

BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT

Lor'themar Theron: In the Shadow of the Sun

Sarah Pine

The surface of Lor'themar's desk had ceased to be visible underneath all the paper piled on top of it. Reports, missives, orders, and inventories teetered precariously in stacks he had long since stopped trying to organize. All of them were related to the short yet brutal war over Quel'Danas and the Sunwell. None of them was currently on his mind.

In his hand he held a single unopened envelope. Stamped into its violet sealing wax was a great eye, the symbol of Dalaran. It seemed to glare at him accusingly, reminding him of all the other similar letters he had received and discarded. He cracked the seal and removed the neatly folded parchment inside. By now Lor'themar recognized the even, meticulous handwriting adorning the page.

Archmage Aethas Sunreaver had requested an audience with the regent lord numerous times recently, but Lor'themar had deliberately ignored him. Since the events on Quel'Danas he had desperately tried to forget the rest of the world, but he realized the world would force itself upon him eventually.

Lor'themar sighed and leaned back in his chair. This letter was much briefer than its predecessors. This time Aethas had not asked, but had simply stated a date and time of arrival. Lor'themar ran his thumb along the paper's rough edge. He had a good idea what Aethas was going to propose, and he was not yet certain how he wanted to answer.

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Lor'themar was not any surer of his thoughts by the day Aethas was scheduled to arrive. As he made his way through Sunfury Spire to the front hall where the archmage would appear, Halduron stopped him, holding out a small bundle of soft crimson wool. Lor'themar took it and held it up as it unfolded, beholding a regal golden phoenix upon its field: the Silvermoon City tabard.

"No," he said curtly, shoving the garment back at his friend.

"You should wear it," Halduron pressed.

"What does it matter?" he answered, striding forward. "Anyone in the service of Silvermoon may bear it."

"It is the symbol of state," Halduron called after him. "You are the head of state. You should look the part."

"I am the regent lord," Lor'themar said, continuing to walk away. "Not the king."

"That is not the point, Lor'themar. You look like a Farstrider."

Lor'themar froze mid-step.

"I *am* a Farstrider," he replied, more sharply than he intended.

"You *were* a Farstrider," Halduron sighed. "You cannot ever be a Farstrider again, Lor'themar. We know that for certain, now."

Lor'themar bowed his head and took a deep breath.

"We are going to be late, Halduron."

He walked on, and after a moment's pause he heard Halduron's footsteps on the floor behind him, following.

Rommath was already awaiting them in the hall, leaning heavily against his staff and staring vacantly toward the far wall. He glanced at Lor'themar and Halduron as they entered, a flicker of disapproval crossing his face, but he turned back again without speaking. There was a time when he would have disputed Lor'themar's choice to present himself as a ranger far more aggressively than Halduron had, but not anymore. For all the thorn in his side that Rommath had often been, Lor'themar could now find only pity within his heart for the mage. Kael'thas's final betrayal had taken its greatest toll on his most loyal advocate.

The air in front of them shimmered, gleaming violet—the unmistakable mark of arcane magic. A moment later a burst of bluish-white light illuminated the hall, and Aethas materialized in front of them. He straightened, brushing off his robes, and Lor'themar could not help but notice how silly he looked. The elegant rich-purple mageweave of the Kirin Tor clashed horribly with his coppery hair and refused to fall properly across his slender frame. From his letters—and third-party rumors—Lor'themar understood Aethas to be idealistic yet shrewd, and far too young for the position he had carved for himself in Dalaran. Then again, most of the elder sin'dorei magi were dead. In the end, Lor'themar supposed that Aethas's ambition was a good thing. At least someone among them still had hope.

"Welcome home, Archmage Sunreaver," he announced.

Aethas flashed a smile. "Thank you, Lord Theron," he answered, bowing graciously. "Would that I were returning to stay."

"Of course," Lor'themar replied diplomatically. "Your correspondence has familiarized me with the intent of your visit. Come this way; my advisors and I will hear your appeal."

Ordinarily Lor'themar would have led them all to the stately meeting hall at the north end of the palace. It was an impressive chamber designed specifically for this purpose. The day was clear, however, and the horizon as sharp as a shard of glass. The isle would be visible across the channel. Lor'themar almost wished never to see Quel'Danas again, so instead he took them to an alcove east of the main court, overlooking the domed, shadowed rooftops of Silvermoon City. They sat, and Aethas began.

"I am here on matters of utmost importance—ones that concern us all. I am quite sure you are aware of the reason the Kirin Tor have relocated to Northrend."

"Malygos, yes," Lor'themar answered. "What is it you want?"

Aethas shook his head. "The blue flight's power and menace are far greater than even we first thought. I want to formalize our involvement with the Kirin Tor. It is imperative that the magi of Quel'Thalas and Dalaran again work side by side, as we had for many years in the past."

"No."

Aethas started in irritation, a scowl deepening at the corners of his mouth and between his brows. The voice of dissent had not been Lor'themar's. Turning to the speaker, he said, "I asked the regent lord. Not the grand magister."

Rommath laughed so bitterly, it sounded more like a cough. "Well, then, let the regent lord deign that I am fit to speak."

"I daresay we shall hear your opinion eventually in any case," Lor'themar said, schooling his wry tones as best he could. "Go on and say your piece."

Rommath's eyes glinted even in the well-lit room, which should have dimmed their glow. "How *generous* of you, Lor'themar," he replied, never shifting his gaze from Aethas's face. His voice sounded like a coiled snake: low and fierce and dangerous.

"Did Modera send you with a statement before you left, Aethas? You do not exactly sound like yourself. Your words drip of her false diplomacy. At least she dares not set foot here herself. She has that much of sense. I suppose I should be grateful for small mercies."

"Modera agrees with me on these matters," Aethas answered stiffly, not rising to Rommath's bait.

"She agrees with you," Rommath mused, "or, rather, you agree with *her*, for I doubt they would send you here to speak on their behalf had you half a mind of your own."

"Damn it, Rommath." Aethas's patience snapped. "Do you have anything useful to say,

besides personal insults?"

"You are blind," Rommath replied evenly, assuredly. "They bit off more than they can chew, and now they find themselves facing both Malygos and Arthas. They are afraid, as they should be. They need aid beyond their own capacity—and to whom have they always turned regarding matters of the arcane? Oh, yes, to us. The members of the Kirin Tor will swear up and down that you are indispensable to them, that your skills are invaluable. The moment you become inconvenient, you will be discarded." He cocked his head to the side, one long ear twitching almost imperceptibly as his eyes slid first to Halduron, then to Lor'themar. "Ask them. They know. But not as well as I."

Aethas stared blankly back at Rommath. "Quel'Thalas and the Kirin Tor have been allied for over two thousand years," he said. "Since we joined formally with the Horde, things have been strained, but—"

Rommath laughed again, loudly this time.

"Since we joined the Horde," he repeated. "Of course. That's somewhat awkward, I imagine. And do you, Archmage Sunreaver, remember exactly *why* we sought to join the Horde?"

Aethas did not answer, but he looked Rommath straight in the eye, unflinching.

"A monumental betrayal," Rommath said, his voice nearly a whisper. His eyes glittered with seething anger that nearly a decade had failed to quell. "In Dalaran," he continued, "beneath the ever-watchful eyes of the Kirin Tor."

"They really had nothing to do with—"

"I assume you mean," Rommath interrupted, "that the Kirin Tor *did* nothing. Did nothing to prevent it, did nothing to stop it. And instead"—his voice began to rise—"left us to rot in the prisons beneath a city many of us called home as much as ever we did Silvermoon. A city our own crown prince had served as faithfully as his own homeland for longer than a human lifetime. A city we fought and died for, and at the request of the Kirin Tor. A city within whose walls they would have watched, in silence, as we all swung from a hangman's noose. *Their* city."

"The Kirin Tor find themselves under new leadership," Aethas replied, and Lor'themar felt that his controlled tone spoke well of the young archmage.

"That is a lie, and you know it," Rommath said. "Rhonin may be their figurehead, but Modera and Ansirem remain on the council. These are the same people who happily turned their eyes away when Garithos sentenced us to death. They can all rot in hell, or better yet, in Arthas's

army as Scourge," he scoffed.

"Let us hope that none of the Council of Six ever ends up under Arthas's sway, Rommath," Halduron said quietly.

"Despite your obvious disdain for the Kirin Tor, you seem to be rather well informed, Grand Magister," Aethas said.

"Which would be one of the reasons *I* am the grand magister of Quel'Thalas and you are not, I would think," Rommath retorted. "And as grand magister I will *never* order my magi to service in the name of the Kirin Tor. *Never.*"

Lor'themar's fingers twitched against the smooth table top, and his mouth hardened. Rommath had walked a thin line, and overstepped it.

"That is enough," Lor'themar said coolly. "You do not possess the authority to issue such ultimatums. It will be *my* decision whether to send our forces to Northrend—and if I so choose, you and your magi will follow orders.

"Now," he said, standing, "it is clear that to continue this will result in nothing more than petty bickering, and by all means, if the two of you wish to go on in such a manner, feel free. I, however, do not care to waste any more of my time. I would hazard the ranger-general feels similarly.

"I have business in the south," he continued, "and I had planned on leaving tomorrow. I do not think I shall disrupt those plans. You are welcome to stay, Archmage, but I may be gone a number of days."

Aethas did not reply, but nonetheless failed to successfully mask his irritation. Lor'themar was more than content to let him be upset. He turned to leave.

"There are those who will go to Dalaran whether you will it or not, Regent Lord," Aethas's voice called out across the room. Lor'themar paused and turned to face him as he continued. "Give me at least the blessing to speak on behalf of the regency of Silvermoon, and I will see to it that the interests of the sin'dorei are protected."

Rommath snorted in response, but said nothing. For a moment Lor'themar considered Aethas's request, but the younger elf was in no position to bargain. They all knew well that Aethas's skills in statesmanship were far outclassed by the other men in the room.

"I shall have a servant show you to your quarters, Archmage," Lor'themar said.

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Aethas had left graciously enough, sparing one or two mean looks in Rommath's direction. The grand magister had appeared resolute, but Lor'themar could see the sway in his step and the lines of exhaustion that had resettled heavily upon his face the moment Aethas had gone beyond sight. Carefully Lor'themar had noted Rommath's fragility; his will could be bent.

Once, in the past, Lor'themar would have called it ignoble to even consider using such a thing against another. Now he recognized its necessity.

Alone, he sat by the window in his quarters and mulled over the afternoon's debates. Absently he twisted the long curtain between his hands as he stared across the spire's gardens, hearing Aethas's determined voice in his head. *There are those who will go to Dalaran whether you will it or not.* Lor'themar could not deny that truth, but privately he agreed with Rommath's disdain. How could he trust Aethas to faithfully represent the regency when he already cloaked himself in the dress of the Kirin Tor and stamped their seal upon his correspondence? Aethas was committed to the Nexus War: that much was clear. How many others would he convince to follow him? And how far was he, as regent lord, obliged to protect his people when they forged into ambiguous territory?

The cloth stretched and began to fray beneath Lor'themar's ungentle, unconscious attentions. He failed to notice.

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"I am not sure," Halduron confessed to him later that evening. He had found the regent lord still sitting by the window, staring sullenly into the sunset. One glance had sent him wordlessly to the liquor shelf to generously fill a glass for his old friend. Now the ranger-general sat across from him.

"I believe his intentions are honest," Halduron continued. "I just do not know how far we can trust honest intentions, even among our own people."

Lor'themar stood and went to the shelf to top up his drink. "I worry that if we give him authority to act on our behalf, he would—intentionally or not—promise something from us that I am not willing to give." Lor'themar paused and looked toward the carved ceiling. "Then again, if

enough sin'dorei follow him to Dalaran, he will end up their de facto leader anyway, and I am loath to have him acting as such without obligation to the cro—Silvermoon."

"It would be better if Rommath were not so stubborn," Halduron mused. "He lived in Dalaran for a long time; he bears the archmage title himself, you know. He has enough experience with the Kirin Tor to know how to handle them, and enough loyalty to his country that I believe we could trust him. He would be an ideal liaison for Aethas."

Lor'themar smiled faintly at Halduron's words. "Well, is that not a strange thing, to hear you speak well of Rommath?"

"I never approved of that business with M'uru, or the formation of the Blood Knights, no," Halduron admitted. "But that is behind us now, and we have no more reason to doubt him. If he were going to betray us, he would have done it when Kael'thas..." The words drifted and froze in Halduron's throat. Neither of them spoke for a long moment.

"Well," he added finally. "He would have done it then."

"So what do *you* think?" Lor'themar changed the subject and returned to his seat by the window. "What should we do about Aethas and Dalaran?"

"Aethas considers himself a member of the Kirin Tor," Halduron replied. "And I can think of a number of others who would be pleased to bear that mantle again as well. If the Kirin Tor want to admit blood elves, we cannot stop them from doing so."

"No, we cannot," Lor'themar answered. He was silent a moment. "However, it is my instinct that we should eschew *official* involvement in the Nexus War. Aethas should report to us periodically, and we should give him a clear set of boundaries. But those who wish to offer their services may do so under the banner of the Kirin Tor—not Quel'Thalas."

One corner of Halduron's mouth twisted up into a sardonic smirk, and Lor'themar pretended not to notice the melancholy in his friend's eyes. "What was that you said this morning about being a Farstrider? You sound more like a king every day, Lor'themar," Halduron remarked.

From where he sat, Halduron could not see the way Lor'themar's fingers tightened around his glass.

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A few days later Lor'themar, atop his hawkstrider, picked his way through the northern

foothills of the Eastern Plaguelands. He winced to look at the land; he was an elf, and, moreover, a ranger—a child of the open woods, of clear water and golden leaves. The sight of the cracked, foamy soil and withered trees of eastern Lordaeron twisted his heart and nearly made him retch. Such would be the fate of Quel'Thalas if not for his people's unrelenting vigilance.

Lor'themar looked behind him. Three Farstrider honor guards followed, taken at Halduron's and Rommath's insistence.

"By all means," Halduron had said, "you should not be going at all—I thought for sure you would give up this silly notion when Aethas decided to drop by. But I can see that nothing I can say will stop you, so you are at least going to take an escort. Do not argue." Rommath had wanted to send a few of the Blood Knights, which was out of the question. "They will not be well received," Lor'themar had pointed out. *And nor will I*, he added silently. Fortunately Rommath had not pressed the point.

At last the ridge he sought came into view. At a glance it would seem to be just another jutting projection on a low, rocky face, but he knew better. He drew his mount into a sharp turn, picking out the path, and continued up at a quick pace. There was no point in stealth, for the scouts would already have seen them.

As he expected, about halfway up the winding trail two figures suddenly materialized from behind the rocks. Their blades clashed as they barred the way, the sound echoing violently into the eerie stillness of the Plaguelands.

"Who would come to Quel'Lithien Lodge?" one asked.

Lor'themar looked down at him evenly.

"Do not be an idiot. You know who I am."

The other looked him straight in the eye.

"That does not mean you are welcome, Lord Theron."

Lor'themar unsheathed both of the swords he wore across his back. The Quel'Lithien guards' knuckles whitened around their own weapons, and he saw one twitch his fingers slightly, readying the signal of attack to the myriad others who were surely hidden throughout the terrain. Silently the regent lord tossed his blades to the ground, then loosed his bow and quiver and dropped them as well. He motioned for his escorts to do the same, and when they had done so, he raised an eyebrow.

"Is that convincing enough of my honest intent?"

The first Lithien scout spoke again.

"Tell us why you have come."

"I have news for Ranger Lord Hawkspear and High Priestess Skycaller," he said.

"Regarding..." He cleared his throat. "Regarding Prince Kael'thas."

The guards considered this a moment, one briefly glancing at the other, but for the most part their eyes never left Lor'themar—eyes still blue and untainted, Lor'themar could not help but notice. At last one guard jerked his head toward the ridge.

"Fine, then," he said, "the ranger lord can decide what to do with you. Follow me."

The other snapped his fingers and, as Lor'themar had predicted, half a dozen more Lithien scouts jumped out from various gullies and fissures in the rock to collect the arms he and his guards had left in the dirt. Silently, Lor'themar followed them.

At the top of the trail, nestled among the boulders and dry brush, Quel'Lithien Lodge rose in front of them. Its fine wood siding had faded and pitted, undoubtedly due to the ravages of the plague, and the Farstriders had camouflaged its beams with rotting foliage. Lor'themar's stomach pitched strangely as the lodge came into view, and he tried not to think of the days when its surroundings had been green and his visits greeted with delighted shouts, not angry blades. Those days were lost.

He handed his hawkstrider to one of the scouts. She collected it and left him with a suspicious glare. One of the rangers who had stopped him on the trail had run ahead into the lodge. As Lor'themar watched, the ranger returned, trailing two elves he had not seen in several years.

"Lor'themar Theron." High Priestess Aurora Skycaller's voice was measured and not a little unkind. "I must admit I am surprised to find you here."

"You have some nerve," Rentharr Hawkspear said cruelly, "to show your face. I should have a dozen archers turn you into a pincushion."

The words stung, even though he had expected them. He closed his good eye and slowly opened it again.

"I have news," he said simply, "that you should know."

"You could not have sent a letter?" Rentharr sneered.

"Would you have read it?" Lor'themar answered, and the small twitch at the corner of Aurora's lip and the deepened scowl across Rentharr's face told him what he already knew: they

would not have. "I did not come all this way because of something trivial," he said at last. "Will you at least hear what I have to say?"

Renthar and Aurora eyed him wordlessly, then turned and walked into the lodge. Lor'themar followed, painfully aware of the high elven eyes watching him as he passed.

The Farstrider outposts of the Eastern Kingdoms had never been lavish, but Quel'Lithien's austerity was sobering. A number of the walls were scored deeply from some sort of blade and the dark stains trod into the floorboards were surely blood. Yet the elves clearly took pride in the lodge's keeping; the curtains, though worn, were carefully hemmed with even stitches. The ancient map of eastern Lordaeron nailed to the wall had been heavily annotated, but in elegant script, with not so much as a single blot of ink upon its yellowed parchment. A strange little ache grew inside of Lor'themar as he saw each of these things, as if he had rediscovered a forgotten lover's letter. He had lived the life of a Farstrider, in a past that seemed so distant now as to be nothing but a dream.

"In here," Renthar said, jerking his thumb toward a small room and banging the door open with a shove. "Close it behind you," he told Lor'themar without looking back.

Lor'themar sat across from Aurora. Renthar swept several scraps of bloodied leather armor off the narrow table before sitting next to her, and it almost made Lor'themar smile vaguely, the way they stared him down like judges at a tribunal.

"You said you had something to say." Renthar's voice cut the stillness. "So say it."

"Several weeks ago a number of the Sunfury forces returned to us."

Renthar's and Aurora's eyes rounded with disbelief. It gave Lor'themar a smug, but hollow, satisfaction.

"By the Sunwell," Aurora said softly. "I cannot say I ever thought they would."

"So, then." Renthar's eyes glittered strangely—he almost reminded Lor'themar of Rommath. "Are you here on the prince's orders to offer us an official apology?"

"I might be," Lor'themar answered, "if he were alive."

If either of the high elves in front of him had looked shocked before, it was nothing compared to their expressions now. The color drained from both their faces.

"Explain, damn you," Renthar demanded.

Lor'themar took a deep breath and began to outline the events of the recent past. He had not entirely anticipated how painful it would be to relay the story, especially to two people who so

thoroughly despised him. He drew the words from his throat, one by one, sometimes forcefully. He had to spit them across the room to get them out at all. When at last he had finished, he blinked once, as if waking up.

"The Sunwell is thus returned to us," Aurora said. She turned her face to the window.

"Yes," Lor'themar replied.

The Plaguelands' absolute, dead silence fell across them. Lor'themar bowed his head, reliving his own moment of comprehension, when the last dust of battle had settled on Quel'Danas and the Sunwell had shone majestic and proud once again. He had stared into it with the same paralyzed expression that had now etched itself into Renthar's and Aurora's faces, and had found no joy in its glow. He had never dreamed the price of its return could be too much to pay.

Aurora's voice startled him. "I had wondered why the pangs of the addiction felt so eased lately. I have not needed... help... to cope."

"The magic in the Sunwell is different now," Lor'themar said. "It may take a while for some to adjust."

"Some, yes." Aurora reached her hand up and seemed to grasp something that Lor'themar could not see, twisting it between her fingers as if it were a long ribbon. "I am a priestess of the Light. I know this magic."

"It was a great gift," Lor'themar heard himself say. Aurora looked sidelong at him, and he knew his lack of conviction had not gone unnoticed.

"If the prince is dead," Renthar said, "then what will become of the crown of Quel'Thalas?"

"Kael'thas himself decreed that Anasterian will always be the last king of Quel'Thalas. The crown is unclaimed."

Renthar narrowed his eyes. "And if someone were to lay such a claim?"

"There are none alive with any right to it."

Renthar looked him right in the eye. Lor'themar matched his gaze just as fiercely. Renthar Hawkspear could doubt him in any way but this one.

Aurora spoke again. "I suppose this is what you came to tell us of."

"Yes," Lor'themar replied.

"Then feel free to leave," said Renthar.

Lor'themar closed his eye. "There is one more thing." This would be the hardest.

"Is there?" Renthar's voice was flat. "Well?"

"Since the Sunfury have returned to us," Lor'themar began, "and our position in the Ghostlands is more... secure... the Farstriders are finding themselves stretched a bit less. They—I—would send you regular supplies."

Lor'themar had become accustomed to the mockery of those he could not please, but he had not fully anticipated the pointed sting that Renthar's laugh elicited. Even Aurora's face, normally so controlled and serene, flushed deeply with undisguised contempt.

"Five years we rot here, thrown out of our homes at *your* behest because we refuse to suck magic from living things like vampires." Renthar began to rise from his seat, leaning across the table, truly shaking with rage. "And now you want to offer aid? After all we have been through, you come *now*? After what the Horde did to us in the name of that bastard human who called himself *ranger*? How blind do you think I am, Lor'themar? I should kill you. I should kill you and send Sylvanas your head!"

Even through Renthar's outburst, Lor'themar latched onto one word and held fast. *Ranger*, he had said, and not just any—a *human* ranger. As far as Lor'themar knew, there had only ever been one.

"I thought," he began slowly, "that Nathanos Marris died to the Scourge."

Both Aurora and Renthar turned slowly to look at him, their faces as cold as ivory dolls. For the first time since he had arrived for this confrontation, Lor'themar heard his heart hammering in his ears, the lump in his throat making it difficult to swallow.

Aurora spoke first.

"He did," she said.

Lor'themar stared hard at Aurora's face. There was something else here, something lurking like a shadow in the corners of the room, and he would know what it was before he left.

"He did not *become* Scourge," she said.

"Sylvanas did always take a strange pride in him," Renthar muttered, looking away. "It should not be much of a surprise that she would call him to her service before Arthas had the chance to sway his will.

"We come in the name of the champion of the Banshee Queen," he quoted. "That is what they said when they arrived. 'You have something that belongs to him.'" Renthar turned again to face Lor'themar. "We held a copy of the registry detailing Marris's acceptance into the Farstriders.

They took it by force, and slaughtered any of my rangers they could find. Horde, Lor'themar. Including Forsaken. *Sylvanas's people. Your allies.*"

Lor'themar could not speak; he did not trust his voice not to shake.

"Once I would have gladly laid down my life at the ranger-general's request." Renthar's voice filled with unbearable bitterness. "We are no longer her people. And nor are we yours."

"Renthar," Lor'themar started, "for all our differences, you know I would not have—"

Renthar laughed, interrupting him.

"You send us here to be ignored, inconvenient as we are, and then dare to be shocked when we suffer? There are no curses foul enough to describe you, Lor'themar. I know whose troops sit in Tranquillien, Regent Lord. I wonder how many of your own, sin'dorei rangers, they have killed beneath your very nose. Deal with the devil as you please. I can only hope that you get what you deserve.

"Now go," he said quietly. "Send supplies if you wish. I will return the bearers' hearts to you, wrapped in their own tabards."

Lor'themar stood and turned to leave. They had caught him off guard, and the walls around him no longer held the assurance of solidity. He saw Aurora stand and stare him down, her chin high and defiant. Neither she nor Renthar spoke another word, and it seemed as if the sheer force of their hatred pushed him from the room.

He had no reason to fight them. He could, perhaps, offer his palms in penance, but they would only spit upon them, and in truth he could not find it in his heart to fault them. If he had held any hope of atonement before—and perhaps he had—the Plaguelands' desolation had smothered it, as it did all that lived and dreamed. These bridges had burned long ago, his own hand setting them to flame.

All three of his guards sat waiting in the front room, surrounded by quel'dorei rangers with arrows nocked in their bowstrings. He walked straight outside; his rangers followed silently.

In the yard a Quel'Lithien scout held the reins of their hawkstriders, and another carried their weapons. Lor'themar took his things, swung into the saddle, and turned back to where Renthar and Aurora stood watching. The impulse seized him to say something, anything, to bridge the gulf that stretched between them, but whatever words he intended dried and crumbled to dust in his mouth. He turned his hawkstrider away and did not look back.

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As they rode upward through the Thalassian Pass several hours later, it began to snow. They passed through the gates that demarked the southern boundary of Quel'Thalas with hardly a glance. Once their arches had soared, golden and white, seeming to leap out of the rocks themselves and cascade to the ground like a waterfall of marble and amber. Arthas had laid them, like everything, to waste. Dark banners of the Scourge still hung high from the ramparts, snapping and popping above their heads in the mountain wind.

"Lord Theron," one of his escorts called, "you should wear your cloak in this weather."

Lor'themar did not respond. He could not possibly become any more frozen than he already felt. The snowflakes drove into his face and rubbed his skin raw.

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Halduron and Rommath awaited Lor'themar in Silvermoon upon his return. So did Aethas, much to Lor'themar's chagrin. When Halduron looked at him and said, "Well?" Lor'themar simply shook his head. Halduron raised his eyebrows as if to ask, *What did you expect?* Rommath did not meet his eye.

"How did they react to you?" Aethas asked. Lor'themar turned to stare at him.

"Five years ago I threw them out of the homes they had fought for every bit as fiercely as anyone in Quel'Thalas today," he answered. "How do you think they reacted?"

Aethas winced.

"Vereesa Windrunner is married to the new leader of the Kirin Tor. She is not fond of me, or those I represent. I had hoped... because you were a ranger..." Aethas shrugged. "I thought maybe you could help us bridge that gap. I suppose not."

Lor'themar scowled at the mention of Vereesa's name. "You suppose correctly," he said.

* * *

That afternoon he relayed to Halduron the details of his trip to Quel'Lithien in between gulps of Eversong wine.

"Of course they were going to treat you with contempt. You always knew that," his ranger-general reprimanded him. "Honestly, I do not know why you bothered to go at all."

"You would have done the same," Lor'themar answered, and Halduron frowned.

"You know me too well," he said at last. He slouched in his chair and stared out the window.

"They did not know about the Sunwell," Lor'themar said. "It was right that I went."

"Whom are you trying to convince here?" Halduron asked, bemused.

"Halduron," Lor'themar said quickly, "do you remember Nathanos Marris?"

"Of course," he said, frowning. "So what?"

"Aurora told me he was raised as undead," Lor'themar replied. "Sylvanas called him to her service. He is known as the champion of the Banshee Queen."

Halduron leaned back in his chair, balancing on its rearmost legs and resting his palms behind his head. "Funny, that," he said. "Sylvanas was always championing *him*. Kae—er—some—were not keen on letting a human train with the Farstriders. Myself included."

"The rangers at Quel'Lithien were attacked by a group of Horde in the name of the Banshee Queen's champion," Lor'themar said finally. He drained his glass of its contents and set it on the desk. "Many of them were killed."

The front legs of Halduron's chair came down to the floor with a bang.

"Why would he want to attack Quel'Lithien?"

Lor'themar shrugged. "Quel'Lithien had a copy of the Thalassian registry where Sylvanas gave her final word admitting him into the Farstriders. Apparently he wanted it."

"So he sent his subordinates to *attack* them? Over a book?" Halduron's voice filled with disbelief.

"That is what they told me."

"Are you sure they were not lying?"

"It occurred to me," Lor'themar admitted, "but if ever Renthar Hawkspear was anything, it was principled."

"And I cannot imagine Aurora being dishonest a day in her life," Halduron added. He sighed heavily. "Do you think Sylvanas knows?"

Lor'themar shook his head. "I do not know."

"Do you think she would care, if she did know?"

That was the question Lor'themar had been dreading. "I do not know that, either. What if she does not?" He covered his face with his hands. "They were *her rangers*."

"They were yours when you exiled them," Halduron said quietly.

"Actually, they were *yours*," Lor'themar snapped back. He bristled a moment in fury, but then his shoulders sagged. Renthar's words echoed ghostly in his head. *You send us here to be ignored, and then dare to be shocked when we suffer?*

"I never wanted to see them dead," Lor'themar said at last, cringing to hear the plea in his own voice, "but I could not afford to lead a nation divided..."

A heavy hand on his shoulder made him lift his head.

"I know," Halduron said, placing a refilled glass in front of him. "Get a hold of yourself." His voice was gruff, but not unkind. "We always knew it was a risk to trust the Forsaken. But who else ever offered to fight for Quel'Thalas at all?"

Lor'themar lifted his glass. The afternoon sunlight shone through it and turned its contents a rusty red, like the soils of the Plaguelands.

* * *

Lor'themar tapped his fingers against his desk, dully recounting his notes from the various meetings with Aethas. He would have to give the archmage a definitive answer either today or tomorrow. He pinched the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger and glanced toward the wine on the shelf. A knock on the door disturbed his thoughts.

"Yes?" he answered.

The courier hastily bowed and addressed him.

"Lord Theron, your presence is requested in the hall."

Lor'themar frowned. Halduron and Rommath would have come themselves, and Aethas probably too, at this point.

"I am not available," he replied flatly.

"My lord," said the courier, "the Banshee Queen will not wait."

Lor'themar felt his heart sink into the pit of his stomach. He rose to his feet.

"No," he said quietly, "of course she will not. Show me to her."

The courier turned on his heel, but not without one uneasy glance at the regent lord.

Lor'themar steeled himself as he followed.

He took the minutes that they spent walking to the front hall to collect his thoughts. During the years he had now spent ruling Quel'Thalas, he had found it to be very nearly a physical action, the way he had to draw the mantle of authority about himself. He could feel the change, right down to the tips of his fingers. In front of Sylvanas he would need all the resolve he could muster.

Halduron and Rommath joined him silently as he walked. The ranger-general's face was hard. Rommath was more detached; he knew what to expect, but his horror was distant and impersonal, unlike Lor'themar and Halduron's. To them, Sylvanas's fate was a wound ripped raw again every time they saw her, and its pain had yet to dull.

In the hall where she stood, the light seemed to fade; it was not that it dimmed or dulled but that it collapsed and sunk into the space she occupied, as if even sunshine faltered around her. The ferocious white glow of her eyes threw the pallid skin of her pinched face into even greater relief. Her Royal Dreadguards flanked her, clutching blackened blades in their skeletal hands.

All Lor'themar could hear as he entered the hall was the echo of his own footsteps, and even that seemed to fade unnaturally quickly in the presence of the Banshee Queen.

"What brings you to Silvermoon, Sylvanas?" he asked.

"I have just returned from Orgrimmar," she said. Her voice scraped against the walls. As her mouth moved, Lor'themar could see the flesh around it crack and peel like a long-discarded snakeskin. "Arthas has dared to strike at the heart of the Horde."

Lor'themar's mouth went dry, and a great tide of unease began to rise in his chest. Sylvanas paused a moment, scrutinizing his face for a reaction. He clenched his teeth but remained quiet.

"The attack was successfully repelled," she continued. "But Arthas is only toying with us—we must bring the war to him. Warchief Thrall at last sees what we have long known." Her eyes glittered with a dangerous eagerness. "The Horde prepares for war. And the sin'dorei, Lor'themar, constitute a portion of the Horde."

Her words hit him like stones. He knew what she was asking, had always known that this day would come. And yet, as he stood in the hall, suddenly conscious of how its grand space swallowed him, he found himself unable to respond.

"Lor'themar." Sylvanas's words shattered around him in impatience. "We go to destroy

Arthas—once and for all."

Slowly, Lor'themar shook his head.

"I appreciate that you and Warchief Thrall wish us to join you on the initial front in Northrend. But we are stretched too thin. We have already received a similar request from the Kirin Tor, but I cannot in good faith send our forces north. Since the events at Quel'Danas—"

"This is not a request, Lor'themar," she interrupted. Her eyes flashed red in anger. "You will send troops. They will accompany the Forsaken."

"Sylvanas," Lor'themar said quietly, "we have just fought a civil war. What can we possibly have to give?"

"Have you forgotten who is responsible for the state of Quel'Thalas in the first place? Who is ultimately to blame?" She searched his face for a reply, and when he gave none, she continued. "Well, I, at least, have not! My vengeance will not be denied, and you will give what I demand of you: the sin'dorei rangers and magi, as well as the Blood Knights."

"We cannot spare them, Sylvanas."

Her flaking lips curled into a sneer.

"Then you can hide here like a beaten dog if that is indeed your will, Lor'themar. Though if you believe anything can come from it, you are a fool. Do you think Arthas will be content to ignore you whilst you wait here and lick your wounds? Do you think *I* will tolerate such cowardice? I would warn you: those who do not stand with the Forsaken stand against them. And those who stand against the Forsaken will not stand long.

"For a while now my people have stood guard in these lands, and it is by my hand that you have any place within the Horde. You will aid us in Northrend, or I shall cease to aid you in Quel'Thalas."

In the south, near the Plaguelands, where the Scourge still ran rampant across the Dead Scar despite every effort, they could not afford the loss of Sylvanas's troops. He had not lied to Aurora and Renthar when he had said that their position in the Ghostlands was more secure, but he was not so naïve as to think it could be held by Thalassian forces alone. Without the Forsaken, Tranquillien would fall. And what, then, would follow?

For the second time since he had returned from Quel'Lithien, he heard Hawkspear's words in his memory.

We are no longer her people.

If Lor'themar was honest with himself, he could not deny that he had known it all the while.

"Send my exhausted people to find more death in Northrend, or risk losing Quel'Thalas to the Scourge once again." From far away he heard his own laugh, and it sounded more like one of Rommath's. "There is no choice here, Sylvanas."

The Banshee Queen eyed him dispassionately.

"I will expect your forces at the Undercity in two weeks, Lor'themar," she replied. "I will not be disappointed in this."

"Yes, my lady."

She turned to leave.

"How can you do this?" Lor'themar registered the desperate anger in Rommath's voice with a sort of dull surprise; the grand magister seemed still to believe somewhere that Sylvanas could be made to negotiate.

"This is blackmail!" Rommath continued, the knuckles of his fists paling as he clenched them around his staff. "It was *you* who pleaded to aid us in the first place! We never asked for your assistance; you gave it of your own free will! How can you call yourselves our allies in one breath and hold our lands for ransom in the next?"

Sylvanas considered him a moment, somehow managing to look down upon him though he was taller than she.

"You were never required to accept my offers," she said. "You chose to. All I ask for now is the will and power to defeat our greatest foe."

Rommath glared at her in sheer hatred, but Lor'themar spoke before he could.

"Is there anything else you wish to discuss, Sylvanas?" To his own ears he sounded defeated, bereft of will and passion. *Discuss*, a little voice taunted him. *As if there could ever be any discussion with the Banshee Queen.*

"No. I am finished here, Lor'themar."

"*Shorel'aran*, Sylvanas," he said. Her eyes flashed at the Thalassian farewell, and she said nothing more. Lor'themar watched her go with listless interest; he looked only because there was nothing else to see. He felt as brittle as a blade of grass in a frost.

As Lor'themar turned he noticed with distaste that Aethas had appeared at some point during the meeting. It vexed him that the archmage had witnessed his humiliation, but he had

little strength left to concern himself with pride. Even through his daze, his mind was already preoccupied with lists. He was familiar with war. Halduron would summon Captain Sunbrand and Lieutenant Dawnrunner. Rommath would notify the magi; he could also represent the Blood Knights while they sent word to Liadrin. Aethas would indeed have his chance to prove himself. Lor'themar wandered back down the hallway as if in a dream.

"Lor'themar!"

He stopped and turned to the speaker, trying to tame his face, to appear attentive or interested. In truth, he was exhausted. He wanted nothing more than to return to his desk and be alone, to busy himself with necessary, mindless tasks and forget for a while what had transpired here.

As usual, Rommath would not let him have his way.

"Lor'themar," he called again as he caught up to the regent lord. "You cannot seriously—we do not—"

"You heard her, Rommath," Lor'themar interrupted. "We go to Northrend or we lose Forsaken support—and likely the rest of the Horde's as well. So we go." He turned to leave again.

"There are still soldiers in the infirmaries from Quel'Danas!" Rommath continued. "We have not even held a proper service for the dead—by the Sunwell, Lor'themar!"

"We do not have a choice, Rommath; do you not understand that? We do as Sylvanas asks or we quite possibly lose all of Quel'Thalas south of the Elrendar River!"

"So, let it go!" Rommath shouted, and Lor'themar froze in shock. Slowly he turned back once again, catching sight of Halduron's equally startled face as he did.

"Let it go?" His voice started to rise. "Do you know how many elves—sin'dorei and quel'dorei alike—died to defend that land? How many continue to die? And you say I should just *let it go*? What the hell is wrong with you?"

"They would rather have died in vain than have given their lives just so you could turn into nothing more than the puppet of some—some *monster*, in the name of their sacrifice!"

Lor'themar could not believe what he was hearing. Rommath glared at him, not in anger or contempt, but in wild and shockingly uncharacteristic desperation. During all of Lor'themar's tenure as regent, though he and Rommath had argued on many counts, Rommath had never lost his composure or poise. Now he practically shook. Out of the corner of his eye, Lor'themar noticed that a small crowd had gathered. He had no wish to cause a scene.

"Do not fall for her threats," Rommath said quietly, and Lor'themar realized in horrified awe that he was pleading. "She will only use you."

Lor'themar clenched his fists in resentment. "I will do *whatever* it takes to protect Quel'Thalas and its people," he stated. "Even if it means being used. And you *will* obey my orders. Do I make myself clear?"

"And how long do you think you can play this kind of game?"

"As long as I need to," Lor'themar answered, unflinching. Rommath had run up against his obstinacy, and the regent lord would not be easily bested. He straightened and stared Rommath down. Rommath stared back for a moment, but his whole body seemed to sag. He closed his eyes.

"Another leader of the sin'dorei once said something very similar to me, Lor'themar," he said softly, looking away. "I did not argue with him then; indeed, at the time, I thought him right."

Lor'themar's blood ran cold.

"We buried him on Quel'Danas," Rommath said. He sighed heavily. "I will notify Lady Liadrin and Magister Bloodsworn of your decision, Regent Lord. I will report back to you with their preparations." He left without another word, his shoulders hunched.

Barely able to think, Lor'themar blankly watched the grand magister's receding figure until it disappeared around a corner.

"Lor'themar." Halduron's quiet voice startled him out of his trance. He turned to his friend only to find the ranger-general regarding him strangely, as if seeing him for the first time. Lor'themar wanted to shake him, to yell at him to stop *looking* like that.

"What are the regent lord's orders?" Halduron asked. His formality was unnerving.

"Send word to Farstrider Retreat and Farstrider Enclave," he answered. "Tell them what has been decided."

Halduron nodded, leaving him with a final, unreadable glance.

Lor'themar looked around, one dark scowl sending the servants and palace guards scurrying back to their respective duties. The only person who remained in the hallway was Aethas Sunreaver, who refused to be ignored.

"If you are going to Northrend, will you also support the Kirin—"

"The Kirin Tor can do whatever they damn well please—it is no concern of mine," Lor'themar snapped. "But seeing as any number of sin'dorei forces will shortly be heading north, I expect many of them will likely end up on your doorstep. You will do what you can to aid them,

Aethas. Now go find Rommath. I am sure he will have much use for you." Lor'themar's contempt finally bested him. "I suppose you should be pleased, Archmage."

Aethas shook his head. "It is true I wished to acquire your support in Northrend, Regent Lord. But not on these terms. Believe me when I say I would rather have seen you agree of your own free will, not because of—"

"My free will remains intact, thank you," Lor'themar interrupted him again, smarting from the sting in Aethas's words. "And it is still by *my* will that Quel'Thalas is ruled."

"Of course, my lord," Aethas answered, bowing slightly in conciliation. But as he raised his head, Lor'themar could see that the apology did not extend to his eyes. Seething, Lor'themar turned on his heel and left him there, standing alone beneath leaden banners of red and gold.

* * *

Journal of the Regent Lord, entry 83

I cannot remember the last time I told anyone such a bald-faced lie, even since I was forced into politics. But I did lie to Aethas, and he knows it, and I know it, and anyone who heard me say it knows it. My will means very little, in fact. I can pretend my power is real, but in the end, it is all an act, and none of it is honest. I can wash my hands of it, play martyr, be victimized, and accomplish nothing, or I can fight and victimize others in my turn and thus become the essence of all I have battled. If I have ever rationalized my choices using any other logic, I was certainly lying to myself. Hawkspear was right: I deal with the devil indeed, but the Sunwell may never have been restored had we not sunk to those levels. He and Aurora can sleep soundly, knowing they have never compromised their ethics, but if they deny that they prosper in the wake of those who have, then they delude themselves as much as I.

Here I find myself so close to believing that the ends justify the means. But the ruins of the Magisters' Terrace will haunt me forever, reminding me of the fate I tempt with that thought. This is the line I walk, finally knowing that the actions I take in necessity are nonetheless indefensible. Those truths can never be reconciled, but sometimes I can hold them both side by side and almost understand. I might call this revelation profound if I were ignorant enough not to realize that I am only learning what Kael'thas, and Anasterian before him, had also learned in their turns.

All we can do is walk the road we are given with such dignity as we can muster, each to our own glory or demise, and pray that there yet remains something of our own hearts when all is said and done. By the Sunwell, I hope that there will remain something of mine.