Forsaken ... just as you intended.”

He didn’t turn. “You have proven useful, Vashka.”

She smiled uneasily. “Thank you, Master. I do try.”

The silence stretched, broken only by the wailing wind. Malthrax finally spoke. “Where were you when it was destroyed?”

“When what was destroyed, my lord?”

He turned slowly, the emerald in his eye socket flaring with cold fire. “My phylactery. My soul. Torn from its vessel and cast into the void. Destroyed forever.”

Vashka gasped, staggering back. “You ... you lost it?”

Malthrax stepped into her shadow, glaring down at the necromancer. “No, not lost. Taken. Destroyed by an elf with whom you are well acquainted.”

The color drained from her face. “I ... I don’t understand.”

“But you do,” Malthrax said. “You understand perfectly well. You thought to strike a bargain with my enemy to save yourself. Your life in exchange for the location of my old lab.”

She withered under the lich’s gaze, shrinking away.

“You led him to it. He slaughtered my followers, destroyed my laboratory, and dropped a mountain on Cinderak before the wyrm had even risen!”

Vashka retreated from him until her back was pressed against the stone wall. “How long have you known?”

“There are no secrets from me, Vashka.” His voice dropped to a whisper.

“I—”

He raised a finger, strangling her voice in her throat. “I would have killed you long ago, but I needed someone foolish enough to take the fall for Wrathgate. For it wasn’t I who betrayed Arthas and sided with the Forsaken ... it was you, and all will be forgiven when I bring the Lich King your heart on a platter.”

The wind lashed at them as the words settled into place, and for one terrible moment, Vashka saw clearly. Az’kharoth. Vikstone. Wrathgate. Every thread she’d pulled had been slack because he’d already cut it from the other end. She had spent her entire undeath making certain she would never again be the puppet—and she had been dancing on his strings since the day he let her believe she was free.

Her hand slipped toward the dagger at her hip.

“You betrayed me,” Malthrax said. “And in doing so, betrayed everything we were building. I tried to give you immortality, and in return, you destroyed mine.”

Vashka lashed out, lunging with her dagger at the lich’s heart. He seized her wrist, the dagger falling away as her bones shattered in his grip. She clutched her ruined hand as she dropped to her knees.

Dark tendrils shot from his fingertips, ensnaring Vashka and dragging her toward the balcony’s edge. Malthrax followed, the necromancer struggling against the bonds as she was lifted into the air.

“Wait, I’m sorry.” Her voice cracked. “I’ll kill him for you, I promise. Just give me another chance.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Malthrax said with a vicious smile. “The elf will be arriving shortly.”

A green glow enveloped Vashka. As the writhing tendrils tore at her flesh, he plunged his hand into her chest.

She gasped, the light fading from her eyes as the lich tore out her still-beating heart, leaving a gaping hole in her ribcage. Her skin cracked and flaked away on the wind, her mouth frozen open in a silent scream.

With a flick of his wrist, Malthrax launched the corpse over the edge. Leaning over the railing, he watched the broken body of his former assistant implode and paint the rocks below. He retreated into his fortress to prepare for his guest.

Battlescar Spire, Icecrown

The ridge of Battlescar Spire was slick with ice and barely wide enough to stand on. Vikstone gripped a jagged outcropping with one hand, his boots finding purchase on frozen rock, and looked down.

Far below stretched the full, awful breadth of Malthrax’s empire. To the west, Balargarde Fortress jutted from the glacier, its twin spires rising into the dawn sky. The undead, hundreds deep, gathered before its gates—zombies and skeletons packed shoulder to shoulder, ghouls pacing the flanks, and high above them all, a great skeletal dragon circled the valley in slow, patient orbits.

Vikstone turned east, and his heart sank further still. If Balargarde was the head of the serpent, the Fleshwerks were its rotting heart. Enormous vats churned with roiling green sludge. The smoke rose from a dozen vents, thick and sweet with the smell of rendered fat. Limbs larger than his entire body hung suspended on rusted hooks as black-robed necromancers scurried through the carnage like flies on carrion. They tested limbs that had belonged to a dozen different corpses before the surgeons stitched them into something new.

Flesh giants. Vikstone watched as one of the creatures was hoisted upright.

The Howl screamed in his blood, demanding violence, but the odds tempered his fury. If Malthrax marched on the Argent Vanguard—where Calvey was recovering—the Alliance outpost would be gone before word reached Dalaran.

He reached for Infernos. Flames erupted along the blade as his fingers closed around the hilt, the weapon's rage amplifying his own. With a last glance at the Fleshwerks, he turned his full focus on Balargarde Fortress.

Malthrax awaited.

The Emerald Garden, Inside the Shard of Yogg-Saron

It stalked low through the underbrush, its powerful limbs drawn tight beneath it. Blank flesh stretched across where its eyes, nose, and mouth should be, but it didn't need those senses to hunt. The Faceless were drawn to fear, the thumping of a terrified little heart up ahead calling to it like a siren's song.

Its clawed fingers curled around gnarled roots as it closed on its prey. The creature's featureless face split into a terrible maw of interlocking fangs as it sensed the hunt neared its end. Soon, it would feast.

Then it sensed her. A small elven child, standing alone in the center of a clearing, her violet eyes wide in terror. It growled, drool dripping from its fangs as it bounded straight at her.

A flash of shadow was its only warning before a night elf dropped onto its back from an overhanging branch. In each hand, she held a shard of broken bone fashioned into a makeshift dagger. Namarie slammed her daggers into both sides of the creature's neck.

The Faceless bucked and contorted, reaching for the elf with its clawed hands. She clamped her legs around the creature's waist, slipping her right foot behind her left knee to lock in the hold and prevent it from turning to face her as she stabbed it again and again.

One bone shard tore across the beast's throat as the other buried itself into the top of its head. It shrieked as it fell. She rode it to the ground, driving the shard deeper until it stopped twitching.

Namarie straddled the monster's corpse, eyes wild, hair matted with dried blood.

Behind her, a small pair of feet padded quietly through the moss.

"I told you to cover your eyes," Namarie said. She took several deep breaths before turning to face her daughter.

"I got scared," Lunara said, clinging to Namarie's leg. "Can we go home now? I want to go home."

Namarie knelt, wrapping Lunara in a hug while her eyes never left the treeline.

"Shhh," she said. "None of this is real, baby. It's just a bad dream, one that we're in together. Right now, you're snuggled up all comfy in your bed, sound asleep. The window is open, and there's a cool breeze blowing through. It's a beautiful moonlit night."

Lunara sniffled. "Is Teddy Yeti there?"

Namarie pulled her daughter close to hide the tears streaming down her cheeks as she fought to compose herself.

"Of course he is," she whispered, rocking Lunara in her arms. "Soon, Daddy and I will come wake you up, and you can help me make pancakes, and then we'll spend the whole day at the lake."

"How much longer till we wake up, Momma?"

"I don't know, baby. I don't know. But we have to keep moving."

Eyes narrowing, Namarie studied the treeline and offered a hand to Lunara, who clasped onto it without hesitation. Together, they pressed forward, keeping the green crystal wall to their right as they crept along its glowing curve. The jungle seemed to close in tighter with every step, forcing Namarie to slash through overhanging vines to reach the next clear stretch of path.

Then she stopped cold.

At the base of a warped tree, she saw a mark scratched into the bark—an arrow pointing in the same direction they were walking. Namarie let out a soft gasp, crouching to examine the marker she had left weeks earlier. They'd been following the wall this entire time and had now ended up back where they'd started.

"We've been walking in circles," Namarie said, her mind racing as she looked toward the maze of twisted trees and writhing vines at the center of their prison. "So, if there are no exits on the wall, I guess we head inward."

She squeezed Lunara's hand, brandishing her bone dagger with the other. "Stay close, baby."

They stepped away from the wall, for the first time venturing into the deeper wilds of Malthrax's Emerald Garden.

Battlescar Spire, Icecrown

Lightning-flecked clouds rumbled over Icecrown as Vikstone looked down at the seemingly endless horde of undead outside Balargarde Fortress. Veridian nudged his shoulder, and Stormclaw paced in anxious circles around them, letting out a low, steady growl.

Vikstone ran a hand along her neck as he looked into the eyes of one of his oldest and dearest companions. He reached under the drake's scaled belly, unfastened her saddle, and hauled it off her.

Veridian slit her eyes and snorted a puff of smoke, glaring at the elf.

"I know, I know," Vikstone said, his gaze drifting to the massive skeletal dragon above the keep, easily ten times the size of his drake. "I have to do this one alone. You wouldn't make it, and I can't lose you. My place is here, yours is in Elwynn Forest. Go, my friend. Go and live free."

Veridian looked back at him and Stormclaw a final time before launching herself into the air with a beat of her powerful wings. Thunder cracked above as she streaked away into the storm.

Stormclaw's lip curled back, and she rumbled when he turned to face her. She backpedaled as he approached, eyes tight, fangs showing.

"I'm sorry, old friend, but this is the only way," Vikstone said, kneeling to unfasten the straps on Stormclaw's saddle. "I can't have you two following me in there, and I know you would. Not this time."

The great cat whimpered and bumped her head hard into his leg as he removed her saddle. He crouched next to her, wrapping both arms around her muscular neck. "Go home and never return to this frozen hellscape. If I make it, you'll see us there. If not ..."

Her white fur was coarse against his face, still warm beneath the plate armor she'd worn since before Outland. The teal gems in her shoulder guards had long since cracked from years of battle, but they still caught the light.

He ruffled the fur on the back of her neck. "I just need to know you'll be okay. That something, anything, will be okay. You've been a loyal companion, Stormclaw. It's time to go home now. To be free."

He rose, stepping away and pointing south. The great cat dropped her haunches, sitting unmoving and staring defiantly at him.

His voice cracked. "Don't make me do this. Just go. Please, go."

Stormclaw snarled, the hair on her back spiking as she stared him down. Vikstone took a sharp breath before barking out, "Leave Icecrown now. This is my final command to you."

The cat turned away, glaring over her shoulder. He sighed as she jumped onto a boulder, making her way south. He watched her silhouette fade into the swirling snow, leaving him alone in the land of the dead.

After a long pause, he withdrew a tightly wrapped canvas bundle from his pack. His grip trembled as another wave of Howl-induced rage crashed over him. Holding one corner, he gave the bundle a hard shake, causing it to unfurl into a makeshift hang glider. The goblin-made contraptions were notoriously unreliable. The strong winds, which already threatened to pull the glider from his grip, would make steering all the more difficult.

He strapped himself into the glider as he studied the pattern of the dragon flying over Balargarde. As the creature completed its southern sweep and turned its attention north, Vikstone sprinted to the edge of Battlescar Spire. With a grunt, he hurled himself into the sky, an updraft catching the glider and slinging him sideways.

The raw air tore at the exposed skin of his face as he struggled to keep the glider level. The undead horde shuffled hundreds of feet below. Robed necromancers led a flesh giant through the swarm, the third of the flesh giants he'd spotted so far. It stumbled like an infant learning to walk. Like a puppet whose strings had not yet been properly tensioned.

He searched the sky ahead, the dragon nearly past the fortress now, beginning its turn. He angled the glider downward, picking up speed as the fortress walls rushed toward him.

The dragon banked back into view, its empty eye sockets flickering with pale fire. Vikstone cursed under his breath, yanking the release strap early. The glider sheared off course and crumpled against the tower wall as he dropped down to the parapets. His legs skimmed the stone wall before he landed in a roll, crashing into and through a rickety wooden door in a hail of splinters.

As he sprawled into the empty guard room, his hand snapped to the hilt of *Infernos*. Crawling for cover behind a table, he held his breath, listening for any response to his chaotic arrival. Nothing. He spat blood and pulled himself to his feet, eyes locked on the stairwell leading down into the heart of Balargarde.

The Emerald Garden

Malthrax drifted silently through the heart of his creation, robes whispering over moss. Soft green radiance shimmered from the crystal canopy, lighting dozens of emerald soul spheres strung across the landscape, each one catching the light the way dew catches a web.

Frozen within each was a soul, trapped in a moment of greatest agony. Writhing vines connected each sphere to the ground, channeling the power generated by their fear directly into the lich. He dragged a skeletal finger along a sphere as he passed, savoring the horror of the soldier within as an abomination tore him apart. Over and over and over.

Malthrax let out a cold laugh, power flowing into him from all sides as he strolled through his soul garden. At the base of a gnarled tree, a pair of soul spheres lay side by side, husband and wife. He adjusted the barrier between the orbs, making them momentarily transparent. The husband, trapped in the moment of their son's death, could now see his wife in her separate prison, entombed in the same memory.

Within, her screams echoed endlessly as she collapsed sobbing to the floor.

When their eyes met across the barrier, recognition flared—a moment of shared anguish that transcended their individual hells. He observed with clinical interest as desperate hope flickered between them, the futile belief that they might escape together. How adorable.

The lich allowed them thirty seconds of panicked connection before resealing the barrier, harvesting the resulting despair as hope withered into fresh torment. The emotional discharge from freshly crushed hope was particularly potent. He had experimented with preserving happier memories in his early work—wedding days, children’s laughter, moments of pure joy. But fear, he had discovered, was far more potent. These brief glimpses of connection were essential to his art. Without them, the souls could grow numb.

His smile faded as his gaze fell upon a pair of empty vessels reserved for Namarie Moonswept and her daughter, both somehow still evading his Faceless wardens tasked with herding newcomers to their cages. There was nowhere to run, however. No escaping the Shard of Yogg-Saron. They would be captured, as would Vikstone; the family would be reunited at long last.

The culmination of his harvest.

Malthrax continued on through his garden, approaching a rustic cabin encased in a glistening dome. A perfect recreation of the home he once shared with Lysandra.

He stepped through the surface without resistance, the membrane parting like mist. Within, the recreated cabin stood exactly as he remembered it. Fire crackling in the hearth, air thick with the scent of fresh pine and warm bread. On the floor lay a rug emblazoned with the silver and blue of the Icevein clan. His mother’s work. He never told Lysandra where it came from.

Lysandra sat in a chair by the window, wrapped in a shawl and staring vacantly into the distance. Her long raven hair, now streaked with silver, fell in gentle waves across her back. She looked pale, her eyes heavy with dark circles.

And then she saw him. A moment of recognition sparked in her eyes. Then confusion. Then fear.

Malthrax raised his hands in a gesture of peace. “Lysandra,” he said. “I mean you no harm.”

“What have you done to me?” She stepped backward into the kitchen as he approached.

“You are safe. I recreated our home down to every detail. I made it perfect. For you.”

“Where am I?” Lysandra shivered, her voice unsteady.

Malthrax's lips curled back, exposing rotting teeth. He caressed her cheek with his withered hand. "You are home."

She slapped his hand away. "Do not touch me."

"I am your husband," Malthrax said.

"My husband was a man of honor," she said, reaching behind her for the handle of the heavy iron skillet on the stove. "You aren't my husband ... you're the monster that killed him."

She whirled, swinging the skillet into Malthrax's face. The iron rang against bone, knocking him back. He turned, the Shard of Yogg-Saron in his eye socket radiating a green light that filled the house. He stalked toward her, spitting each word.

"I ... did ... this ... for ... *you*."

Lysandra gasped as he pinned her against the wall by her throat, her legs thrashing as he lifted her. "I became this for you. It was the only way to save you, and this is how you repay me? You owe me your life, your soul. You owe me everything!"

The lich's head snapped to the side, his hand rising to the shard. "Vikstone," he hissed.

Malthrax released his grip, letting Lysandra fall, coughing to the floor. He stormed from the house. It was time to add another soul to his collection.

Cathedral of Light, Stormwind

Morning sunlight streamed through the Cathedral of Light's high arched windows, casting golden rays across the marble floor. The sanctuary was quiet in the way only stone churches are quiet. The soft footsteps of a young squire approached from the nave.

Mardagan knelt alone at the altar, clad in simple robes, head bowed in prayer. His face was covered with fresh claw scratches, and blood seeped through a bandage on his thigh. Towering statues of saints looked down upon the paladin from all sides.

Behind him, the squire cleared her throat. "Sir Mardagan?"

He didn't look up.

"Your armor has been restored, sir," she said. "And polished."

There was a pause, then he nodded, eyes still closed.

The girl hesitated. "If you'd like, I could accompany you on your next—"

"I work alone. You're dismissed, squire."

She gave a nervous bow, boots clacking on the stone as she hurried away. Mardagan sighed before returning to his prayers. But the prayers wouldn't hold.

Are you jealous that I'm now a more powerful healer than you are?

He'd said that to a man who was only trying to help him. And Gabe had stepped back. Just stepped back and said nothing.

"I thought I might find you here," came a gentle voice from behind him.

He turned, slowly rising to his feet. A gnome woman no taller than a human child stood in the center of the aisle, dressed in a flowing lavender gown, her golden hair pinned up into a tidy bun. Despite her youthful appearance, the sadness in her smile belonged to someone much older as she looked upon the broken paladin.

"Chromie?" Mardagan said before catching himself, dropping to a knee, and lowering his head in respect. "I'm honored by your presence, Chronormu. Why are you here?"

"I might ask the same of you." Chromie cupped the paladin's chin in her hand, raising it to look into his sunken, exhausted eyes.

"I require penance," he said, turning away.

"But is this penance or flagellation?" Her gaze softened. "You've spent the past two weeks charging alone into fights you shouldn't survive. You're scaring the people who love you, Mardagan. And frankly, you're scaring me."

"You think I don't know that? I betrayed my only friends, and I was abandoned by the Light in response."

"You were tricked," she said. "Your thoughts poisoned by a monster who used your love against you. You weren't abandoned by the Light, Sir Mardagan. You couldn't feel it in that moment because you were trapped in a lich's shadow. A shadow you are no longer in."

"How can I possibly know that to be true? How can I know my thoughts are even my own? Besides, they don't want my help."

"True though that may be, your help is needed," Chromie said. "Your friends are in grave danger."

"Would the Light even answer my call?"

"Have you tried?"

He looked away before admitting he hadn't. The fear of reaching out to the Light and again feeling only darkness in return had paralyzed him into inaction. She was right. This wasn't penance—it was cowardice. Hiding from his friends in hopes of being forgotten, instead of trying to earn forgiveness.

The paladin gazed up at the statues of saints, raising his arms to the sky. "Holy Light of Creation, I beg of you to heed the call of your humble servant. To bestow upon me the power to battle the evil that plagues Northrend. To heal my friends who have fallen ill, and to lead the charge unto the breach once more. Light, hear my cry. Allow me to serve your will!"

A small sphere sparked to life in his hands, rapidly expanding until it enveloped his entire body in glowing radiance. Mardagan gasped as his feet lifted off the floor, the scratches on his face mending as the Light flooded through him like water through a burst dam. Tears of joy streamed down his face as the Light seeped into his skin, his body absorbing the powerful blessing.

A high-pitched screech sounded through the upper cathedral, stained glass rattling in its frames as Veridian swept overhead. Chromie tilted her head toward the door.

"That's for you."

He recognized Veridian's call and rushed to the cathedral entrance, throwing open the double doors to find the drake shrieking at him in the courtyard. His heart dropped. Veridian's saddle had been removed. *Vikstone had gone after Malthrax alone.* He must have set his mounts free before departing on a suicide mission.

Mardagan stormed back into the cathedral, his voice echoing across the grand entryway.

"Squire, fetch me my armor."

The Emerald Garden

The underbrush opened onto a winding pathway of luminescent moss as Namarie stepped through a writhing tangle of vines, bone shard clenched tight in her hand. Shoulder-high emerald spheres lined the path, pulsing with faint inner light. The air grew still in this part of the Garden.

Behind her, Lunara clung to her mother's free hand, her wide violet eyes scanning the twisted surroundings, absorbing every detail.

She crouched low as they approached the first orb. A thick, pulsing vine connected to its base, the sight of which made her blood freeze. Inside the prison, a woman was trapped beneath a thick layer of ice, fists pounding in vain against the unyielding surface, searching for an opening that didn't exist.

She searched the surface for latches or openings, then slashed at the vine, to no effect. In every prison, another tale of horror played out. A mother sobbing as her child was taken by a creature in the dark, a bloody soldier screaming while stretched out on a rack, a ranger overrun and torn to pieces by a slaving horde of ghouls.

Lunara tugged on her mother's hand, whispering, "Are they asleep?"

"Yeah, baby. They're just sleeping. Don't look inside."

At the end of the row stood a large dome. Inside, nestled in a clearing with tidy flower beds and a curling trail of chimney smoke, stood a small cottage. The sound of a woman sobbing within drew them closer.

Namarie placed her hand on the surface and felt no resistance. The membrane parted.

"Stay close," she said, stepping through the barrier and into the cabin's front yard.

The perfectly manicured flowers and scent of fresh-baked bread were exactly as they shouldn't have been. Everything about the cabin felt wrong. A beautiful lie. She tightened her grip on her shard as she pushed open the front door, Lunara close behind.

The rustic kitchen smelled welcoming despite its apparent disuse, but signs of a recent struggle were everywhere. A skillet lying on the floor, a toppled spice rack, the kitchen table turned askew.

She slid open one drawer after another, her lips curling into a grim smile as she withdrew a meat cleaver, the first proper weapon she'd found in the weeks they'd been trapped. She leaned the skillet against the kitchen door to serve as an alarm, then signed to Lunara to follow.

Lysandra sat hunched over in the living room, rocking back and forth in her chair, eyes vacant. Namarie approached, cleaver held at the ready behind her back.

Lysandra looked up at the approaching night elf, her eyes red with tears. "If you've come to kill me, get on with it. I'll never love you. No matter what form you take or what tricks you play. You cannot make me."

She crouched in front of Lysandra, setting down the cleaver behind her. “I won’t hurt you,” she said. “I’m Namarie, a prisoner here, just like you. My daughter and I are trying to find a way out. Can you help us?”

Lysandra’s eyes went wide as she spotted Lunara partly hidden behind Namarie. “Is she ... is she real?”

“Yeah, we both are,” Namarie said, taking Lysandra’s trembling hand in hers. “Malthrax captured us. I don’t know how long ago. Weeks, maybe. Months? How long have you been here?”

“I think I’ve always been here,” Lysandra said, her gaze darting to the door. “I was someone else once, long ago. A princess from a noble family. I think she died, that I died, and he built this place around me. You shouldn’t be here. He could return at any moment.”

“Malthrax has been inside this house?”

“He just left.”

She seized the cleaver. “If he was here, that means he has a way in and out. It means there’s a portal somewhere. Which way did he go?”

Lysandra pointed out the window toward a winding path through the soul spheres. “He always comes from that direction.”

Namarie scooped Lunara onto her hip and headed for the door, pausing in the kitchen. “Come with us.”

Lysandra recoiled, shaking her head. “There are monsters beyond the emerald veil. Terrible creatures with no—”

“The Faceless.” Namarie held up her jagged knife, fashioned from the creatures’ bones. “Are you coming or not?”

Balargarde Fortress, Icecrown

The stench of death clung to every stone of Balargarde Fortress. Vikstone crept through a wide corridor on the ground floor, his boots making no sound on the frozen stone. Flickering light from torches lining the passageway cast grotesque shadows across the architecture. Stone gargoyles perched on ledges above. Just statues, he told himself, but their eyes seemed to follow his every movement.

The Howl wanted him to smash them. Wanted him to break everything. It pulsed behind his ribs like a second heartbeat, faster than his own. He kept moving.

He kept to the shadows as he slipped through a crumbling arch into a long corridor lined with rotting tapestries and rusted suits of armor. A sound ahead stopped him in his tracks: a heavy dragging noise, and the clack of chitin on stone. His skin dimmed as he let the shadows take him, slipping behind a column just as three creatures lumbered into view. Hulking arachnid horrors, their spiked carapaces nearly impenetrable. *Crypt lords*.

Chittering excitedly to one another, they dragged behind them a sled piled high with corpses. Humans, elves, dwarves, orcs ... all future soldiers in Malthrax's growing army.

He considered ambushing them, destroying their cargo before it could be reanimated. But even if Infernos could pierce their shells, he wouldn't be able to kill all three before they raised the alarm.

He held his breath as they passed mere feet from his hiding place. The trailing crypt lord paused, mandibles twitching as it turned its head toward Vikstone. He readied his axe, the Howl turning his stillness into a fight against his own muscles. The creature's milky-white eyes flared with pale light for a heartbeat before it turned away and continued on.

Once the horrors rounded the corner, he stayed pressed against the stone, counting to thirty. The bodies on that sled would be standing by morning. New soldiers, stitched and reanimated. If Vikstone fell tonight, he'd be on the next one. The Howl didn't mind that thought.

He slipped out of the shadows and continued onward, skirting the edge of the torchlight. He willed Infernos to life, flames licking the axe's blade to light his way. At the far end of the corridor, a staircase wound down into the bowels of the fortress, the steps slick with ice and streaked with blood.

The axe's light reflected off ancient Vrykul runes carved into the walls—the language of Malthrax's own people, the people who had left him on a mountainside to die. He saw no signs of movement, drew his cloak tighter, and started down the spiral stairs.

The staircase narrowed as he descended deeper into the lich's lair. The howl of the wind faded behind him, replaced by the structure's quiet creaking. He hadn't been alone—truly alone—since Elwynn.

He reached the landing and peeked into the hallway ahead. A procession of black-robed necromancers guided an undead monstrosity down the passage. The gaunt bone golem lumbered behind them on mismatched limbs, groaning as they led it into a side chamber.

Vikstone darted forward, ducking low as he moved past the chamber unseen, coming to a stop outside a wooden door warped with age. Frost and oxidation streaked the iron bands, but the handle moved freely. He cracked it open, just an inch.

Beyond was a room unlike any he'd ever seen. The circular chamber had been carved from a single glistening black sapphire. Along one wall stood a mirror frame, a large portal rippling within. It wasn't the gateway that drew his attention.

On the far side of the chamber, a figure ascended a spiral staircase. Ten feet tall, cloaked in dark vestments. His form was unmistakable, as was the green glow emanating from his right eye socket.

Malthrax.

Vikstone sprinted toward the lich's exposed back.

A flash of movement drew his eye to the portal, beyond which lay a jungle bathed in pale green light. But it was what he saw in the distance that brought him to a sliding halt. An emerald wall stretching skyward ... the wall Namarie described seeing.

The portal's edges curled inward as it began to close. He looked back at the staircase, Malthrax no longer in sight. For just an instant, he considered pursuing the lich, but instead bolted for the portal.

Scrambling across the frozen ground, he drove Infernos into the floor for leverage, yanking on the hilt to fling himself toward the portal. He reached back. "Infernos." The axe ripped free of the stone and shot into his hand as they vanished together into the Emerald Garden.

The Argent Vanguard, Icecrown

Snow swirled across the battlements of the Argent Vanguard, the blizzard intensifying as the morning wore on.

"Looks like we're in for a rough one," Corig said, looking out the window of the infirmary before drawing the shades closed.

“As opposed to every other day in this paradise,” Wopak said, from Calvey’s bedside.

Calvey lay unmoving on a cot, breathing shallow but steady as her body battled the poison raging through her. Her hand felt cold and clammy as Wopak held it in his own.

“Anything yet?” Corig maneuvered through the cramped infirmary to crouch on the opposite side of Calvey’s bed.

Wopak shook his head. “No, but she ain’t squirming like she was. I think she’s finally getting some rest.”

Corig placed a cool wet cloth across her forehead, pressing two fingers beneath her jaw as he did. With his other hand, he touched the skin at her wrist—warmer now. He’d been tracking her water since they brought her in. The color had lightened overnight.

“Aye, more than a good sign, that be.” Corig sat back on his heels. “If the plague was gonna turn her, it woulda happened by now. She’s a fighter, this one.”

“Aye, that she is,” Wopak said, chuckling softly. “Back in training, she and Namarie used to get into these wild brawls, like nothing I ever seen. They matched up so square that neither would admit defeat. They’d both end up bruised and bloody, and laughing. Like sisters, those two. I think losing Namarie hurt her worse than she let on.”

Corig let out a wistful sigh. “It’s been entirely too long since I’ve been in a proper scrap. Instead, I’m stuck here wasting away in an infirmary, tending to them least apt to pull through. ’cept fer your friend, of course. I’m sure she’ll be fine.”

The door flung open, Mardagan filling the doorway, surrounded by winter’s lash. The paladin was clad in gleaming silver and gold plate mail, a greatsword strapped across his back. His eyes found Calvey.

“By my mother’s braided beard ...” Wopak said, rising to greet Mardagan, who pushed past him.

“No time to explain,” Mardagan said, hurrying to Calvey’s side. He knelt by her bed, gesturing toward the heavens. Light bloomed from his palms, swelling until it engulfed first him, then Calvey, then the entire room.

The surrounding soldiers stirred, Calvey’s eyes fluttering open as the healing spell expelled the poison from her system.

“Mardagan?” she said, sitting up and looking around the infirmary. “Where are we?”

Corig's jaws dropped open as an infirmary full of terminal patients began rising from their beds, stretching as if awakening from a restful sleep.

Wopak rushed over, pulling Calvey into a hug. "I thought we lost ya, lass."

"How long was I ...?" Her face scrunched up in confusion as she looked around the room. "Where's Vik?"

Mardagan rose to his feet, the golden light retracting back into a small glowing sphere before fading away.

"He's in danger. Malthrax is holed up in Balargarde Fortress, and Vik went in alone."

"Damn fool elf," Wopak muttered. Beside him, Corig shifted uneasily.

Calvey grabbed her leather armor from the bedside stand. "We have to go. We have to go now. Where's my bow?"

Mardagan raised a hand to slow her. "Malthrax has an army two hundred strong ... and a dragon. We can't do this with the three of us, but I have a plan. Wopak, is there a portal merchant in town?"

"Aye," the dwarf said, looking at the stairs. "Arcanist Taelis is upstairs in Room 3. Shall I fetch 'im?"

"We'll need two portals," Mardagan said. "First, we need to get Calvey to Shattrath."

"What am I supposed to do in Shattrath?" Calvey said, finding her bow under the bed and slinging it over her shoulder.

"Nothing. Your task lies to the northeast ... in Netherstorm."

Calvey gasped. "Wait, no ... you mean?"

"It's our only hope." He paused. "Tell him Namarie is in danger, and he'll come. Wopak, think you can wrangle up some firepower?"

"Aye, I know of an alchemist itching for a good scrap," Wopak said, shooting Corig a quick grin.

Mardagan clasped a gauntleted hand on his friends' shoulders. "We'll rally at the gates of Balargarde. Move with all haste. Vik's already inside."

As Wopak hobbled up the steps to fetch the arcanist, Mardagan strode to the bar and scribbled a note on a piece of parchment. He rolled it up and thrust the paper into the bartender's hand, alongside a heavy pouch of gold coins.

“Deliver this to the Shadow Vault,” he said. “Send your fastest raven. The fate of Northrend may depend on it.”

The Emerald Garden

Vikstone landed in a roll, springing to his feet with Infernos at the ready. Behind him, the portal blinked shut, leaving an empty mirror frame in its place. Green mist clung to the jungle floor. Warped trees stretched high above toward a domed ceiling of green glass.

Despite a thick canopy of trees, there were no scents of the forest. No blowing breeze, no insects or backdrop of animal noises, no signs of life. It felt like walking through a painting, lifeless and empty. A chill ran through him. He was inside the lich’s Emerald Garden.

“Namarie! Lunara!” he called out as he tried to get his bearings. Gauging by the position of the dome overhead, he was near the center of this emerald prison. Namarie had told him they were following the perimeter wall, but in which direction?

Sensing movement beneath his feet, he leapt aside as the moss-covered ground bulged and split. A nightmarish figure crawled up through the gap—humanoid but moving on all fours, limbs contorted and too long. Pale, rubbery skin stretched taut over a featureless face.

As it turned, the thing’s blank face split horizontally, revealing a jagged maw full of uneven teeth. Behind it, another clawed its way out of the hole, then a third. The last one hissed as it emerged: “Shur’nab ... Yogg-Saron.”

It’s so cold, and we’re being hunted by faceless creatures.

These were the monsters hunting his wife. Hunting his daughter. He surrendered to his rage, letting the Howl take over.

With a low growl, he rushed to meet the first creature’s charge. He surged upward as if for a leaping attack, and it took the bait, springing into the air to meet him. Dropping into a slide, he swung Infernos across its belly as it flew past.

The creature’s skin split open where the axe struck, but nothing spilled out. It whirled about, the wound already closing, pale flesh knitting back together

like wet clay filling a groove. He hacked into the second—a deep cut across its shoulder that would have taken a man’s arm off. The flesh parted and reformed behind the blade.

They were made of this place. Spawned from the shard itself, the same Old God corruption that formed these walls and this false sky.

But where the edge failed, the fire bit. Each time *Infernos* flared, the creatures flinched. Where flame touched their skin, it blackened and didn’t close. Titan-forged steel against Old God flesh. The fire remembered what it was made to burn.

He caught an overhanging branch and hauled himself up as they snapped at him, their claws shredding bark as they swarmed up the tree. He needed distance.

As the first Faceless flopped down from the branches in pursuit, Vikstone flung *Infernos*. The burning axe spun through the air and buried itself in the center of the creature’s head, pinning its corpse against the tree trunk. Where the flames touched, the flesh didn’t reform. It charred and crumbled.

The remaining two closed on him. He backed away—slowly, deliberately—keeping the pinned axe at their backs.

“*Infernos*. Return!”

The axe tore itself free from the tree and the split skull, flying through the air toward him—and directly into the back of a creature’s head. It flailed in panic, reaching back to dislodge the flaming weapon.

He called out again. It answered, rending straight through the monster’s head before flying back into the grip of its master.

The last Faceless closed the distance before he could reset. He drove a knee into its chest to check the charge, but the creature took it without slowing, its momentum carrying them both to the ground. It snapped at his face, a fang raking a deep gash on his cheek. Inside grappling range, the axe was useless. He rotated the haft across the monster’s throat and pressed, the only thing between its maw and his skull.

It wouldn’t be enough. The beast’s claws penetrated his armor, digging into the flesh beneath. With a swipe, it finally batted *Infernos* aside. Blood pooled beneath them, the creature’s mouth opened impossibly wide as it reared back. A thick, grey tongue uncoiled from the maw, dragging across his face. And froze.

Its jaws flapped ineffectually as a meat cleaver thudded into the back of its skull. As it fell away, Vikstone's jaw dropped.

"Namarie?"

His wife's hair was disheveled and matted with dried blood, her eyes feral and dark as she looked down at him, a bloody meat cleaver in her hand. For one terrible moment, she looked at him the way she'd looked at the creature she'd just killed.

"Vik?"

Namarie pounced on her husband as he tried to regain his feet, both of them tumbling to the ground in a furious embrace. "You came for us! I knew you would. I knew you would."

"Daddy?"

Vikstone gasped, looking past Namarie to find his daughter staring at him. He rushed to her, scooping her in his arms. "Lu! Daddy's here, baby. I'm right here."

"I was so scared," she sniffled, clinging to him. "Momma kept us safe, but there are monsters and I don't like it here, and I want to go home. Can we go home now?"

"Soon, baby. I brought you something," Vikstone said, reaching into his pack and withdrawing a battered stuffed yeti toy.

"Teddy Yeti!" she said, her face lighting up as she wrapped her toy in a ferocious hug.

Namarie's gaze softened as she studied her husband. His armor and torso torn by claws, his eyes bloodshot and wild, his posture lopsided. She gently caressed his bloody face.

"What have you done to yourself, my love?"

His hands trembled. "Whatever it took."

"Your ribs ..." Namarie crouched to examine the gashes, already mending due to the Death's Howl rampaging through his veins. "How is this possible?"

Lysandra cleared her throat, drawing his attention to her. Wearing a pristine gown, the high elf watched with calm detachment, still unclear how much of what she was seeing was real.

"This is our new friend, Lysandra," Namarie said.

Vikstone stared. He approached with Lunara still perched on his hip. "I know that name from Malthrax's journal. You're his wife?"

Lysandra sighed. “Maybe once ... I don’t know what I am. Or where we are.”

“This is a soulstone,” he said, gesturing to the crystalline ceiling above. “We’re inside the Shard of Yogg-Saron.”

“Am I ... dead?” Lysandra asked, clutching his arm.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “He brought you back from the Void, and built this place for you inside a relic of the Mad God.”

Namarie took in a sharp breath, placing her hands over Lunara’s ears. “Does that mean ...?”

Vikstone shook his head. “It’s ... complicated. Your physical bodies are safe at Violet Hold.”

“There are others,” Namarie said. “Dozens of people trapped in these pods. I think he’s using their fear as a power source. We have to save them.”

“We’ll do what we can,” Vikstone said. “Right now, we need to figure out how to get you out of here.”

A smile fell upon Namarie’s face as she spotted her enchanted longbow, Thori’dal, slung over Vikstone’s shoulder. She took the weapon from him, giving the string a test pull, an arrow of light magically appearing as she drew the bow taut. Next came a silver buckler and her dreamsteel scimitar, Moondancer.

Finally, Vikstone withdrew from his belt pouch the necklace, fashioned from a Star of Elune, that he’d given Namarie on their wedding night.

Gazing into his wife’s eyes, he reached behind her neck to fasten the pendant, which took on a warm blue glow as it settled onto her chest.

“I pledge my life to you,” he said, repeating his vows from the night he first gifted the pendant to her. “For now, and always.”

“For now, and always.” Namarie placed her hand over the pendant, her eyes fluttering closed as its warmth flowed through her. When she reopened her eyes, her gaze was calm and fierce, her fist tightening around the hilt of her scimitar. She had barely managed to defeat the first Faceless they encountered by beating it to death with a rock. She had then extracted its leg bone and broken it in half to fashion a pair of crude daggers she’d been using while surviving on the run. But with Thori’dal and Moondancer now back in her possession, Namarie Moonswept was all done running.

“So where can we find Malthrax?”

“There’s a portal.” Vikstone gestured behind him. “I snuck through right before it closed, but we can set up an ambush and hit him the next time he—”

“The next time he does what?” The lich’s raspy laughter echoed through the garden as the face of Malthrax appeared large and looming on the dome above.

Lunara gasped, darting behind her father’s leg as she stared up at the projection.

“Welcome to my Emerald Garden.” The lich’s eye socket flickered with an icy green flame as he glared down at them.

Namarie slung her bow off her shoulder, nocking an arrow as she scanned the surrounding forest. Vikstone pressed Frostbite into Lysandra’s trembling hand. Axe in hand, he took up the opposite position from Namarie, keeping Lunara and Lysandra between them.

Malthrax laughed at their maneuvering. “You fight to save your family, but what happens when their years run dry? Like the Curse of Flesh claimed my people? I offer immortality.”

“A lich who lost his phylactery is in no position to speak on immortality,” Vikstone said.

“And little good that did you,” Malthrax said. “I offer preservation. Your wife and daughter, frozen at the height of their beauty, their love, their life. Together forever. Is that not what every father dreams of?”

Vikstone reached back to ensure Lunara was still safely behind him.

“I got her,” Lysandra said, wrapping the young elf in a protective hug.

“How sweet,” the lich said. “Since you’re so fond of them, Lysandra, I’ll be sure to place their spheres near the house, so you can hear their screams.”

A gust of air surged through the garden, cracks spreading across the lich’s visage until the image shattered into mist. At the edge of the clearing, a thick cluster of vines disentangled moments before Malthrax burst through them. The lich snapped down the visor on his helm, his emerald eye shining within, and advanced on his prey.

Namarie was five arrows into her opening volley by the time the lich stepped free of the vines, her arm a blur as she sent a cluster of arrows thudding into his torso. Malthrax stalked toward her.

Vikstone roared as he rushed to intercept. He kicked off a mossy log and flew at the lich, Infernos pulled back for a downward strike.

“Begone from my domain,” Malthrax said, waving a hand dismissively.

The elf froze in midair, then was buffeted by an irresistible force, sending him flying backward through a thicket of trees, over a trio of Faceless running to join the fight ... and vanished. The portal snapped closed behind him.



CHAPTER 10

THE BATTLE OF BALARGARDE

Balargarde Fortress, Icecrown

Vikstone tumbled to a stop on the cold sapphire floor, scrambling back toward the now-empty mirror frame.

“No, no, no. Namarie, run!” He frantically searched the room for any way to reactivate the portal. His eyes settled on a torch against the far wall. If he couldn’t get into the Emerald Garden, maybe he could lure Malthrax out of it.

The threadbare tapestry in the upstairs hallway erupted into flames as Vikstone put the torch to it, moving room to room and setting fire to anything that would burn.

“Malthrax! Face me!” He ignited a long table whose dried, ancient wood burst into smoke and flame.

As he returned to the hallway, an angry chittering drew his attention to the stairwell, where a hulking arachnid crypt lord was emerging, two more right behind it. The fire raging around them climbed the axe’s blade, drawn to it like iron to a lodestone. Infernos drank it in. Vikstone sent it spinning down the stairwell.

The axe buried itself in the torso of the first crypt lord and ignited, fire pouring from the wound and engulfing the panicking creature. The other two monsters scurried around it and charged to attack.

He launched himself at the second crypt lord. The axe returned and slammed into his grip mid-flight, and he drove it down into the creature's carapace with every ounce of fury the Howl could give him, shearing off three legs in a single stroke. The third crypt lord reared back, expelling a tangle of webs.

The webs ensnared Infernos, pinning it against the wall. Not bothering to recall it, the elf lunged for the wounded crypt lord, wrenching back its armored scales with one hand and tearing into the exposed throat with the other—gauntlet strikes and bare fingers, punching and clawing until the thing crumpled in a gurgling mess of blood.

Vikstone charged straight at the remaining monster, vaulting barehanded onto its back. The creature scuttled about, trying to dislodge him as he unleashed a volley of iron fists onto its head. The scales cracked and splintered under the barrage, revealing vulnerable flesh beneath. With a scream, he plunged his fist downward, burying his arm to the elbow in the creature's brain.

He rolled off the still-twitching corpse and shook the gore from his arm as he called to Infernos. The axe burned away the webs as it tore itself free.

Flames licked at wide ironwood columns as the blaze spread through the hallway. He torched a small storeroom full of dried goods. "Malthrax, fight me or I burn it all down. I'll destroy your army, your castle, your world!"

The Emerald Garden

"Stay back," Namarie whispered, positioning herself between Lysandra and the lich. Lunara clutched Lysandra's leg, peering wide-eyed from behind it.

"Careful, Momma," Lunara said.

Namarie's jaw set as she dropped her bow and unsheathed her scimitar, Moondancer. "You want me? Here I am!"

Malthrax waved a hand at the elf. A swirling cloud of death magic formed before him, soulfire crackling within as he willed it forward. The screams of tortured souls pressed against Namarie from every direction as the cloud enveloped her.

The Star of Elune in her necklace pulsed with a warm blue light, cutting through and dispersing it harmlessly. Malthrax snorted in annoyance, unsheathing his greatsword and moving to meet the elf's charge.

Namarie feinted high as if to leap, then slid to her knees under the lich's counterstrike, slashing Moondancer across the withered remnants of his calf muscle. Malthrax growled in pain, limping as he reeled on her.

"Oh, you felt that one, didn't you?" she said as she pivoted for another pass. Moondancer was a gift from the Cenarion Circle, guardians of nature and enemies of the dead. If the lich could feel the blade's sting, the scimitar should be capable of killing him.

Before she could press her advantage, a trio of Faceless burst through the underbrush, sprinting unevenly on all fours toward Lysandra and Lunara.

"Run. Back to the house." Namarie rolled under a horizontal slash of Malthrax's greatsword to snatch up her bow.

The first arrow was loosed before she completed her roll, striking the front leg of a Faceless and sending it tumbling hard to the ground. Lysandra caught Lunara, hurtling through the rows of emerald prisons, the beasts gaining on them.

She fired a pair of arrows into an overhanging branch as Lysandra darted beneath it, dropping the branch onto the closest Faceless and entangling it. The beast she had shot in the leg whirled toward Namarie, its maw opening wide.

She unleashed an arrow into the creature's mouth, then a second, and a third, the monster dead before it hit the ground, her stride never slowing. The two remaining Faceless clambered over the fallen tree, eager to reach their prey.

After casting a quick glance back at Malthrax, she fired another pair of arrows, each finding its mark in the body of a Faceless. The creatures turned to face her. She tossed her bow aside and drew Moondancer.

She twisted to avoid a leaping Faceless, its maw grazing her cheek before she brought her silver buckler around in a shield smash. Teeth flew through the air as it stumbled away, but Namarie was already focused on its companion, which pressed forward, slashing with its front claws.

Sensing movement behind her, she dropped, throwing up her buckler just in time to partially deflect Malthrax's greatsword. The blow dizzied her, sending her sprawling

to the ground, blood running down her temple. Before she could regain her feet, the Faceless charged.

She lunged from her knees to meet the beast, driving Moondancer into its open maw and out its back, tearing upward until the blade ripped through its split skull. The second Faceless hit her full force, slamming her hard to the ground.

Another flash of movement from the side was all the warning she needed, kicking the beast into the air just high enough for her to roll free before Malthrax's blade sliced the monster in half. She staggered back to her feet as the lich strode toward her, his decaying lips curled back in a victorious smile.

"You cannot resist me, Namarie," Malthrax said. "In this domain, who is God if not I? You will yield to me, and your suffering and fear will fuel my empire to even greater heights."

Namarie spat blood, pushing herself upright. "You think I fear you? I pity you. A pathetic monster who built a fake world to rule over because you're a failure in the real one. Your own wife despises you. You are nothing. An honorless lap dog to the lich king."

Malthrax swung with a wild diagonal stroke intended to split her in two. She stepped toward the lich instead of away, slipping inside his reach and plunging Moondancer to the hilt in his chest.

Malthrax gasped, staggering, impaled on her blade. She watched, wide-eyed, as the lich's choking cough turned to sputtering laughter. His hand shot out with lightning speed, clamping onto her throat and lifting her from the ground.

Namarie thrashed, trying and failing to kick her legs up over his arm. Malthrax pressed her into the wall of Lysandra's house, crushing the air from her. She reached for the lich's emerald eye, as if to tear it from his head, but her strength was fading, her arm dropping limp as her consciousness slipped away.

"Leave her alone!" Lysandra drove Frostbite into the lich's back. The dagger flashed with holy light and sizzled as it pierced his flesh.

Malthrax dropped Namarie and whirled on Lysandra, glaring down at her. "You dare strike me?"

Lysandra struck again with the blade, leaving deep gashes on the lich's chest. "I hate you. You did this to me. To us. Die!"

A sharp backhand sent Lysandra spinning across the perfectly manicured lawn, Frostbite skittering away into the grass. As Malthrax moved toward his fallen wife, Lunara bolted from the house, seizing the dagger with shaking hands and staring defiantly up at the lich.

"I'm not afraid of you," Lunara said, tears streaming down her face as she stood protectively over Lysandra.

Malthrax smiled. "Oh, but you are, little one. And your fear is ... delicious."

Namarie struggled to her feet. *If these pods were fueling the lich's powers ...*

"Did I say I was done with you, lap dog?" Namarie said, coughing. Malthrax wheeled, looming toward her, Moondancer still impaled through his chest.

Namarie threw herself upward, planting both feet on the lich's chest and ripping her blade free. Malthrax roared in pain, reeling back a step and giving the elf the opportunity she needed.

"Lu, back in the house. Now." Namarie ran toward the nearest emerald soul sphere.

Malthrax cried out as Moondancer swept into and through the thick vines tethered to the sphere. Ichor flowed from the severed stalks, the opaque crystal turning transparent. Fists pounded against the glass from the inside, the emerald cracking as lines snaked outward across its surface.

She was already moving to the next sphere, severing its vines just as the first prisoner broke free from his emerald cocoon. Malthrax bellowed in rage, rushing after her.

Using the spheres as cover, Namarie weaved through their ranks, slashing open every vine she passed. A nearby sphere exploded outward as a tauren warrior emerged from it. She tossed him her cleaver as she passed, calling out to the newly freed souls. "Fight for your freedom. Kill the lich!"

Malthrax growled as his prisoners escaped their cages and advanced on him from all sides. "You have accomplished nothing," he said. "There is no escape from the Shard of Yogg-Saron. I shall return to deal with you later."

The lich raised his fist, his body enveloped in soulfire, before dissolving into the dark.

Balargarde Fortress

“Malthrax.” Vikstone waited from his perch on the parapet. Behind him, smoke poured from the burning fortress as he set fire to a flag bearing the lich’s sigil. Amassed outside the partially open front gates, the horde shambled toward the courtyard, alerted by his yelling.

“Fight me, coward.” His voice was torn and raw, his eyes wild. “Fight me!”

He kicked an unstable section of battlement, dislodging stone and sending it crashing into the courtyard, determined to destroy the castle piece by piece, if that’s what it took to draw Malthrax away from his family.

With a crash, the large steel doors leading into the fortress swung open. Plumes of smoke poured out. In their center stood a skeletal figure in gleaming ebon plate mail, wielding an enruned greatsword larger than Vikstone’s entire body—a runeblade forged from saronite and black iron, its edge cruel and dark, drinking the light around it. Malthrax laughed at the sight of his burning fortress as he stalked along the parapet.

“Magnificent.” The lich limped toward him through the raging blizzard. “You have destroyed so much to reach me. Killed hundreds. Burned everything I built.” He stopped ten paces from Vikstone, greatsword low.

Vikstone met his gaze on the narrow walkway. Despite the bravado, Malthrax was favoring his wounded leg. “Where are they?”

“Safe. Preserved. Dreaming.” Malthrax tilted his head, studying the elf. “Which is more than I can say for you, if we continue down this path.”

“I didn’t come to talk.”

“You want your family. I have your family.” Malthrax spread his arms. “The priests of your world promise paradise to the faithful, and damnation to the wicked. But they cannot deliver. Their heaven is hope. Their hell is fear. Nothing more.”

The emerald eye pulsed.

“I am not a priest, Vikstone. I do not promise. I *provide*.” He stepped closer. “I am real. I am here. And I am offering you a choice.”

Vikstone said nothing.

“Lay down your weapon. Join me willingly. And I will place you beside them—a family preserved at the height of your love.” Malthrax extended a skeletal hand.

“And if I refuse?”

“Then I will show them what eternity truly means. Where they will scream for centuries and never lose their voices. Where your daughter will call for her father, and he will never come.”

“You’re insane.”

“I am the only sane creature in Northrend.” Malthrax’s voice sharpened. “You are no better than the monsters you hunt, Vikstone. You simply lack the honesty to see it. The Lich King looks upon a soul and sees material. A resource to be processed. That is not power. That is *waste*. A child burning books for warmth because he cannot read.”

“And you’re different?”

“The Lich King wants the dead. I want what matters. When he finally moves against me, you will have done his work for him.”

Vikstone hesitated.

“Ah.” Malthrax’s tone carried cold amusement. “You didn’t consider that, did you? That you might be his pawn more than I ever was.”

Vikstone’s grip tightened on Infernos.

“I’m offering you eternity with your family,” Malthrax said. “What father wouldn’t accept that?”

Vikstone stared at the lich for a long moment. *What father wouldn’t.*

“One who knows his daughter would rather die free than live forever in a cage.”

The amusement left Malthrax’s face like heat leaving a corpse. “Then you have chosen.”

“I have.”

Malthrax closed the distance with a leaping downward strike. On the narrow walkway, Vikstone had no choice but to spring backward, the giant blade dislodging chunks of stone as it struck. In the courtyard below, a steady stream of zombies and ghouls shuffled toward the stairs to pin him in from behind.

He drove Infernos down in a wicked chop. Malthrax deflected with a turn of the wrist—barely a motion at all—and the parry nearly sent Vikstone over the edge. He completed the rotation and snapped his foot into the lich’s chest, knocking him off balance. But Malthrax recovered in a single step and countered with a series of sweeping strikes that Vikstone had no answer for but retreat.

Fifteen thousand years. Vikstone could feel it in every exchange. The greatsword moved like it was an extension of the lich himself, each stroke placed with the calm of someone who had centuries to master the angle.

Behind him, the first ghouls had reached the catwalk and were closing in. He barreled toward the nearest two, sweeping them off the walkway with Infernos. Then Malthrax was on him, driving him back toward the throng of undead pressing from the other side.

So, this is how it ends.

The thought arrived without fear. He was going to die on this walkway, and the only question left was how many he'd drag down with him. The Howl answered before he could. It rose through his chest, hot and vast and hungry, and the pain in his ribs and the ache in his arms and the cold of Icecrown went somewhere far away. What remained was simple. The axe. The enemy. The burning.

Vikstone stopped retreating.



On a hillside near the fortress, the wind shifted. The falling snow swirled in tight spirals, a crackling hum growing louder until a wide portal tore open, filled with churning mist.

"Hold 'er steady, lads!" Wopak came through the portal on the back of a swaying wagon piled high with oil kegs and explosives.

Beside him in the driver's seat, Corig and Mardagan struggled to keep the wagon upright as they blazed down the snowy hill toward the front gate of Balargarde, pulled by a pair of mechanical bulls. The wagon bounced chaotically down the slippery embankment, nearly flipping as it hit a large rock and went momentarily airborne.

"Hold," Corig said as they slammed into the front ranks of undead, hauling on the reins to keep them aimed at the flesh giant in the center of the horde. "Hold!"

"Now!" The trio leapt from the careening cart into the mass of zombies, axes, and greatswords, hacking in a wild frenzy. The cart continued plowing through the crowd before hitting the flesh giant dead on.

The explosion sent dozens of dismembered zombies and ghouls flying, the fortress gates twisting and blasting off their hinges.

On the ramparts above, Vikstone stumbled as the castle shook beneath his feet, the parapet cracking under the strain as he tried to fend off the lich's attacks. He smiled and redoubled his efforts as a familiar voice carried across the battlefield.

"Attack!" Mardagan led the charge straight into the smoldering carnage.

Despite the explosion killing dozens, more took their place, surrounding the paladin and dwarves, now fighting back-to-back. The strike team rotated counter-clockwise as they fought, Wopak setting up killing blows for Mardagan, who did the same for Corig, who did the same for Wopak.

The pile of bodies around them grew to waist-height, and still the monsters came, crawling over the fallen corpses. A grating roar rolled over the battlefield as the flesh giant hauled itself back to its feet and bore down on the trapped trio.

The flesh giant's fist came down. Mardagan raised both hands, and the Light answered—a golden barrier erupting around the three of them, the impact dissolving against the radiance. The giant swung again, and again.

Twelve seconds. The Light never gave him more than that.

Wopak leaned on his hammer. "I hate it when ye do that."

Mardagan used the rest of them to breathe.

Three. Two.

The barrier flickered and died. The flesh giant reared back, but the horde reached them first. Wopak and Mardagan exchanged a grim nod, their arms tiring as they hacked through the wave of the dead.

"If this is how it ends, I want you to know—"

"It ain't, so tell me later," Wopak said, bounding onto the corpse pile and splitting a ghoul's skull with a downward chop.

Mardagan stared up at the giant, greatsword drawn back. The ground rumbled beneath their feet, a low, steady vibration that didn't match up with the giant's footfalls. The paladin snapped his gaze northward, where a low cloud of churning snow was visible in the distance.

"Fight on, brothers!" Mardagan braced his weapon as the approaching forms crested the hill.

“Hyah!” Dread Marshal Nightfang thundered down on the back of an undead war steed, her lance raised. Behind her, another rider cleared the crest, then another and another, eight hulking death knights riding in a line so tight their mounts moved as one beast.

The Knights of the Ebon Blade had arrived.

The knights charged down the hill, ground shaking beneath their steeds’ hooves. The formation split, carving through the horde’s outer ranks. Dread Marshal Nightfang impaled three zombies on her lance before their weight tore the weapon from her. She drew her greatsword and continued slashing along the outer edges of the cluster.

The flesh giant caught the last death knight in line with a backhand strike that ripped the armor from his chest and the flesh beneath it, unhorsing the rider and hurling what was left of him to the ground. Mardagan caught the reins as the riderless steed passed, pulling himself into the saddle and falling in with the column. The knights split into two prongs and charged the flesh giant from opposite sides, the dwarves holding their ground between them as the undead pressed in around them.

The riders speared the giant’s legs as they passed, the creature spinning in confusion as they tore into it from both flanks. Strike after strike until it toppled to its knees. The last in the formation was Mardagan, who screamed as he brought his greatsword around, decapitating the giant.

“Charge!” Mardagan let them through the dead and into the courtyard, his greatsword trailing golden fire where it struck, consecrating the ground beneath each step.

Looking down on the carnage, Malthrax stepped back and raised one fist to the sky. “Necroth.”

Mardagan and the death knights rampaged through the scattered zombies and ghouls, cutting a straight line through their ranks as they galloped through the ruined gates. Wopak and Corig fell in behind them, the dwarves putting down anything that got too close to the horses’ hindquarters.

The knights parted into two lines, circling the inner walls before converging in the center of the courtyard, breaking through the undead pouring through the gates.

An inhuman roar reverberated from above. Over the flaming fortress, the great skeletal dragon Necroth soared into view, its hollow eye sockets burning with blue flame.

The first burst of lightning breath hit a cluster of death knights, incinerating two and stripping the third to the bone before it hit the ground. With no cover in the open courtyard and a horde of undead blocking the remains of the gate, the knights were exposed.

“Dismount and take cover!” Mardagan leapt off his horse and summoned Al’ar. His heart sank as he was lifted into the air by his phoenix, staring at the dragon towering above him.

Maybe he could distract it long enough for the others to survive.

Necroth buffeted his gargantuan wings, banking to face the phoenix that buzzed around him like a gnat. A surge of energy gathered within his hollow ribs as the beast prepared to exhale a fatal arc of lightning—only to be engulfed by a midair inferno.

Mardagan turned, jaw dropping at the sight of the ancient netherdragon Astralyth hovering behind him. Twice Veridian’s size, the dragon’s translucent hide rippling with nether energy, crystalline spines running the length of his back. Calvey sat in the saddle, bow already drawn.

“Down!” Calvey commanded. Mardagan veered into a sharp dive as another gout of flame blasted the skeletal dragon.

On the fortress below, Vikstone scrambled atop the castle wall, flipping over a horizontal stroke of the lich’s greatsword to position Malthrax between him and the encroaching horde. He pressed the attack with a furious series of slashes, all deflected by the lich.

In the courtyard, the remaining knights had drawn into a ring of steel, the berserking dwarves weaving through their ranks to hack apart anything that reached the line. The dead kept coming. From above, Mardagan steered Al’ar into a steep dive toward Malthrax on the catwalk.

A heartbeat too late, the lich sensed the attack. He spun away, a blur of dead motion that left Vikstone behind, and whipped his greatsword through a brutal upward arc. The blade didn’t just cut. It cleaved the air, shearing through Al’ar’s wing in a spray of molten feathers. Gravity claimed the rest, dragging the phoenix and its rider into a terminal spiral toward the courtyard stones.

“Mardagan!” Vikstone howled, Infernos blaring as he channeled his rage into a relentless flurry, driving Malthrax back. A quiet murmuring was his only warning before bolts of death magic slammed into his back—one, two, three. From the upper doorway, a necromancer gestured, unleashing volley after volley.

Malthrax grinned, pressing the attack. Vikstone’s moves slowed with each shadow bolt, trapped between the lich’s blade and the necromancer’s magic. He searched for cover, but found only the dead closing in.

A feral roar came from above as Veridian entered the fight, carrying Stormclaw beneath her. The drake released the great cat midair, the necromancer having just enough time to look up in horror before Stormclaw slammed into him and shredded him across the stonework. Veridian circled for another pass, tail-swiping a cluster of ghouls off the wall.

Malthrax glanced at the battle raging above. Astralyth and Necroth were locked in a vicious melee while Calvey rained arrows onto the undead in the courtyard. On the ramparts, his reinforcements were falling to the netherdrake and great cat. Below, a circle of death knights and dwarves held their own against his dwindling horde. The lich turned and fled into the burning fortress.

Vikstone swatted a ghoul over the wall’s edge and charged after Malthrax. A second ghoul shambled in pursuit, but Stormclaw intercepted it with a flying leap.

“Malthrax.” Vikstone kicked open the double doors, flames engulfing the rooms on either side. His arms shook but not from fatigue. The Howl wouldn’t allow fatigue. They shook because the drug was burning through him faster than his body could hold together, and somewhere beneath the chemical fury, what was left of his mind understood that he was running on a fire that would consume its own fuel.

He didn’t care. He stalked after the lich.

Malthrax retreated to his balcony, dragging his wounded leg. As Vikstone followed, the lich gestured to a group of stone gargoyles perched above.

“Fly,” he hissed. “Tell Arthas to send his horde.”

The gargoyles cracked free of their perches and took to the sky. Vikstone hurled Infernos, shattering one to rubble, but the other two beat their wings clear. He whistled to Veridian.

“Catch them. Don’t let them reach the citadel.”

Veridian pivoted into a steep dive, flying away in pursuit.

Malthrax came at him without warning. Even with the damaged leg, even retreating through his own burning fortress, the lich's opening strike came faster than anything Vikstone had faced. He barely got his axe up to parry, the impact rattling his bones and numbing his arms. Ducking low, he lashed out with a kick to the same leg Namarie had injured, buckling the lich's kneecap.

Vikstone rolled away from an overhand counterstrike, rising with *Infernos* at the ready. He kept his distance as Malthrax shambled after him, his right leg violently contorted.

"Army crumbling, fortress ablaze, and your precious Emerald Garden will be in my wife's hands," Vikstone said. "You're a failure, Malthrax. You always have been. Your own wife reviles you. Fifteen thousand years of proving yourself, and you're still the infant in the snow. Still *unworthy*."

Vikstone saw the moment the words landed. Not pain. The shard flared, and for an instant, Malthrax's grip on the greatsword tightened in a way that had nothing to do with technique.

He charged. The measured swordsmanship vanished. The strikes that followed were not placed—they were thrown.

The fight consumed the balcony the way fire consumes a house. Not all at once, but in every direction. There was no column that might not splinter under a deflected strike, no flagstone that might not crack beneath the weight of their exchange. The ironwood supports became brief cover, sheared to kindling by the shadow's greatsword. The parapet became terrain to brace against or dodge behind, and each time it crumbled further beneath them.

A pair of dragons plummeted past in a death spiral and slammed into the mountainside, and the fortress shook to its foundation, and neither of them broke stride. Cracks spiderwebbed across the floor as they fought in its center, and the balcony was dying beneath them, the shadow pressed forward, and Vikstone gave ground he could not afford to give.

Malthrax brought his greatsword down in a diagonal slash. Vikstone darted inside, shoulder-blocking the lich into a column. Spinning off the impact, he dropped to one knee and brought *Infernos* around at his opponent's wounded leg.

He had hit the lich a dozen times. Shoulder, ribs, the ruined knee. Strikes that would have killed any living being. And Malthrax's wounds were already closing—the shard pulsing in his eye socket like a green heartbeat, knitting dead flesh back together with each flare. The gash from the shoulder block had sealed. The buckled kneecap was straightening.

The Howl screamed at him to hit harder. But there was no harder. There was no blow Infernos could land that the shard wouldn't undo.

“Strike me again. I want to feel you understand.” The lich pressed forward, driving him toward the edge, the balcony cracking beneath their feet.

Vikstone cast a glance at the jagged rocks hundreds of feet below, then rolled away and swept the lich's legs out from under him. The damaged balcony groaned and buckled, shifting as it threatened to break free entirely. Vikstone crawled up the slanted stone toward level ground, Malthrax right behind.

The lich struck again. Vikstone moved behind a flaming column for cover, but the greatsword cleaved straight through, tearing a deep gash into his left shoulder. The ceiling shuddered as the column fell away, crashing through the balcony floor.

He flung back from the hole as Malthrax raised his arms. The Shard of Yogg-Saron bathed the balcony in green light. Writhing tendrils coalesced around Vikstone's torso, pinning his arms as acidic roots burrowed into his flesh.

Malthrax approached as Vikstone screamed, Infernos slipping from his grasp. The lich casually kicked the axe through the hole. Vikstone choked against the constriction, struggling to free an arm.

“It was always going to end this way,” Malthrax said, dissecting the trapped elf like a new toy. “You will join your wife and daughter in my Emerald Garden. Your fear and pain will fuel my conquest of Northrend, and then all of Azeroth.”

He leaned close, peering into the elf's eyes. “Perhaps I'll transform Namarie into my undead bride, using her body to serve my every whim.”

Vikstone hammered his forehead into the center of the lich's face. Cartilage disintegrated with a wet, splintering crunch that vibrated through Vikstone's own teeth. The necrotic tendrils withered as Malthrax's concentration shattered, and Vikstone wrenched himself from the dying grip. “Infernos. Return!”

The axe slammed into the underside of the balcony—no clear path back.

He launched himself at the lich, grabbing him by the throat with his left hand, while raining gauntleted punches with his right, driving them back. Malthrax raised an arm to fend off the blows. Vikstone snared his wrist, pinned him against the railing, and threaded his arm through the lich's elbow, cinching a figure-four lock.

He wrenched on the arm, neck muscles corded. Images flooded his mind—Lunara's cries of terror, Namarie's stoicism in the face of death. Every friend buried and broken along the way.

The Howl took it all. Grief, guilt, love, fury—crushed down into a single white-hot point behind his ribs, a vortex that fed on everything he was, and gave back only force. All of it funneling down to his hands. With a primal scream, he tore the lich's arm off at the elbow.

The balcony shifted, both leaning precariously against the crumbling parapet. Vikstone turned to see a bloody Mardagan standing at the doorway, armor twisted and torn from the landing.

"It's over, Malthrax." Vikstone tossed the severed arm over the railing.

"Do you suppose the shard will survive the fall?" Malthrax smiled through his lopsided jaw as he crossed his other, broken arm over his chest and allowed himself to fall backwards over the edge.

"No!" Vikstone lunged for the lich. *If the shard was destroyed, so too would be Namarie and Lunara.*

He hooked his elbow over the railing and clasped the lich's breastplate, straining as they dangled in open air.

Malthrax laughed, bracing his legs against the balcony, gradually pulling them toward the abyss. Vikstone took a deep breath. Beneath the fire, in the quiet place where Namarie still looked at him the way she had on their wedding night, he understood.

"Vikstone!" Mardagan called from the doorway, not daring to add his weight to the crumbling structure.

Their eyes met. His grip was slipping. With a tight smile, Vikstone nodded to his oldest friend. "Shadows always fade, brother."

He released his hold.

As they tumbled over the edge, he used the momentum to swing his right hand around for one last savage punch. His gauntlet connected with the lich's face, shattering bone. He buried his fingers into Malthrax's ruined skull and around the Shard of Yogg-Saron, tearing it free. The lich shrieked.

With a final scream, Vikstone wrenched his body around in midair and hurled the stone toward the balcony before the pair vanished into the swirling mists.

Mardagan sprinted for the railing as Vikstone tumbled over it. Too late to reach his friend—but then he saw it. A perfect emerald arcing through the air. He gasped and threw himself toward the edge, diving.

He hit the ground hard, sliding toward the drop as he reached into open air ... and closed his fist around the gem. His relief was short-lived—momentum carried him over the edge, legs rising as he began to fall head-first, staring in disbelief at the rocks hundreds of feet below.

"Oh no, you don't!" Wopak clamped his hands around the paladin's ankles and hauled him back, the Shard of Yogg-Saron safely in Mardagan's grasp.



EPILOGUE

Wyrmmrest Temple, One Month Later

The morning light washed over the gathered mourners and came through Wyrmmrest Temple the way it must have when the place was built. Unhurried, golden, filling the Hall of Heroes from its eastern windows in long, warm shafts that found the stone floor and stayed there. For the first time, the light felt like it was giving something rather than just illuminating what the cold had taken.

The temple's Hall of Heroes honored Azeroth's greatest adventurers, statues lining the walls of the vast chamber. Sculptures of Uther the Lightbringer, Grommash Hellscream, Cairne Bloodhoof, and Father Gabriel. Dozens more, Alliance and Horde alike, their rivalries settled by the only thing that settles all rivalries.

A grand statue veiled in shimmering silk stood atop a marble pedestal on the altar. Before it stood Mardagan, dressed in his finest armor, polished to perfection. His voice trembled as he addressed the gathered crowd.

"Friends," he said, his eyes drifting across the crowd and landing on the front row. Calvey sniffled, taking Wopak's weathered hand in hers and squeezing it as she turned to the seat next to her. Namarie sat there, a fresh sprig of night lily in her hair, her arms wrapped around Lunara. Both were whole again, freed from the nightmare of the Emerald Garden.

“Today we gather to honor a man whose courage reshaped the fate of our world. A man whose stubborn determination never wavered. A warrior who charged alone through an army of the dead into a lich’s den and succeeded through sheer force of will. A man who was the best friend I’ll ever have.

“He never gave up,” Mardagan said, his gaze finding Namarie’s. “Even when the rest of us had lost hope. Even when I ... failed him, he never faltered.”

Mardagan paced on the dais as he addressed the crowd. “The recent destruction of the Lich King, Arthas, was made possible by Vikstone killing his most dangerous general, Malthrax the Undying. With Namarie’s help, seventy-six souls that had been trapped in Malthrax’s Emerald Garden were also freed, finally at rest. Among them was Lysandra of Clan Icevein, who in the end raised a blade against the monster who built her cage. It is my great honor to welcome into the Hall of Heroes, standing at a place of honor alongside Father Gabriel, my dear friend, Vikstone.”

Mardagan drew back the veil. For a moment he just stood there, looking at the face of his old friend carved in stone. Vikstone stood firm, his arms crossed over his chest.

The crowd rose in silence as Namarie stepped forward to gaze up at the statue. She reached out and caressed its cheek. “Oh Vik ...”

“He was a good man.” Namarie turned to see Chromie dressed in a black-and-gold gown, her hair tied in a neat bun.

“The best,” Namarie said.

“He loved you with a ferocity I’ve never before encountered,” Chromie said with a smile. “Darn near throttled me when I refused to send him back in time to save you.”

“That does sound like Vik.”

The pair stood in silence, gazing up at the statues of Vikstone and Father Gabriel.

“Does he know he succeeded?” Namarie didn’t look away from the statue. “That he saved us?”

Chromie leaned in close, lowering her voice to a whisper, “Trust me when I say ... he does.”

As the crowd began shuffling out, Namarie remained at the altar, Lunara perched on her hip, staring wide-eyed up at the statue of her father. Before turning to leave, she

took one last look at her husband, who had given them this new chance at life. A golden plaque embedded at the base read:

Vikstone. He kept his promise.

“Wait.” Lunara squirmed free from her mother’s arms and hurried back to the statue, wrapping her little arms around his leg to hug him. She opened her backpack and withdrew a battered stuffed toy yeti, which she placed between her father’s feet.

“So you won’t be alone, Daddy.”

She went down the aisle to catch up with her mother, who took her into her arms as they stepped out into the fresh morning air.

Northrend had thawed. Not fully. It would never fully thaw, but the sky was open and blue for the first time any of them could remember, and the wind off the Dragonblight plains carried nothing worse than the clean smell of snowmelt and wet stone. After months of grey and cold and death, the world was trying. The long winter had finally ended.

Namarie whistled, a familiar shape coming down to greet them. Veridian crouched low to the ground upon landing as Calvey lifted Lunara up, giving her a warm hug before placing her in the saddle. Stormclaw padded out from beneath the temple archway and pressed her head into Lunara’s side, and the little girl buried both hands in her fur.

Wopak ruffled Lunara’s hair. “You take care of yer mom, ye hear me? She’s trouble, that one.”

Turning toward Mardagan, Namarie took his hand in hers, tears streaming down her cheeks. “Thank you, for everything. You’re always welcome in our home.”

“And you in mine. My mother keeps a vineyard in Westfall—come spring, I’m expecting you both. Vik never let me drag him there. Don’t you make the same mistake.”

Mardagan wrapped Namarie in a powerful hug, which she wholeheartedly returned. “If you ever need anything ...”

The paladin offered his arm to Namarie as she climbed onto Veridian. Lunara looked up at her mother from the passenger's saddle as she was tucked in for the long flight home.

The Stars Above Wymrest

Somewhere beyond the reach of time ...

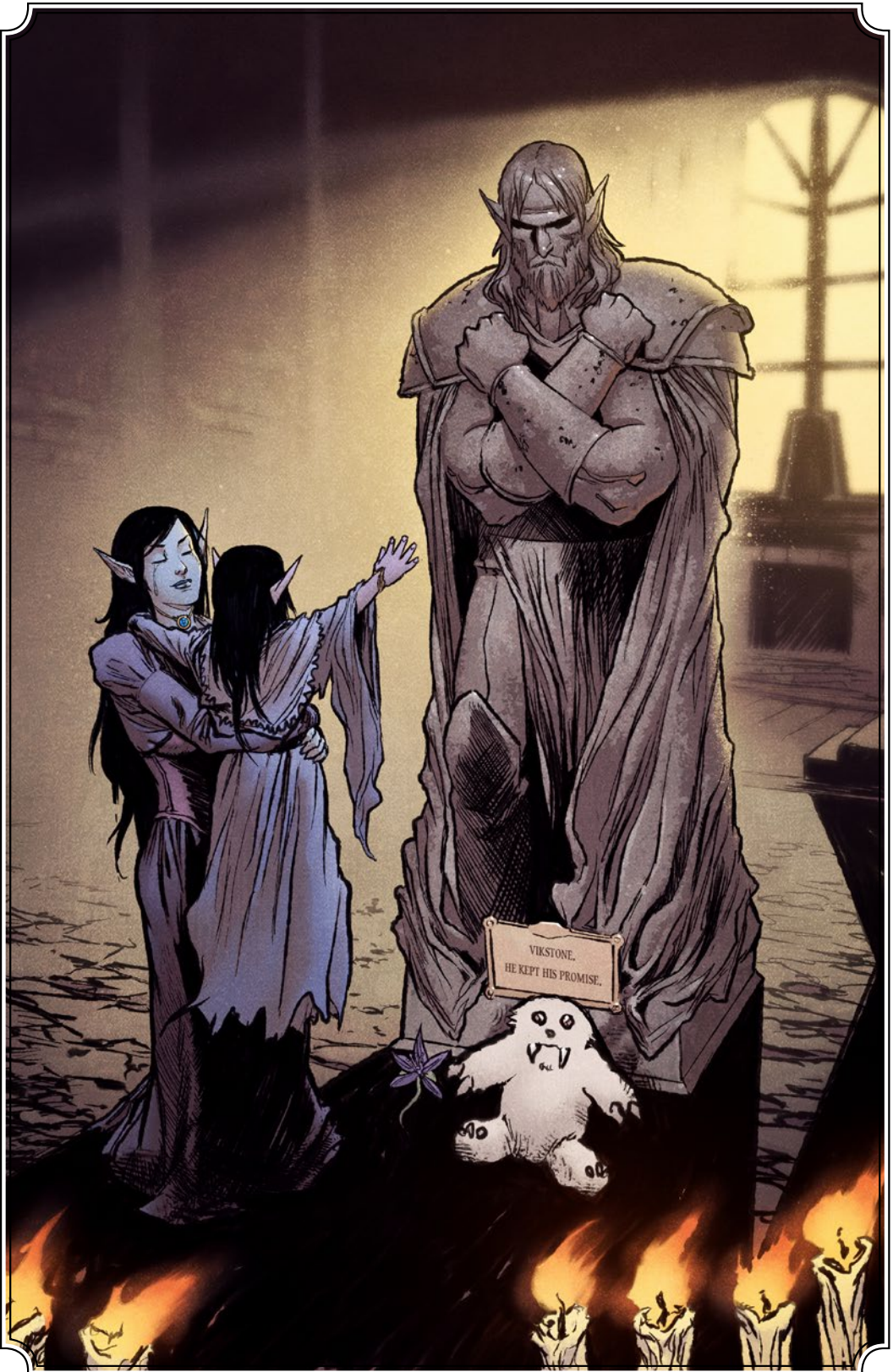
Vikstone opened his eyes to silver light. His body felt ... whole. The pain was gone. The exhaustion, the anger, the fear. All of it, gone. What remained was peace.

A warmth settled over him that he had no name for, vast and gentle, as though the moon itself had bent low to gather him up. He understood, without knowing how.

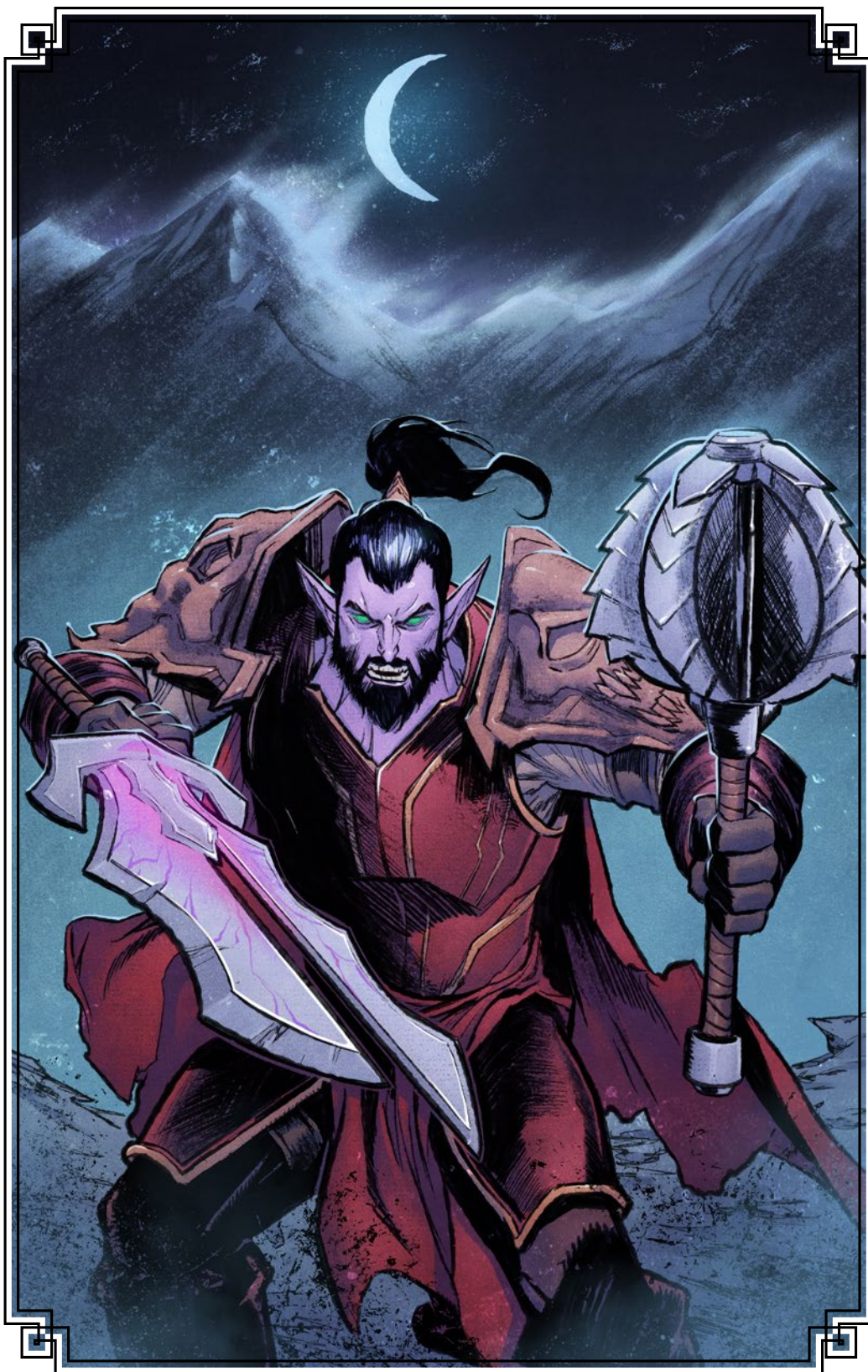
A vision of Wymrest Temple formed before him in the moonlight. His friends gathered outside, around Namarie and Lunara, saying their goodbyes. As Veridian lifted off, the gentle voice of his wife and daughter drifted across space and time to reach him.

“Can we go home now, Momma?”

“Yeah, baby. It's time to go home.”



*This story is dedicated to the memory of my friend, Asa Minhas (1986–2010),
who taught me what it means to stand by a friend in their darkest hour.*



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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To my friends from Trinity. You know who you are, and you'll recognize yourselves in these pages. Thank you for the years we spent together in Azeroth and beyond. This story is as much yours as it is mine.

The friendships we build in games are real, the worlds we share together matter, and showing up for the people you love is the only thing that lasts.

Follow Vikstone's adventures in
Vikstone's Classic Expedition
gamertribute.com

