

Edge of Night

By Dave Kosak

ICECROWN

Sylvanas Windrunner drifts in a sea of comfort, physical sensations replaced by the purity of emotion. She can grasp bliss, see joy, hear peace. This is the afterlife, her destiny. The eternal sea in which she found herself after she fell defending Silvermoon. She belongs here. With each recollection, her memory of this place palls. The sound grows distant; the warmth, cooler. The vision takes on the pallor of a half-remembered dream. But with horrific clarity, the memory always ends the same: Sylvanas's spirit is wrenched away. The pain is so intense it leaves her soul forever torn. The grinning face of Arthas Menethil, with his lopsided smile and dead eyes, leers at her as he pulls her back into the world. Violates her. His laughter—that hollow laugh—the memory of it makes her skin crawl!

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"*You son of a bitch!*" Sylvanas hollered, kicking aside a shattered piece of the Lich King's frozen armor. Her voice, empty and terrifying, cracked under the strain of her hatred. The sound echoed across the peaks of Icecrown, rolling through the valleys like the cloying mists that forever haunted this horrible place.

She had ventured here, alone, to his former seat of power. To the very top of Icecrown Citadel, where a frozen throne loomed on a plateau of white ice. Of course that egotistical little boy she knew would place himself here, sitting atop the world. But where was he now? Shattered. She could no longer feel his malevolence tugging at the edges of her consciousness. His broken armor lay in pieces on the white peak before his throne, surrounded with blackened cakes of frozen gore, the remains of those who had finally brought him to his knees.

Sylvanas regretted not being there to see him broken. She picked up a shattered gauntlet, from the very hand that had once gripped Frostmourne. *He is finally dead.* But why did she feel so hollow inside? Why did she still throb with rage? She hurled the armor from the peak, watching it disappear into the roiling mists.

She was not alone. Nine glimmering spirits encircled the pinnacle, their masked faces turned toward her, their ephemeral forms held aloft on graceful, insubstantial wings. They were the Val'kyr, warrior maidens of old, once enslaved to the will of Arthas. Why did they remain in this place? Sylvanas neither knew nor cared. They stayed out of her way, absolutely mute, immobile even as Sylvanas hollered and raged. Were they watching her? Judging? She ignored them and crunched through the snow to the very seat of Arthas's power.

Someone else sat atop the throne.

Sylvanas at first thought it was Arthas's corpse, planted mockingly in this place of honor and sealed in a block of ice, but the silhouette was all wrong. She approached the throne and wiped her hand across the surface of the ice, peering at the distorted figure within. Human, yes. She recognized the profile of an Alliance shoulderplate. But the body was very badly burned, the flesh split open like roasted meat. He wore Arthas's crown—and his eyes—that flicker of consciousness...

They have replaced him. A new Lich King sat on the throne!

Again Sylvanas cried out, shock growing into explosive rage. She smashed the flat of her hand against the ice, then her fist. The ice cracked. The immobile face within split open behind a web of fractures. Her howls faded, disappearing hollowly into the mists that enveloped the peak. *They replaced him. Does this mean there will always be a Lich King? Idiots.* Naively presuming that their puppet king wouldn't someday begin twisting the world to his own ends. Or worse: become a blunt weapon for something even more terrible.

It was a bitter blow. She had expected to venture here in triumph, not to discover another defeat. The victory was hollow. But she backed away from the throne, straightened up, and accepted that the cycle would go on. Arthas was dead. What did it matter if another corpse filled his vacant throne? Sylvanas Windrunner had her vengeance. The vision that had driven her and her people for years had finally been realized. And not a single fiber of her desiccated, animate corpse cared where the world went from here.

It was over now. A part of her was surprised she was even still around, without his lingering presence always tugging at the back of her mind. She backed away from the throne and slowly turned to survey the cold gray world all around her. Her thoughts returned to that place of bliss, her half-remembered glimpse of what lay beyond. Home. It was time.

Slowly, she crunched her way to the ragged edge of the icy platform. A thousand feet below, shrouded by the clouds, lay a forest of shattered saronite spikes she had scouted out earlier. The fall alone couldn't kill her: her animate flesh was nigh indestructible. But the spikes, the hardened blood of an Old God, they not only would tear the body apart but would obliterate the soul as well. She longed for it. A return to peace. The work she had begun in the forests of Silvermoon was finally complete with the death of Arthas.

She lifted her bow from her shoulder and cast it aside. It clattered against the uneven ice. Then she removed her quiver. Arrows spilled from it, cascading down the side of Icecrown Citadel, disappearing one by one into the fog. The empty quiver dropped quietly to the ground at her feet.

Her ragged, dark cloak, freed from her discarded armaments, began to whip around her neck in the bitter wind. She could feel no cold, only a dull ache. She would feel nothing soon. She already felt her spirit reaching a place of calm for the first time in almost a decade. Her weight shifted toward the edge of the drop. She closed her eyes.

As one, the Val'kyr silently turned to face her.

GILNEAS

"Forward—" the marshal cried, his command cut short as a musketball shattered his lower jaw. The wall before him was broken but still offered cover for the snipers hidden in the rain above. The weather poured from the sky in white sheets, drenching attackers and defenders alike. The marshal toppled over, careening down a pile of rubble like a sack of cordwood, coming to rest in the thick mud below. Like the bogged-down demolishers and meat wagons of his artillery, his troops were making no progress. Any normal man would've been dead for sure, but being that the marshal was already dead, he soon clawed his way up from the mud, spitting coagulated blood and ichor from the remains of his face.

To the north, across a long stretch of rutted field and on the other side of a gauzy filter of rain, Garrosh Hellscream tried to piece together what was happening along the front. He could see the gray silhouette of the great Gilnean wall, slotted with enormous diagonal gaps where the Cataclysm had wrenched it wide open. Were his Kor'kron at the front, they'd have walked right through. He grunted as a Forsaken scouting party trundled back through the mud, ragged and beaten. Even in victory, the Forsaken looked like corpses; in defeat, they looked even worse.

"Your scouts are useless. I sent them to harass the wall's defenses, and they crawl back like whipped dogs." Garrosh snorted, not even looking at his companion. The great brown-skinned orc was festooned in his most menacing battle garb, his veiny, tattooed biceps bursting out from beneath tusked shoulderguards. Although he stood right in front of his tent, he refused to step back out of the rain. It dribbled over his scowling face and blackened jaw.

Next to the great orc and sheltered under the tent canopy, Master Apothecary Lydon looked positively frail. His pockmarked face winced under a matted mess of purple-gray hair as he tried to formulate a response that wouldn't earn him another round of verbal abuse from the warchief. "I can assure you they're giving as good as they get," he said in measured tones, his voice rough and shallow. "Gilnean defenses are almost certainly in disarray."

"Then why are your scouts limping back instead of pressing forward?" Garrosh kicked aside a barrel. Behind him, his own troops weathered out the rain: four companies of elite handpicked orc and tauren warriors supported by five battalions of Orgrimmar's

hardest. They stretched over the fields of Silverpine, a sea of green and brown faces against a backdrop of bright-red banners. "And where are the promised regiments from Lordaeron? They're to flood the breach. We waste time."

Lydon knew better than to talk tactics with the hard-headed warchief, but he had grown desperate as the hour of the attack had approached. He licked his gray lips with a dark-purple tongue and tried to answer casually, hoping to elicit some reason. "Slowed by the rain, no doubt, but they should arrive soon. They are... absolutely... Lordaeron's finest. The very heart of our infantry and backbone of our entire endeavor..."

Garrosh stroked the side of his face with his knuckles. He eyed the terrain and mentally positioned the coming infantry and cavalry as Lydon spoke.

"But you can't just send them right into the central breach in the wall," Lydon continued. "It's a... a chokepoint. Well fortified, closely watched. Heavy armored troops on horseback couldn't maneuver through the breach: they'd be mown down by musketfire from the debris. Surely you can see—"

"Of course I see!" Garrosh answered. "The door is wedged open; now it must be kicked down. This is what your kind is good for." Now the warchief looked directly at the master apothecary, his cool eyes fixated on the pale yellow light that filled the latter's eye sockets. "You're already corpses, nearly impossible to kill. You flood the chokepoint, you open the way for the rest of the Horde to come through, fresh and eager. Rushing over a bridge of broken bodies if we have to. This is how fortifications are breached. How wars are won."

The master apothecary lifted up two bony fingers. "But if we could just use a... just a *touch* of the plague. Just to open a gap. Not even enough to do any—*just a smudge!* More to cause fear and panic than any actual—"

Garrosh's backhand ripped through the sky, spraying the tent with a glistening arc of rainwater as it smashed into the side of Lydon's face. The master apothecary reeled as if he'd been kicked by a horse, but by will alone managed to stay upright after the blow.

"If you're suggesting using even an *ounce* of that filth that you've got hidden away, I will burn you *and* your sewer-city to the ground," Garrosh grunted. He turned back toward the action.

Humiliated, Master Apothecary Lydon muttered a barely audible, "Yes, Warchief," through clenched teeth. But privately he coiled up his anger. *Where is the Dark Lady, Sylvanas?* he wondered, turning his empty eye sockets toward the gray heavens. *Why isn't she here to counter this beast?*

ICECROWN

Sylvanas tottered on the edge of Icecrown's peak, her eyes closed. She raised her arms. Although the wind here was biting cold, she felt only the dulllest of aches.

She sensed a presence nearby and opened her eyes. The Val'kyr had drifted closer to her, close enough that she could see their weapons glinting against their ghostly thighs. What did they want?

Without warning, a vision filled her head. A memory. She found herself in a warm, sun-drenched bedroom. Shafts of golden sunlight spilled through the window, illuminating aimless motes of dust and casting ornate patterns on the floor. This was her room. A lifetime ago. She had not yet seen her twentieth autumn, yet already young Sylvanas was the most promising hunter in her family. She pulled on her thigh-high leather boots, carefully measuring the laces and decoratively tying them. She adjusted the leaf-patterned embroidery, then bounced herself off of the bed to admire her reflection in the mirror. Her waist-length blonde hair flowed like water, absolutely translucent in the light of the sun. She beamed at the mirror, teasing her hair until it dashed around her long, slender ears in just the perfect way. It wasn't good enough to be the best hunter in her family. She needed to take everyone's breath away as she ventured out. *She was so very vain.*

It was a strange, forgotten memory, and it brought Sylvanas back from the edge of the peak. What had prompted that recollection? That life was lost a thousand times over.

Another memory flooded her senses. Now she crouched behind an outcropping of smooth stone in Eversong Woods. The autumnal foliage rustled above her, masking the sound of her companion's footsteps as he dashed forward and then fell into hiding beside her. "There are so many!" he barked, falling silent as she raised a finger. "We have only two dozen rangers up there," he said, his voice now a whisper. "They cannot survive that!" Sylvanas didn't turn her gaze away from the dark mass of shambling corpses crushing its way closer to the river ford. It was the height of the Third War, and hours away from Silvermoon's fall at the hands of Arthas's army.

"They merely need to delay them as we fortify the Sunwell's defense," she answered, her tone measured.

"They will die!"

"They are arrows in the quiver," Sylvanas said. "They must be spent if we are to win this."

She was brash. Empty? No—a fighter. She had a warrior's heart.

Now, as sudden as the last, a third memory. "Rightful heirs of Lordaeron!" Sylvanas called out, holding her bow aloft. Her forearm, still slender and muscular, was now a shade of blue-gray. Dead. The scene was very different now. This vision had the cold sheen of a memory lived after death. Before her waited a grotesque, quivering mass of corpses, their armor piecemeal, their bodies broken, the stench unimaginable. Their plaintive, desperate gazes reminded her suddenly of children. They disgusted her. But their need empowered her. "The Lich King falters. Your will is your own. Are you to be outcasts now in your own land? Or do we embrace the cruel cards fate has dealt us and retake our place in this world?"

Her questions were greeted with gurgles, then a rasping, almost desperate cheer. Bony fists lifted toward the sky. These poor people: peasants, farmers, priests, warriors, lords and nobles... they hadn't yet come to grips with what had happened to them. But for somebody—anybody—to assure them that they *belonged* somewhere was electrifying. "We are abandoned. We are... *forsaken*. But when the sun rises tomorrow, the capital will be *ours*," she pronounced. And now they roared.

"But what of the humans?" a young alchemist asked as the din faded. Sylvanas recognized him from the previous night's fighting. A cool intelligence flickered in his eye sockets: Lydon was his name. Already he'd come to embrace his situation, referring to humans as if they were a separate race; she made a mental note to make use of him.

"The humans will serve their purpose," she answered, her mind already calculating. "They believe *they* are liberating the city. Let them fight on our behalf and spend themselves for our gain. They are"—she stumbled upon an analogy she'd used before—"arrows in our quiver."

The heaving mass of undead clapped and coughed and hacked gleefully in assent. Sylvanas regarded the whole mob coldly. *And so are you*, she thought to herself. *Arrows I will aim at Arthas's heart.*

Still a warrior's heart? She had grown cold. No, she was the same. In death as in life.

Sylvanas shook her head, cleared her vision. These were her memories, but *she* wasn't remembering them. They were being pulled from her. Pulled from her by the Val'kyr. The mute spirits hovered around her, regarding her silently. *They are probing me!* Sylvanas realized. *Judging me!*

She drew cold air into her lungs, her eyes suddenly alive. "I will *not* be judged!" she cried out, turning away from the edge to face her accusers. "Not by you. Not by *anyone*." Her fury welled up inside her. Would her banshee's wail work against these... things?

But she didn't need to fight at all. She was done. "Stay back," she commanded. "And stay out of my head!"

Sylvanas stepped back, the wind whipping her hair and snapping her frayed cloak. The memories of who she had been and what she had become closed a knot in her stomach, and she moved now to unravel it. No more would she be the vengeful leader of a mongrel race of rotted corpses. Her work was done, and her long-denied reward awaited her. Longing for that forgotten bliss, she allowed herself to fall backward from the top of Icecrown Citadel. The wind rushed past her, a growing wail. The pinnacle, and the silent Val'kyr at its peak, disappeared...

Her body burst on the saronite stones below with a crushing finality.

GILNEAS

As if in a dream, the heart of Lordaeron's undead army crashed forward. Shouted commands were strangely muted. The heavy cavalry poured through the breach, skeletal hooves somehow finding purchase on the wrecked remains of the wall. The Forsaken struggled to squeeze through, the gap sometimes as narrow as four abreast.

Then the defenders' artillery fired with a dull, echoing crack. Man and horse burst into dust and gore where the shells landed. Musketfire erupted like the tapping of distant drums: row after row went down. But these veterans had lived through the horrors of Icecrown. They poured through, unrelenting, in order to give fight to the defenders beyond. The second wave arrived, hurling grapples to the walltop as oil poured down. All at once, the front burst into flame. Still the gunfire peppered them; still the Forsaken charged.

Some reached the walltop, only to be cut down. The defenders weren't human. Those rabid, lupine animals that had been lurking around Silverpine had actually been organized into a fighting force. Where guns and swords failed, tooth and claw tore into the undead army.

The Forsaken surged again, weapons spattered with blood and awash in rainwater. The figures who fought were gray in the mist, their cries somehow silent echoes as they were hacked apart. By now, even the defenders were reeling. They had killed so many: could anything be left?

The first wave of orcs caught the Gilneans by surprise. Horde forces rushed forward over a carpet of corpses, lust for victory in their eyes and throats. Everything was silent now. And then it was gone.

In its place stood the Bulwark, the half-finished fortifications that lined Lordaeron's border with what had become known as the Plaguelands. Master Apothecary Lydon was there, his left arm missing and an enormous gash across his face. He spoke urgently to his people, but no sound came out. He was orchestrating a last-minute defense at the

Bulwark, but had little to work with. The heart of the Forsaken army had been sacrificed at Gilneas.

What little remained faced off against an organized force of humans and dwarves marching west, fresh from its victory at Andorhal. The ragged force that remained at the Bulwark had little hope of victory. The rest of the Horde was nowhere in sight.

This isn't real, Sylvanas realized, suddenly aware of her own consciousness observing these ghostly events as they unfolded. She was dead: she could feel it, but her spirit was being held in limbo. *What is this?*

The last thing she remembered was falling to her demise. These visions—they were like memories of events that hadn't yet happened. Where did they come from? Where was she now?

The capital was suddenly under siege. King Wrynn stood beyond the burning remains of the zeppelin tower, drawing diagrams of the Undercity for his generals. He had stormed the city before; he was confident of victory.

Within the city walls, bonfires raged. Sylvanas seethed; the Alliance was already burning the corpses. No. Wait. She tried to make sense out of the clouded vision. *The few Forsaken who remain are throwing themselves into the bonfires*, she realized, *rather than facing their executioners*.

"This isn't real!" Sylvanas announced, her voice echoing in her head and sounding as it had when she had been alive. Were her people really so weak? No—*no!* Garrosh had all but murdered the best of her troops in his own wasteful campaigns. The Forsaken leadership had been gutted. That was what these visions showed.

The mists closed up completely as the future became indistinct. Sylvanas could no longer feel her body. She was floating in some kind of limbo. She realized she could see herself, and held up her hands in silent awe. Her flesh was a golden pink again, firm and luminous as it had been in life. But she was not alone here.

With a gasp, she saw that she was surrounded. Nine warrior women drifted in a circle around her, and their beauty outshone even hers. The Val'kyr appeared as they had in life. Some had raven-dark hair that fell around tan faces and jewel-like blue eyes. Others had blonde manes the pale, brilliant color of sun shining on snow. Their faces were soft, but their jaws hard. Their arms were smooth and muscled; their thighs wide and strong. Each held a different weapon: a spear, a halberd, a great two-handed claymore that stretched from chin to ground in a shimmering swath of polished steel. Each was the greatest warrior of her generation.

They were all just like me, Sylvanas saw. *Vain, victorious, and proud.*

"Yes, we were," said the blonde Val'kyr armed with the claymore, answering Sylvanas as if she'd spoken aloud. Her voice was rich and full. "I am Annhylde the Caller. These are my sister battlemaidens, and we are the only nine who remain. We served the warriors of the north in life, and chose to continue our service in death."

"To serve the Lich King."

The vision of Annhylde rankled. "Did *you* choose to serve the Lich King?" she asked.

"What is this? What are these visions?" Sylvanas demanded.

"Visions of the future," Annhylde explained. "Every life leaves a wake in its passing. This is yours."

"It doesn't take a crystal ball to see Hellscream squandering the Horde's resources, tearing it apart in his lust for conquest." Sylvanas felt the old anger welling up again, but couldn't feel her body respond. She couldn't feel anything. "Where have you taken me? I should be dead."

"You are," said another Val'kyr, her hair the color of coal.

"I've tasted oblivion before," Sylvanas protested. "You're keeping me in limbo. *Why?*"

Annhylde remained patient, her voice soothing and measured. "To show you the consequences of your passing, and to offer you a choice..."

"I've made my choice," Sylvanas interrupted.

"Your people will perish!" said the dark-haired Val'kyr. She had clearly been the youngest of the battlemaidens in life and was now the most impatient in her undeath.

Sylvanas thought about her people. They had come far from their decimated origins, the yearning, confused mob of fresh corpses huddled about the ruins of Lordaeron's wrecked capital. The Forsaken were truly a nation now: a fetid, gore-caked, hideous mass of lifeless husks, skilled in combat, devastating with the arcane arts, and unhindered by fetters of morality. They had been honed into the perfect weapon. *Her* weapon. And they had struck the killing blow for which she had built them. She cared nothing for their fate.

"*Let them perish!*" Sylvanas cried. "I am finished with them!"

Annhylde raised a hand to quiet her younger sister-in-arms. "Hush, Agatha. She does not know. She must see more." The Val'kyr leader directed her luminous green eyes to

Sylvanas, their edges rimmed with sadness. "Sylvanas Windrunner, the oblivion you seek is yours. We will not stop you."

Annhyde's eyes closed, and at once the figures vanished into their faceless spectral forms.

Then Sylvanas felt herself being pulled away, her senses reeling. Everything disappeared, and time stopped.

"She is lost!" Agatha wailed.

GILNEAS

The rain continued, unrelenting, turning the ground before the Gilnean wall into a swamp. As Garrosh inspected the ranks of the Forsaken, the paws of his great war wolf sank into the muck. Rainwater dribbled from his face and steamed from the top of his stubbly shaved head.

"The Gilneans cower behind their high stone walls," the warchief called out, his deep voice booming over the din of rain and thunder. "You, citizens of Lordaeron, you know their history. When their human allies needed them, what did they do? *They walled up and hid.*"

Swords clanged against shields. Not all Forsaken clung to their living memories, but those who did held no love for the kingdom that had turned its back to the world in its most desperate hours.

Garrosh continued, his head high as his words filled the air. "They live in dishonor. How do you think they will fight? With honor?" Guttural laughter. "No, they will die the deaths of cowards and be remembered as such. But *your* glory today will live in word and song." Garrosh Hellscream turned to face the broken wall of Gilneas, drawing the legendary axe Gorehowl from his back and aiming its notched blade at the shattered parapets. "*Walls fall, but honor is forever!*"

Master Apothecary Lydon ran his bony fingers through his tangle of hair. The roar from orc, tauren, and Forsaken alike overwhelmed the thunder. *How does he do it?* Lydon wondered. *My Forsaken brothers cheer for their own destruction!*

Lydon desperately tried to form the words, some last plea for sanity against Garrosh's plan. He tried to imagine what the Dark Lady would say, how she would tamp down his bloodlust. His jaw opened, but no words came out.

A distant din erupted in the rear of the Forsaken vanguard.

Garrosh spurred his war wolf to the side of the army, clearing the way for a charge. "Heroes of the Forsaken! You are the point of my spear. Lift your arms; lift your voices; and do not stop until you lift the Horde banner upon those walls." Gorehowl dropped down. "Chaaaarge!"

"BELAY THAT ORDER!" shrieked a voice from the north. The call of the Banshee Queen carried such terrifying power and purity that even the rain itself seemed to cease falling at her command. The sky tore open with lightning, and thunder cracked like a hammer on stone. All heads turned toward her—the Dark Lady astride her skeletal mount, her black cloak snapping with the fury of her charge, her eyes shrouded by a rain-slicked hood. As the Forsaken saw her, they lowered their weapons into the mud, bowed their heads, and knelt.

Master Apothecary Lydon did not fall to his knees, although they buckled under him at the sight of the Forsaken savior. He stutter-stepped forward, his long robes dragging sloppily through the mud, and reached up to grasp her reins as her steed slowed to a halt. "Dark Lady," he whispered, breathless with relief.

Then he blinked in astonishment: Lady Sylvanas was flanked on either side by the abominable Val'kyr, their shimmering bodies held aloft on translucent wings.

Garrosh now approached her on the rutted road, the kneeling, quiet Forsaken army stretched out around him like thousands of silent statues. Bloodlust shone in his eyes. Lydon couldn't help but shrink away.

Yet Sylvanas didn't blink, nor did she remove her hood out of respect. She lifted her chin in a subtle gesture. Her words sang out, meant for Garrosh but loud enough for all to hear.

"Hellscream. Gilneas *will* fall. And the Horde will have its prize," she said. "But if you wish to use my people, we will do this *my* way." She threw her cloak over one shoulder, revealing her dappled gray skin and the feather-festooned leather plates of her ornate black armor. "My three fastest ships have already been dispatched to the southern coast to divert the attention of the Gilnean capital. And even now I gather reinforcements from Deathknell."

Apothecary Lydon cocked his head at her cryptic remark. So far as he remembered, nothing remained of Deathknell but a graveyard.

More importantly, however, something had changed in his sovereign's presence. Her voice—always terrifying—now had a definitive edge, as though she spoke with the finality of gods. And what of those Val'kyr who hovered mutely beside her?

"My lady," Lydon whispered. "Where have you been?"

She looked down at her subject, and Apothecary Lydon found himself backing away, his quaking hands dropping the reins of her steed.

DARKNESS

Lady Sylvanas Windrunner tumbled in a free fall. Not in the physical sense; her body had been obliterated at the foot of Icecrown Citadel. It was her spirit that tumbled, lost, like a rudderless ship in a storm.

How had she gotten here? She couldn't remember. Had she been killed by Arthas? Had she committed suicide? Had she been sent to judgment by the Val'kyr? Time was meaningless here. Her whole life seemed not a series of events but a single instant, a pinpoint flash of consciousness in an infinite void.

She saw only darkness.

And then she felt—truly *felt*, for the first time in a long while. She recoiled. In *agony*.

Here she was, her spirit once again feeling whole, only to feel it suffer. To feel once more, only to feel abject pain. Cold. Hopelessness.

Fear.

There were others in the darkness. Things she didn't recognize, because nothing so terrible could exist in the world of the living. Claws tore at her, but she had no mouth with which to scream. Eyes looked at her, but she couldn't look back.

Regret.

She sensed a familiar presence. Recognized it. The taunting voice that had once held her in its grasp. Arthas? Arthas Menethil? Here? His essence rushed to her, desperate, then shrank away in horrified recognition. The boy who would be Lich King. Just a scared little blond child, reaping the aftermath of a lifetime of mistakes. If any part of Sylvanas's soul were not at that moment torn and tormented, she might have even felt—for the first time—the slightest glimmer of pity for him.

In the grand landscape of all the world's suffering and all the evils of the infinite, the Lich King was... insignificant.

Now the others had her. Surrounded her. Gleeful, tormenting, tearing at her consciousness, delighting in her suffering.

Horror.

This was to be her eternity: the endless void, the dark, unknown realm of anguish.

Was it a moment or a lifetime before a single thread of light broke through the darkness? Then they came to her, their arms extended. The nine Val'kyr, impossibly beautiful after this dark place, enshrouding Sylvanas in a single halo of light.

She felt small and naked. Coiled into herself. When she found her voice again, it only sobbed. Sylvanas Windrunner was broken. Yet still, the Val'kyr did not judge.

"Lady Sylvanas," Annhylde said, her voice soothing. She touched the side of the elven ranger's face. "We need you."

"What—what do you want?"

"We are bound to the will of the dormant Lich King. Imprisoned atop Icecrown, possibly for eternity. We hunger for our freedom, as you once hungered for yours." Annhylde knelt beside Sylvanas, the other Val'kyr clustering around the pair of them, arms linked. "We need a vessel. One like us. A sister of war. Strong. Who understands life and death. Who has seen the light and the dark. Someone worthy—worthy of power over life and death."

"We need you," repeated Agatha, her black hair floating freely in the light.

"My sisters will be free, free of the Lich King forever, but their souls will be bound to yours," Annhylde continued. "Sylvanas Windrunner, Dark Lady, queen of the Forsaken... you may walk with the living again through the sisterhood of the Val'kyr. As long as they live, so too shall you. Freedom, life... and power over death. This is our pact. Do you accept our gift?"

Sylvanas answered, but not right away. The lurking oblivion filled her with terror. Even now, she felt the tempest rage around her. This was her only way out. But she didn't want to give her assent out of fear. She waited until she felt something more. A fellowship. A sisterhood. *Sisters*. Separate, they were all trapped. But together, they were free... and with them, she could postpone her fate.

"Yes," she said. "We have a pact."

Annhylde nodded grimly, then rose up, her features blurred and ghostly. "The pact is made, Sylvanas Windrunner," she said. "My sisters are yours, and you hold sway over life and death." A long pause, and then: "I shall take your place."

The light was blinding.

Then Sylvanas awoke, her body twisted but whole, the enormous column of Icecrown Citadel looming above her like a tombstone.

Annhylde was gone. Sylvanas was surrounded by the eight remaining Val'kyr.

As long as they lived, so too would she.

GILNEAS

"Who are *you* to countermand my orders?" Garrosh demanded, nudging his war wolf forward. The enormous orc now pressed his great girth into her space, coming up alongside her and glowering at her.

Sylvanas did not move or shy away. "I was once like you, Garrosh," she answered, her voice quiet and steady, loud enough only for the warchief to hear. "Those who served me were tools. Arrows in my quiver." She reached up and slowly brought down her hood, then directed her dark gaze at him. Her eyes were alive, their oversized jet-black pupils livid with rage, red embers glowing deep within.

At that moment, nobody dared look Sylvanas Windrunner in the eye. Nobody but Garrosh Hellscream.

What he saw was a great black void, an infinite darkness. There was fear in those eyes, but also something else. Something that terrified even the great warchief. His wolf began to edge away instinctively.

"Garrosh Hellscream. I've walked the realms of the dead. I have seen the infinite dark. Nothing you say. Or do. Could *possibly* frighten me."

The army of undead that surrounded and protected the Dark Lady was still hers, body and soul. But they were no longer arrows in her quiver, not anymore. They were a bulwark against the infinite. They were to be used wisely, and no fool orc would squander them while she still walked the world of the living.

The warchief sheathed his axe onto his back, his mount sidling away from hers. After a long moment, he finally tore his gaze from those eyes.

"Very well, Dark Lady," he conceded loud enough for all to hear. "We will take Gilneas... *your way.*"

He spurred his mount onward and ambled through the mud toward his own troops. *But I will be watching you,* he told himself.

The eyes of Hellscream are upon you more than any other.