

Tales of Azeroth

The Eversong Blades (Part II)

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Alarea was unarmed and dressed rather casually when she left the building through the front door. They had arrived in Easthaven City, just before sunset, and checked in for a room at a local pension. Not wanting to lose any time, they had decided to start their investigation right away.

Alen had gone out to learn more about the victims of the demon attacks, while Zeno talked to rangers and military authorities. Alarea was on her way to the tavern across the street.

Zeno had wanted to find out more at the tavern, which was always a hub of information. Alarea, however, had persuaded him to let her go instead. She had suspected he'd just get drunk instead of focusing on the mission. Besides, she had pointed out that, as an attractive female, she'd have a better chance of getting the right people's attention and get them to give up information more freely.

When Alarea entered the tavern, the smell of cooking reached her nose. She was not hungry, as they had already eaten in their carriage. Still, the smell was quite appetizing.

She passed a few tables of blood elves enjoying their meals. In the center of the tavern, opposite the bar, there was a small stage. A woman was playing a sweet tune on a harp. Alarea realized that she had not really heard any music for years, and this was a beautiful song. For a moment, she just stood there with her eyes closed and listened to the melody.

"It's lovely, isn't it?", a voice said.

Alarea opened her eyes again. The voice belonged to the barmaid.

"Yes, it's delightful", she replied.

"I'm glad you enjoy it", the barmaid said and grinned happily. "Are you new here? I don't think I have seen you before."

"Just arrived in Easthaven for business and thought this might be the right place to spend the evening."

"It's a great choice, ma'am. What can I bring you then?"

Alarea thought about that. She wanted to drink something simple, like water or juice. However, blood elves usually preferred to drink something more noble in a tavern and she wanted to blend in.

"What drink do you recommend?"

The barmaid studied her and pondered the question for a moment. "I can bring you some Eversong Wine."

"Alright."

“Take a seat then! Enjoy the music. I’ll be back in a moment”, the barmaid said and walked off.

Alarea settled onto a stool at the bar. From there, she could overlook the other guests and try to determine which ones may have useful information.

In her head, she went through her agenda. She would try to find a few people to engage in a conversation. From there, she would try to collect information and rumors about the recent attacks. No need to drink too much; one glass of wine would be enough, especially since she had not drunk wine, or alcohol in general, before.

As she looked at the various guests, she noticed a group of elves that already seemed to be rather tipsy. Still, she preferred to start a conversation with individual guests. One elf, who was eating dinner alone at a table, looked rather thoughtful. Alarea decided to see if she could get him to talk.

In that moment, the barmaid returned with a tray full of beverages and handed her a glass with a red liquid.

“And here is some Eversong Wine for you, ma’am.”

“Thanks”, Alarea responded.

“What a fine choice! I’ll have the same”, someone else said and Alarea turned to face them. A blonde elf had sat down on the stool next to hers.

“Certainly, sir!”, the barmaid replied and walked off to empty her tray at the other tables.

Alarea studied the elf. He was quite handsome, and from his clothes, she guessed he was a respected member of society - maybe a rich merchant or craftsman.

“I hope you don’t mind me sitting down here. It’s been a long trip from Silvermoon and, after checking in at the harbor hotel, I figured I could use a drink - and you looked like you could use some company.”

“I-”, Alarea stuttered. “No... I don’t mind.”

She was hoping to find someone who would talk. Instead, someone had found her. She decided to see where this conversation would go.

“Great. This is also a nice place to listen to music.”

“Yeah, it’s marvellous”, Alarea said.

Their conversation paused and both of them listened to the tunes of the harp for a while. When the barmaid brought the wine for the other elf, they raised their glasses and took a sip.

Alarea had difficulties not to make a grimace when tasting the red beverage. This was what so many people liked to drink? It tasted rather acidic and bitter. Her tongue felt like it would dry out. Yes, there was a level of fruitiness as she could taste grapes, but she could not understand how one could enjoy this drink in larger quantities.

Fine, I’ll be decent and finish this glass, but I’ll definitely not have any more of it, she thought.

Bringing her mind back to her mission at hand, she started with some small talk.

“So”, Alarea opened. “Silvermoon you said?”

“Yes, I just arrived here”, the other said.

“I have not been there in years. How is the city?”

“It’s doing better. Many parts of the city are still destroyed and I doubt all of them will be rebuilt, but the eastern area is a beautiful place again: full of life, and it doesn’t show signs of the invasion anymore.”

“Sounds great. What brought you to Easthaven?”, she asked and took another very small sip of the wine.

“Business”, he said. “I was sent here by Lady Veovis.”

Alarea gasped. “By whom?”

“Lady Silvarea Veovis. Do you know her?”

This could not be coincidence. Fate was surely playing a game with her. “Not sure. I might have heard that name before.”

“She’s a young elf who lost her parents and a little sister during the Third War. Quite a tragic story. Those who know her say it made her harder and overly ambitious. Now, she’s leading a small group of rangers.”

So her sister had had quite a career already. Everyone in the family had always assumed she would follow in her father’s footsteps, and it looked like she had been successful. Alarea wondered what path her other sister would follow once she would be old enough.

She drank some more of her wine. By now, her tongue must have grown accustomed to it, as it didn’t seem to taste *that* bad anymore.

“And why did she send you here? Is she here as well?”, she asked, trying her best to sound only politely interested as opposed to intently.

“No, she’s still in Silvermoon. But she is the ranger leader responsible for maintaining contact with this part of Quel’Thalas. I’m what you would call a private investigator, and I’m here to find out more about the demon attacks on Easthaven.”

Alarea’s eyes widened. *Okay, that’s it. What are the odds? Something or someone must be toying with me.*

She reviewed the evening: her goal was to find people that could tell her more about these attacks; and now some guy had found her, had the same mission, and was sent by her very sister. This was impossible. Well, no, obviously it was not...

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you. I suppose you have heard about it?”, he said apologetically.

“Yes, I have. May I ask why she’s sent you instead of a ranger regiment?”

“They don’t have that many resources right now. Besides, the local military here should be quite capable. I’m only an independent helping hand, and I have to report back to Silvermoon once it’s over.”

“Any idea where those demons came from?”

“There must be a portal or a summoner for sure. We suspect a rogue warlock was behind it, but to be honest, I was hoping to find out more at this tavern.”

“I don’t know much else either...”, Alarea said and emptied her glass. Finally, she was done with that rather nasty liquid. A warm and cozy feeling, which must have come from the alcohol, had already settled in her head. Also, she noticed that the harp music had gotten even more amazing to her ears.

She pushed that aside and focused. This was important: she had found someone else with the same agenda, and this was her chance to go along. Excitement spread throughout her body.

“...but maybe we can find out more”, she continued. “What about talking to him?” She subtly pointed at the lone elf she had seen earlier.

“Hm... that might be a good start. Let’s see if we can get him to talk. Next round is on me.” He made a gesture to the barmaid and ordered drinks for the three of them.

What!? *Oh no*, Alarea thought, but she didn’t want to be rude and decline.

“By the way, forgive me. I haven’t introduced myself yet. I’m Faradin”, he said and held out his hand.

“Cassandra”, she lied and shook it. In the presence of someone sent by her sister, she could not give him her real name.

Soon, the barmaid arrived with their wine.

Looks like we’re just getting started, she thought, giving the wine a mildly sour look. *This is going to be a long evening.*

“It was horrific! His whole home was torn apart! All they left was a trail of bleeding, mutilated bodies”, the elf said.

“Where did they come from?”, Alarea asked.

“I don’t know. Nobody does. They seem to aim for high-ranking citizens of Easthaven. They pick a target, strike out of nowhere, and kill everyone in their way before they vanish into the night again”, he answered.

After offering the drink earlier, Faradin and Alarea had been invited to join the elf at the table. They had small-talked for some time when another elf, an acquaintance of the first one, had taken a seat as well. Of course, he had not done so without ordering another round.

It had only been a matter of time until the conversation had switched to the relevant topic. The second elf was related to one of the victims and had witnessed several felhounds raiding his habitation.

“Why would demons attack specific people?”, Faradin wanted to know.

“How the hell should I know?”

“It’s just like the old mayor said”, the second elf added.

“The old mayor?”, Alarea asked.

“Yeah, as you may know, several blood elf settlements started working together with the Forsaken of the Horde. Some say that we should join the Horde altogether. Mayor Sunpride was furious about it when he heard.”

“Isn’t that understandable? I mean they *are* undead after all, and they killed thousands of elves in the war!”

“Our people are also among them”, the first elf countered. “Risen by the Lich King but freed from his will. Now, they’re willing to help us as allies. We should not turn

them down. Many Forsaken have lost everything. Besides, they are led by Lady Sylvanas Windrunner herself.”

He had made a point, although Alarea wasn't really happy about having undead on their side. Her aversion against the abominable race that killed her parents was too strong.

Another thought that had not crossed her mind before flashed up. The Forsaken included elves that were not granted a peaceful rest, but were risen for the Scourge instead. What if her father had been risen as well? The notion made her shiver, and she tossed the unbearable notion away.

“What does this have to do with the demons?” Faradin asked.

“As I said, Mayor Sunpride was furious”, the second elf continued. “It was clear that more and more people were in support of allying with the Forsaken. One day, with a dramatic speech, he proclaimed that doom will come to us all if we continue down this path. Then he resigned, and nobody has seen him since.”

“And you suspect this is the ‘doom’ he was talking about?”

“Possibly. Maybe the Forsaken do have another agenda. We can't trust them!”

“We should. We can't allow ourselves to be influenced by Sunpride's doomsaying”, the first elf said.

“What if he's right? Ever thought about that?”, the other retorted.

The two then started a very heated discussion. Eventually, Faradin had to calm them down before they got violent.

The story was getting very odd, and there was not enough to come to any meaningful conclusion yet. Alarea needed some time to think, but she had difficulties concentrating. Faradin must have thought the same, as he did not push the topic any further.

One of the elves bought yet another round and Alarea groaned. Her head had already begun spinning. Still, the wine was becoming delicious. They continued talking, quite ecstatically, about other topics. They all laughed quite a bit; the two elves turned out to be a very entertaining duo. She enjoyed the evening. By now, everything seemed incredible and twice as important.

At some point, the harp player announced her final song for the evening. It was a great tune with touching lyrics that warmed Alarea's heart.

*Wherever the road may take you from here,
Whenever the way ahead is your fear;
Your future awaits, it has just begun.
Go, and follow the path, in the name of the Sun.*

*Wherever your body and soul find no peace,
Whenever your passion and love seem to cease;
Your future awaits, it has just begun.
Go, and follow your heart, in the name of the Sun.*

*Wherever you go, whatever your quest,
Whenever you choose and whatever the test;
Your future awaits, it has just begun.
May the light fill your heart, in the name of the Sun.*

Everyone present cheered and applauded as the musician left the stage. Some gave her coins as a tip.

Finally, Alarea decided it was time to leave. She suspected that she had drunk way too much alcohol, and her suspicion was confirmed when she stood up and tried to walk. Faradin offered to escort her home and part of her wanted him to, but she only had to go a few meters and it might be better if he did not know where she was staying.

She bade the others farewell, paid her bill, and reeled out of the tavern using whatever she could find to clutch on to. Somehow, she managed to enter their pension and climb the stairs. She hammered onto the door to their room and when it opened she fell directly into the arms of Alen, who was clearly overwhelmed by the situation. With what looked like a desperate hug, she tried to keep the world from falling over.

Finally, she fell to her knees and threw up, losing consciousness.

When Alarea opened her eyes, her head felt as heavy as a mountain. She was lying on her bed, unsure of how she had gotten there. The angle of the sun suggested that it was past noon already. Slowly, she turned to face into the room. Alen and Zeno were sitting at the table talking quietly. Zeno looked at her when she turned.

“Look who’s awake. Good afternoon, Daggers”, he said with a devilish smile on his face.

Alen turned around as well. “Hey, how are you?”

“I feel awful... That headache... I think I’m sick!”, she responded.

Zeno started to chuckle.

“You’ve got a hangover”, Alen said with a grin.

Alarea sighed. “I won’t drink alcohol ever again.”

Zeno went from chuckling to unbridled laughter.

This was very embarrassing. She had gone to the tavern because she had feared Zeno would get drunk, and now she was the one with a hangover and now she felt like an elven wreck. She considered her discipline a disastrous failure.

Her expression must have shown that thought. “Don’t worry, it happens”, Alen said. “We’ve all experienced this before.”

Zeno nodded hesitantly. “Mhm... it’s just... DRUNKEN DAGGERS!”, he bellowed and fell into more laughter.

She turned to lie on her back and closed her eyes, Zeno’s laughing feeling like knives piercing into her head. *Please, make this stop!*

Alen came over. “Do you need some more rest?”

She pondered the question. “No, I don’t think that’ll help. Besides, I’ll feel even more miserable if I’m gonna waste this day in bed.”

“Alright. Today will feel awkward, but you’ll be fine.” He reached over to help her sit up. Then, he reached her a glass of water and a pill. “This may help with the headache.”

After she had freshened up and changed her clothes in the bathroom, she joined the two at the table.

“So, what did your ‘research’ yield?”, Zeno asked titteringly.

Alarea described what she had learned about the raid, the Forsaken and Mayor Sunpride. Zeno jumped on the train when he added, “That matches what I’ve learned from the rangers. They have difficulties tracking the source and the city wards seem to be failing as well. However, there’s a huge distrust against the Forsaken, especially since they have set up a camp nearby.”

While she had been asleep and sobering up, they must have bought a map in the city. He pointed to a circle on it, indicating the location of the Forsaken’s camp.

“I would like to go there and see if I can find out more about their motives”, he said.

Alen gave him a thoughtful look. “Fine, but be careful and think about what you say. We don’t want to be hostile.”

“Yeah, I get it: no hostility against the undead who killed so many of our people”, Zeno said sarcastically.

“When I spoke with some of the victims, medics, and witnesses, I noticed a pattern. All of the attacks were targeting politicians, or to be more specific, political enemies of Sunpride”, Alen said. “Something’s wrong here. When Sunpride vanished, he must have left something of interest behind. I’ll break into his manor and have a look.”

“Are you sure that’s such a good idea?” Zeno responded.

“Yeah, let me come with you”, Alarea offered.

“No, you should take it easy and clear your head”, Alen replied.

He was probably right, but Alarea did not want to feel useless. “Okay, then give me the map and the details on the previous attacks. I’ll explore the city and analyze weak points and paths the demons may have taken during their raid. They must have gotten in and out somehow. Maybe we can learn something from that and prevent future incidents.”

It was understandable that the rangers had difficulties detecting anything useful. As Alarea wandered around visiting the different crime scenes, she had no clue how a group of demons could appear and vanish so quickly. Zeno had said that the city ward spells were useless against them as well. If that was true, she had only two explanations: either powerful magic was at work or they did not enter the city from the outside, but rather attacked it from within.

She was strolling along the harbor that evening when she took the time to sit down on a bench and review her findings. With the sun setting behind her, she began to draw on the map. There had to be a scheme somewhere!

Alarea had spoken to a few more witnesses and had done her best to estimate where the demons could have come through. The only similarity was that their trail always vanished completely after a few hundred meters, a fact that confirmed her suspicion that the demons were summoned from within the city.

She got back up and went to the nearest crime site. Surely, the magisters and rangers had searched for magical traces already. It would be unnecessary to check the site and streets adjacent to witness locations. However, the military had not searched the houses yet. If that was due to legal issues or because they did not expect local residents to be involved, Alarea did not know.

Exploring the alleys a bit further from the site, she tried to use her elven affinity for magic to find something interesting. There was nothing aside from the usual amount of magic that was omnipresent in elven society.

Then, she noticed something that was overwhelmingly obvious and barely noticeable at the same time: not far away from every single site of attack, she had seen one or more abandoned buildings. They were still in a relatively good shape and, thus, did not stand out, but yet this was too interesting to be mere coincidence.

Carefully, she approached the deserted home she had just passed. A look around told her that nobody was paying her any mind. The door was locked, but that would not stop her. It took her only a short time to discreetly pick the lock and enter the abode.

The residence was scarcely furnished. It was obvious that the previous inhabitants had moved out and only left behind a few unneeded things. When she examined the different rooms, Alarea was disappointed. It was indeed just an abandoned accommodation.

She had almost decided to leave when she noticed an unusual sound resonating from her footstep. Something sounded hollow when she moved around on the large carpet in the entry hall. Moving it to the side revealed a hatch in the floor. Alarea grinned.

A stairway connecting the hatch with a cellar came to light when she opened it. Eagerly, she quickly stepped down, her grin widening as she went. She stood in a small dark room, the only light coming through the hatch above. But she did not require any more light: on the floor in the middle of the room were the chalky remains of a huge summoning circle.

So this was how the attacks worked. At night, someone summoned a bunch of demons in abandoned buildings near the target. They would then complete their unholy mission and vanish unseen.

“What!?”, Zeno called out after Alarea had described her discovery. “Sounds like you’ve been busy!”

“The remaining question is who and why?”, Alarea said. “Did you find out anything suspicious about the Forsaken?”

“To be honest, I was very impressed by them. I mean they’re undead, but there was nothing justifying a grudge against them. They seem to do their best to help and improve on their reputation. One guy even mentioned the demons and said he would like to help catch them.”

“Interesting, so you think we should look at-”

“Sunpride, yes”, Alen interrupted. “A very intriguing person. He has bookshelves full of tomes about magic. It looked like he was privately practising for some time. And in a drawer of his desk, I found this.”

He snatched a book from his backpack and put it on the table of their room. It was a dark green leather-bound tome with a thick metal latch. The cover featured a number of mysterious runes. Alarea looked at Alen curiously and grabbed the book to unlock it.

With an intrigued Zeno looking over her shoulder, she started going through the pages. The more she saw, the more terrified she got. This was a compendium of evil. Everything, from blood and fel magic, to curses, and demon summoning, could be found in there.

“So, Sunpride is a wannabe warlock?”, she said.

“What is this?”, Zeno asked and drew a loose page from the book. The sheet of paper showed a list of names.

“I know a few of these”, Zeno said.

“Probably the ones that were victims of previous attacks”, Alen responded.

“And you think the other names are the next targets?”, Alarea asked.

“I’d bet on it.”

She continued browsing the volume. One page had a prominent dog ear and displayed another table full with star constellations and mathematical formulas.

“Looks like he’s a math magician, as well”, Zeno commented.

Alen, who was also intrigued by her find, studied the table. “I think this is a guide to when the magical energies are the most powerful, depending on the stars.”

Alarea went through her knowledge of the night sky. “If I’m not mistaken, these are the corresponding dates”, she said pointing at a number of values.

Zeno frowned when he looked at them. “You do realize these include the dates of the previous assassinations?”

“What!?”, Alen jumped. “If that’s true”, he studied the dates, “we can expect the next one in two days.”

She considered the implications. “Then here’s what we’ll do...”

Nothing had happened in the last two hours. The plaza was absolutely quiet and empty at this time of night. Since the first assassination, people preferred not to walk

the streets in the dark. Only Alarea was sitting there on a bench, a hood cloaking her head. She watched the lights within the manor in front of her. Council member Ralion was still in his study on the upper level which had a balcony overlooking the plaza. The rest of his family was in another room in the western wing.

She hoped that their plan would work. So far, she'd not gotten any sign from Alen or Zeno, both of whom were watching the residences of two other council members that were on the list in the book. Without knowing who might be the next target, they had decided to split up. Each of them carried a flare to alert the others. Fortunately, they were all within a few minutes of each other.

They had used the last few days to scout the areas and pinpoint possible sources of attack. However, there were way too many empty houses in too many different directions, so they had to wait for the demons and backtrack their route. Maybe they were wrong and there would be no attack, but it was their best lead. Alarea would wait patiently until the sun rose if necessary.

Time continued to pass, but finally, she could hear strange noises. They sounded almost like a small pack of hunting wolves and gave her chills. Also, a magical presence started radiating strongly from that direction. She jumped up and carefully moved into the shadow of a nearby tree.

A pack of four felhounds charged from the east onto the plaza and headed straight towards Ralion's manor. Now, it was time to act - lives were at stake. She pulled out the flare, ignited it with a simple spell and launched it high into the sky.

She had expected the felhounds to be distracted and attack her, but she erred. Without paying her any attention, they made it to the eastern entrance of the manor and began tearing at the door.

Damn it!

Alarea would not be able to catch up with the felhounds at the door, but she had another idea. She drew power from her mana ring and stepped through the shadows onto the balcony.

"Who are you? Get away from me!", Ralion shouted surprised when she charged into the study, both of her daggers drawn.

Sprinting past him and without giving him another look, she ordered, "Be quiet and lock yourself in! You're under attack."

With that, she was already out of the room and deeper into the building, entering a hallway. Ralion's family should be somewhere to the left, but she didn't know the way. Her only hope was to catch the demons before they had the chance to get there. From the front, she could hear the sounds of breaking furniture. Then a felhound sped into the hallway. It leapt at her and Alarea barely managed to jump and roll out of its way. By the time she turned around, the felhound was already striking again, trying to sink the sharp teeth of its massive jaw into her flesh. She dropped a dagger and grabbed one of its long, curved horns. Using them as support, she jumped up, wheeled around and landed on the creature's back. With her other hand, she drove her dagger through the beast's head and waited a moment until it laid still.

From further along the hallway, she heard someone scream.

Oh no!

Quickly, she took her daggers and sprinted out of the corridor. She was in a hall with a staircase that connected the two floors. To her left there was another corridor which seemed to lead to the living room where Ralion's family were located. When she bolted into it, she found Ralion's wife with two children hiding behind her back, trying to keep a felhound at a distance with a chair. That plan, however, would not work for very long. From the broken pieces of furniture that were spread throughout the room, Alarea figured the demon did not have any difficulties destroying her makeshift defenses.

Fortunately, she had gotten here in time and did not hesitate to attack the hound. But the creature was quick. It turned around while she was still lunging towards it and hit her with its sharp claw into her shoulder. She managed to ignore the pain and with great precision sank both of her daggers into the demon. It did not move after the blow.

"Go and head somewhere safe", she said, and without giving her rescued audience another thought, she ran back out of the room. There were still two creatures left and time was of the essence if she wanted to save everyone.

When she raced around the corner, she saw the tails of the other two felhounds that were charging directly at Ralion, who was still in his study and had not locked himself in. Ralion did his best to dodge the first attack by jumping behind a pillar. That gave Alarea some time to catch up, but also allowed the demons to circle around him. When the demon on her side was about to jump, she threw one of her daggers and wounded it. The hound hesitated a moment too long, which allowed her to finish it off.

The last felhound must have determined Alarea as the bigger threat and changed its target. She dodged the charge and tried to stab the demon, but it was too quick. Using the space of the study, it had circled further around her and attacked with its claws. She managed to parry the front paws with her daggers and kicked the creature back with her right foot.

Suddenly, a flaming ball of fire crashed into the demon and left behind a scorched corpse. Alarea turned around to look at Ralion.

"You politicians love to moonlight as mages, don't you?", she said.

While Ralion frowned, his family hurried into the study. Ralion, hugging his wife and children, was happy to see them alive and well.

"You saved us", he said and turned back. "I have to thank you for-"

Alarea was already gone.

She had left the manor the way she had entered it: from the balcony of Ralion's study. The plaza was slowly filling with people and a number city guards moved towards the manor's entrance.

You're too late, she thought. But it didn't matter; they had to find Sunpride before he was gone.

Alen was waiting at the far end of the plaza, still catching his breath. “By the sun, you’re wounded!”, he said, pointing at her shoulder.

When Alarea looked at it, she saw blood dripping from her shoulder. Her black leather vest had a fist-sized hole where the demon had stabbed her and was partially assuming a dark red color. Her adrenalin rush and focus on saving everyone had distracted her from feeling the pain, but now it hit her square. She groaned.

“We have to stop the bleeding”, Alen said and rifled through his bag in search of a bandage.

“No, we’ve gotta go and find Sunpride”, she responded.

“Our first priority is keeping you from bleeding to death right now.”

Alarea sighed and Alen started to bandage her up. “Fine, but be quick about it”, she said.

Zeno ran over from another end of the plaza and joined them. “Wow, Daggers”, he said when he saw her wound, “what happened?”

“I saved Ralion and his family. Four felhounds came from over there.” She pointed to a street heading eastwards. “If I remember correctly, there should be two possible buildings that can be reached from that street.”

Alen had finished the provisional bandage and said, “Okay, let’s go, but be careful. When this is over, you should see a medic.”

“Yes, ‘doc’.”

They made their way down the street for a few hundred meters until they reached the first of the two buildings they had pinpointed earlier. The door was not locked and a foul stench welcomed them when they entered. It looked like they were in the right place. Quietly, they drew their weapons: Alarea her daggers, Alen his sword and Zeno a bow.

They scoured the dwelling as quickly as possible. There was no cellar near the entrance, but after they had explored a few hallways, they instead found an elf who was hurriedly packing things.

Sunpride sensed them as they entered the room and, without turning around, sighed, “I suppose it was only a matter of time until someone found me. I was hoping it would be much later though.”

The three of them had spread out around the room, ready for combat. Alarea noticed a few magical objects and devices scattered about. She assumed that they were amplifiers. The summoning circle was probably covered by the carpet on which they stood.

He had just packed another item, and now Sunpride revealed a strange, otherworldly object: a semi-transparent, glowing, blue energy cube with a rotating octahedron inside.

“Stop what you’re doing right now!”, Alen commanded and Zeno raised his bow.

“Ahh, good idea”, Sunpride said and made a gesture before any of them could react.

Alarea felt an incredible force enclose her, as if her body was held in shape by a shell of plaster. She tried to move, but she could not. Her two colleagues did not move either.

“That’s much better”, he said. “No need to wave around with your weapons; they won’t help you anyway. Don’t expect anyone else to come in and rescue you. The whole building is under my spell.”

“Why are you doing all of this, Sunpride?”, Alarea asked, taking great effort to even speak.

“By all of this, do you refer to my killing all these traitors in a dramatic and public fashion? Because I can”, he said and laughed almost maniacally. “Funny thing is, people even believed those damned undead are behind it, which gave me time to study this.” He raised the alien cube.

Alen asked, “Is it some kind of artifact?”

“Indeed. When I found it in an old ruin, my world changed forever. This artifact, which I call the ‘Mana Cube’, houses vast powers. I’ve barely even begun to access them. With the Cube, I don’t have to be a mere mayor in this derelict world that the Scourge left behind. I can shape my own world. I’ll get rid of my enemies, enforce my own laws through my ‘pets’. I can summon whole *armies* of them if I want to. This Cube will give me unstoppable power.”

“You’re mad”, Zeno said.

Sunpride laughed again, “Am I? Well at least I’m on the side that has power, unlike yourselves. Now please excuse me. I wasted far too much time already and I have things to do. Thanks to you marching in here, I’ll need to dispose of your corpses.”

Then, a green ball of energy started to form in front of him.

“Stop this insanity, Sunpride!”, Alarea shouted.

“I’m sorry I won’t let you pick who goes first, but I’m in a bit of a hurry”, he responded as his spell grew larger.

With all of her strength, Alarea attempted to break out of her invisible prison. It was to no avail. Tapping into her mana ring, she wanted to shadowstep away, but whatever she tried, nothing happened. She was stuck and forced to see the spell of her demise form in front of her.

So much for my first mission. At least nobody will blame my dead body for the failure.

Alarea thought of her sisters. She had failed to justify her decision to leave them, but it didn’t matter now, did it?

Suddenly, something shot through the room and hit Sunpride hard in the shoulder, causing him to stumble back a bit and lose his concentration. His spell ended abruptly and vanished into nothingness. Alarea noticed a small knife embedded in his shoulder.

“What!?”, Sunpride yelled. Then, his limbs gave in and he collapsed onto the floor. She could feel the holding spell lift and the three of them began to move again.

From the entryway, someone came into the room: an undead, who once was human and was now just a pale creature of reanimated flesh and bones, stood in front of them. He was clad in a quite formal vest and pantaloons, a hood on his back.

“Your holding spell does not seem to work against the Forsaken, sir. You should work on that next time”, he said sarcastically to the defeated ex-mayor.

“Rupert!”, Zeno called out.

“Rupert?”, Alen wondered.

Alarea raised her eyebrows, “You know him!?”

“Remember the undead I talked about?”, Zeno replied. “The one who wanted to help? Meet Rupert! How did you find us?”

“I’m not so different from you”, Rupert said. “I know how to work with stealth and subtlety as well. Since I wondered whether you were on a trail, I decided to follow you. I don’t care who you are and who you work for, but we all wanted to see this issue resolved. Our goals are aligned.”

“You followed us the whole time?” Alarea asked somewhat outraged. “We must be really bad at our jobs.”

“No. I simply knew who to look for.”

“Anyway, thank you for saving us”, Alen said and then pointed at Sunpride. “What about him?”

“He won’t wake up for a long time”, Rupert said. “My poison has proven to work very well.”

“You clever fox”, Zeno commented, “but we should end this now.” He drew a small knife from the back of his belt.

“Zeno, no!”, Alarea called.

“No? Why? He’s a madman and taking him out is our job. We’re killers after all.”

She shook her head. “We’re trained for killing. That doesn’t mean we’ll kill when it’s not necessary.”

“So, you *are* afraid of a real kill.”

“Alarea’s right”, Alen said. “The blood elves have a system and laws for that. Let the authorities handle him. He’s no threat anymore, but *this* is.” He pointed at the blue artifact.

“Can we destroy it?”, Alarea asked.

“I’d be careful with unknown objects, but we can’t leave it here either. It’s too dangerous. Let’s take it to Gaelin and let him decide what to do with it.”

“I have no interest in this artifact”, Rupert said. “But whatever you do with it, do not let it fall into the wrong hands. Destroy it if you can, and if you cant, hide it! No good will come of it otherwise.”

“Okay, fine. We’ll take the cube”, Zeno said. “But how do you plan to get Sunpride to the rangers? You don’t want to blow our cover by marching in and explaining everything, do you?”

“No”, Alarea lips formed a slight grin, “I have another idea.”

She was glad that he had told her where he stayed. Alarea did not need long to find the harbor hotel. She just hoped that Faradin was there, right now. Her shoulder gave her immense pain and she really had to see a healer soon. This was still more important, though.

Fortunately, she managed to convince the lady at the reception, who was looking pretty disturbed by her wound, to help her. After a short wait for the lady to go and get Faradin's approval, she was given his room number.

When Alarea had found it and knocked, the door opened and Faradin let her in.

"Cassandra?", he said surprised. "By the Sunwell, what happened to your shoulder?"

"It doesn't matter", she replied. "But here is what does: I'll tell you the location of a house. There you'll find an unconscious Sunpride, who is being watched by a Forsaken. There's lots of evidence proving that he summoned the demons. You'll also get a book from his manor, which the Forsaken, Rupert, will have and will also give to you. Oh, and you should also check in with council member Ralion. Feel free to claim all the honor for yourself. Good job resolving the issue."

Faradin paused for a moment. "Wow, Cassandra, slow down. You found out where the demons came from?"

Alarea sighed and slowly described the way to the abandoned building in which Sunpride was being held. "That's all you have to know. Sunpride is in yours and the rangers' hands now."

Another moment of silence filled the room until Faradin snorted. "I had the feeling you were hiding things when we met in the tavern. This is...wow."

"We all have our secrets. I'm sure you have yours as well."

"Perhaps... Are you sure you don't want to come with me and explain everything again calmly?"

She shook her head. "I prefer to stay out if it. Besides, I need a medic. I don't think you'll see me again."

"I see."

"Farewell", she said and was out of the room.

Too slow. This is all taking too long.

Kyrien paced around his desk. He needed more power for his research. The rate at which he could test his subjects was way too low. In the lab next door, someone screamed. He had been doing so, on and off, for the last few hours. It was pretty annoying, but Kyrien mostly managed to ignore it. He would have done his experiments without causing pain to the subjects, but that was impossible. Thus, they had to suffer for the cause. If this experiment worked better than the last ones, his subject might even survive. It was aggravating when he had to find new subjects because the others died.

He entered the lab and looked at the elf, who was tied to the chair. Four mages channeled their spells at his head, an exhausted expression in their faces.

Almost done.

Finally, the mages completed their spellcasting and stepped away from the subject, who seemed unconscious. Kyrien went to him and felt for his pulse. He was still alive. The new spell had worked better. This was good news. Very good news indeed.

They brought the subject into a nearby, magically-warded cell and Kyrien waited. It felt like ages until he woke up. A pained look was still in his face as he sat up and looked around.

“Subject, do you hear me?”

The elf looked at Kyrien.

“Do you hear me?”, Kyrien repeated.

As a response, he got a dark, almost whispered “Yes”.

“Stand up”, Kyrien commanded and the subject obeyed. “See that table over there? Destroy it!”

The man went over to the table and shattered it into pieces with one single smash of his fist.

“Now go back to sleep.”

Kyrien watched the subject lie down and close his eyes. Then, with a wide smile on his face, he turned around, silently dismissed his tired mages with a wave of his hand, and went back to his desk.

The first milestone was reached, but there was still work to be done. Now he needed more power. A *lot* of power. His gaze went to the book he had read so many times before. It showed a fascinating blue cube with a rotating octahedron inside.

This was what he needed: this powerful artifact.

And he knew exactly how to get it.

THE END