

The Last Farm In Lordaeron

An entirely unofficial World of Warcraft short story



ALLEN
DONNELLY

The Last Farm in Lordaeron

“Lanth,” she whispered, looking up at his face from where she lay on his chest, rising and falling with each breath he took, “tell me how much you love me.”

Lanth smiled mischievously at her, taking in the waves of hair fanned out on his torso, the glint in her blue eyes. “Well, I don’t know about that,” he said.

“You...” She jabbed him in the side with a finger. “Tell me or you’ll be out in the stable with the horse.”

He laughed, softly so as not to wake their three children who were sleeping in the next room. “I love the glow your cheeks get when you get angry, and the twinkle in your eyes. I love the softness of your hair on my skin, even if it tickles a bit.”

“That’s a lot better,” she said, pushing herself up so that she was sitting astride him. “Tell me more. Do I make you happy?”

He nodded, closing his eyes in relaxed pleasure. “You bring me all the joy in the world,” he whispered.

“But what joy is there in this torment,” she said, her voice suddenly harsh and filled with strange and terrible harmonics.

His eyes snapped open. His wife was gone. In her place, something else entirely. Taller, more muscular, with blue-grey skin and long, pointed ears. His wife’s tumbling brown curls had been replaced by straight, white hair, and the eyes...they glowed, blazing a bright crimson as if lit from within by some hellish fire.

Around him,, the farmhouse decayed, the stout wooden beams warping, the fabric of the bedspread and curtains rotting away before his eyes and filling his nostrils with the stench of death. The creature leant closer. “Tell me how much you love me,” she commanded.

“Yes, Dark Lady,” he cried as the fire in the eyes burned brighter and brighter.

~*~

He awoke with a muffled cry, sitting bolt upright in the remains of what had once been his marital bed. The nightmare hadn’t left him out of breath and nor was he shrouded in sweat; he had neither perspired nor needed to breathe since he had died some ten years previously. Nor did he need to sleep but, well, there were some things you just had to cling to, despite the nightmares that slumber inevitably brought. His sons thought he was a fool, clinging to these faint echoes of life. He didn’t have the heart to point out the different little rituals they

each unthinkingly did that were now unnecessary. Jaron even still rubbed that shiny stone for luck, same as he had since he had found it in a nearby stream back when he was a boy of six. Luck! And what had all that rubbing brought the poor boy? Robbed of life when he was only fourteen, turned into an undead monster, part of a mindless army that swept across the land before finally being freed, but freed to what? Perpetual purgatory, locked in a semi-decayed body until...well, Dark Lady knew when, and perhaps she did. Who could say what went on behind those blazing eyes.

“Dark Lady watch over us,” he muttered - it was a reflex at this point. Heaving a deep sigh, he ran his pale, wrinkled hands over the smooth dome of his head, sat up and swivelled around, the bones of his feet that jutted out through the remnants of his flesh hitting the floorboards with a loud clack.

There had been a thick rug there once, woven with vivid reds and yellows that his wife had bought at a market in Lordaeron. It had long since rotted away save for a few ragged patches that carried only the faintest echoes of the once vibrant colours.

Another sigh. At least she didn't have to liv...exist in this decaying land. Marissa, along with their daughter Liandri, had been safe and sound in the distant city of Stormwind, visiting her sister, when the Scourge had come. A small mercy but one he was grateful for. Only a little sliver of cold comfort but when you were the deceased half of a widowed marriage you took what you could get.

The floorboards creaked as he stood and he wondered how long the wood would last. The farmhouse was built from solid timbers but nothing lasted in this land anymore and the timbers were bowing and coated in mould and fungus. It was the same everywhere; decay permeated the very air, reducing everything to a shadow of its former self. Including him, he thought. There would have been a wry smile on his lips were he still capable of moving them in any meaningful way.

He went down the stairs (all creaking, obviously - he barely heard them anymore) and went outside. The pre-dawn light was slinking reluctantly through the thick trees of Silverpine, barely penetrating the constant mist that wound snake-like around the warped trunks. In his mind's eye he could see again how the forests of Lordaeron had once looked; lush and verdant, filled with life and colour and vitality. Now everything was muted, grey and brown and sickly green, and what life there was slunk along in the shadows.

It had once been a fine place for a farm, for a home, for a life, but that time had long since passed and now only the dead remained. It was still his land, though, passed down to him from his father, and from his father before him, and he was damned if he was going to let it go to ruin. He thought about it for a moment. Yes, technically you could probably say that he actually was damned in a very real sense but that wasn't the point. The point was that his family had farmed this land for generations and they weren't about to stop now, even if there weren't going to be any more generations. As pointless as it was, he would keep up the tradition, and so would his two sons whether they wanted to or not. He could still look with pride on the neat furrows on his fields and the crops that were growing. Admittedly the plants were stunted and twisted, and if he was actually dependant on them for sustenance then he'd be in trouble, but they were still growing and that was what counted as far as he was concerned.

“Dad!”

He looked round to see Jaron running around the corner of the house, waving his arms in apparent distress, some of the loose flesh flapping around the exposed bones of his forearm. The boy's shoulder-length hair had turned white after his death and it flopped around his drawn, pale-blue face as he ran in the shambling, hunched run of his kind.

"What is it, Jaron?" said Lanth.

His son skidded to a halt in front of him. "There's a Son of Arugal digging in the cabbages again!" said Jaron.

Lanth rolled his eyes with exasperation then had to manually roll one of them back down after it got stuck. "I've told you before, just shout at it and if that doesn't work then lob a clod of earth."

"But it's scary, dad!"

Grumbling under the breath he'd deliberately taken just so he could mutter under it, Lanth walked round the corner of the house and faced the small plot of land that contained his cabbage patch. Sure enough there was a Son of Arugal digging holes in it, snuffling in the dislodged dirt with its long canine muzzle; it probably thought it had buried something there. The bipedal wolf-creatures were large and intimidating, especially on when it was dark and their pale fur made them look like ghosts racing between the trees, but they were as dumb as bricks.

"HEY!" shouted Lanth.

The Son stopped scabbling in the soil and looked suspiciously at the late farmer.

"Bugger off!"

The Son straightened up to its full height, growling, and raised up its muscular arms, the claws on the end of its long fingers gleaming. The clod of earth smacked it on the side of the snout

Lanth watched it run, yelping, back into the forest and shook his head sadly. What a place this had become. "See," he said, turning to his son, "that's how you get rid of them." He looked around. "Where's your brother?"

Jaron looked embarrassed. If there had still been any blood flowing in his dessicated veins he might even have blushed. "He's, er, feeding the horse, dad."

We do cling to our pasts, don't we, thought Lanth as he made his way round to the stables where they kept the horse that had once pulled the cart to town on market days. One son convinces himself he's out of breath after running and the other insists on trying to feed a horse that's been dead for close to a decade. And then there's me, trying to grow crops that no one needs in toxic soil, and you know damn well that you've given a sugar lump or two to that stupid nag yourself.

When he entered the stable, with its door hanging on by one rusty hinge, his other son, Marlow, was letting the horse eat sickly looking grass out of his hand. From where he stood, Lanth could see the grass falling back out through the gaping hole in the horse's chest to land on the floor of the stable, whereupon Marlow would scoop it back up and feed it to the horse again. I guess it is at least cheaper to look after now, thought Lanth.

For its part, the horse seemed entirely content with its meal and was eating the grass with every indication that it was enjoying the experience.

Marlow heard his father's footsteps approaching and turned around to greet him, his tongue flopping about like a beached fish from the movement and his attempt to speak. All

he managed, of course, was a damp glugging sound. The poor lad's lower jaw was last seen getting carried away by a fox in what was now the Eastern Plaguelands. Marlow didn't seem to mind though, Light bles... Dark Lady watch over him (old habits really do die hard, thought Lanth). Maybe he was just putting a brave face on things but how could you tell, it wasn't like any of them were capable of any facial expression beyond the standard glum grimace anymore, not that Lanth ever felt inclined to try smiling. Nothing to smile at round here, no joy in this tormented land. Aside from the missing mandible, Marlow looked very like Lanth - the same bald head, a similar blue-green colour to their sickly skin.

"How're you doing, son?" said Lanth, absently scratching the horse behind the tattered remnants of its ear; dust cascaded down from gaps in the skin.

Marlow glubbed at him and nodded. It was probably a mercy that all their saliva glands were shrivelled and desiccated otherwise that flapping tongue would be decorating the stable walls with drool.

"Dad?" said Jaron, who was still standing just outside the entrance to the stable.

Lanth turned and saw that his son was staring down the road that connected their farm to the main road between Undercity and Tarren Mill. "What is it, Jaron?"

"Uh, there's someone coming," said Jaron. "He looks... human. You know, alive."

"Don't be daft, lad," scoffed Lanth. "You'd never get a live human in Silverpine, at least not for long. It'd be suicide." He walked out of the stable and followed his son's gaze. There was a rotund man wearing a bright blue uniform riding a brown, living horse down the lane towards the front of the farm.

Lanth's eyes would have widened in shock if they could. As it was, he shambled out to intercept the stranger as fast as his bowed legs would carry him. "what are you doing?" he shouted, waving his arms. "You can't be here!"

The man glanced up, startled by the sudden commotion. "I think you'll find, sir, that I am licensed to travel wherever my duty takes me by the royal court of Stormwind. I have a chit signed by someone who has almost certainly met King Wrynn himself, or at least been in the same building as him at some point," the man said. He dismounted and stretched, rubbing at the small of his back. "The old muscles don't half get stiff sitting in the saddle all day, still, don't suppose that's a problem for you is it, eh?" He nudges the baffled Lanth with his elbow.

Lanth tries to collect his thoughts, and a part of him wonders if perhaps his brain has decayed to the point where he's totally abandoned reality. He clings desperately to the one solid, inviolate truth he knows. "You don't understand, this is Silverpine, this is Forsaken territory." He points wildly to the east. "Look, you can see Undercity from here. The Dark Lady is in there, you know, Sylvanas, the Banshee Queen." He peered into the man's eyes, hoping to see some hint that the peril of his current position was starting to register.

The man blinked a couple of times and cleared his throat. "As you say, sir," he said in the tone of one talking to a child who's struggling to understand the most basic of information. "Anyhoo, are you..." He pulled an envelope out from inside his bright blue jacket and peered short-sightedly at the name on the front. "...Lanth Ringersson?"

Yes, no doubt about it, his brain is finally rotting away and he's going to turn into one of those shambling corpses that wander aimlessly around the darker parts of the forest. "Yes," he said, "that's me."

“Excellent, if you could just take this envelope off me - thank you, sir - and then sign here and here.” He pulled a form out from his jacket along with a pen and handed them over to Lanth. “Just in the two places where I’ve put little crosses. Excellent, thank you, sir.” He took the form and the pen back from Lanth and secreted them away within his coat once more.

“What is this?” asked Lanth, staring uncomprehendingly at the envelope.

“Werrrlll, strictly speaking I’m not supposed to really say anything but I don’t see what harm it could do,” said the man. “It’s a summons.”

“A summons?” repeated Lanth, still staring at the envelope.

“That’s right. To appear at the royal courts of Stormwind in two weeks if I recall correctly. Don’t worry, sir, all the details are in the letter.”

“But why, and how?” said Lanth. “How could I possibly get to Stormwind? I’ll be killed as soon as I get near Westfall.” He catches the look on the man’s face. “Killed more. Properly this time. I’m not saying this existence is a barrel of laughs but it’s the only one I’ve got.”

“Oh, no need to worry, sir. The letter grants you safe passage through all the lands of Stormwind.”

“Stormwind?” said Jaron. Lanth hadn’t realised the boy had come up behind him. “Are we going to see mom?” The hopeful note in his son’s voice is like a twisting knife in whatever was left of Lanth’s guts.

“Er, probably not, son,” said Lanth, turning to meet his son’s eyes. “I don’t think she’ll be quite ready for that.”

“But she knows about us, right?” insists Jaron. “We’ve been sending her gifts for her birthday and Winterveil and everything!”

They had, Lanth knew. He hadn’t had the heart, literally and figuratively, to tell them that the presents had all been sent back, unopened. Nearby there was a bear den that contained a lot of gaily wrapped boxes and a very confused grizzly. “Uh, yes, son, but it’s one thing to get a present, it’s another to actually see us.” He turned back to the man. “Do you know why I’m being summoned?”

The man lifted up his blue cap and scratched at his head. “Can’t say for sure, sir - not really any of my business - but I think it’s something to do with property speculation.” He leaned closer and his voice took on a conspiratorial air. “Truth to tell, sir, those bloody property speculators have been the ruination of Stormwind, the ruination, sir. Time was you could buy a small but decent house somewhere in the suburbs for only a thousand gold. These days, you can’t find a cardboard box within the walls for less than ten thousand. How’s anyone supposed to be able to live there, eh? I mean, my poor son’s going to be graduating soon and what’s he supposed to do, I ask you. All the bleeding jobs are in Stormwind but he’s going to have to rent a room somewhere in Westfall and commute in, and even that’s going to cost a packet. It’s criminal, sir, criminal.” He glanced up at the sky. “Well, mustn’t stand here chit chatting, sir, time’s getting on and a courier’s work is never done.” He remounted his horse with a grimace of effort. “Good luck to you, sir.”

“Dark Lady watch over you,” replied Lanth automatically.

“Well, thanks, but if it’s all the same to you, sir, I rather hope she doesn’t,” said the courier. With a friendly wave, he trotted off and was soon lost among the towering trees of

Silverpine.

~*~

Why should he go, he asked himself over and over again as he watched the slow, barely distinguishable shift from the afternoon into the dim twilight of evening. It's not like he was a citizen of a human kingdom anymore, not like he was even human anymore. For a moment he tried to imagine what the Dark Lady would say if he went and asked if he could go to Stormwind because the court there had sent him a summons, then he quickly decided that it was far too terrifying to contemplate such a thing and resolved to never think of it again. So why was he thinking of actually going?

He looked again at the letter, already looking aged and weathered in the damp Silverpine air. The courier had been right, it was about property, specifically the farm he currently lived in. He thought about it for a moment and revised that to 'occupied'. His wife... widow... whatever their relationship status currently was, along with her new husband, was seeking to take ownership of the farm, arguing that since he had died and she was his closest living relative then it should actually belong to her. The fact that he was still here, if not technically among the living, was apparently a moot point. He looked around at the rundown farm, the feeble plants, the Son of Arugal that was failing to hide behind a tree at the edge of the turnip field; why in the Dark Lady's name would anyone want this?

What would they do if he just didn't bother going, send a force to evict him? The prospect of Sylvanas's reaction to that was even more terrifying than the thought of talking to her about it. And once all the human soldiers were dead, she would ask "Why are there humans coming into my domain?" and he would be the one who would have to answer.

Nope.

Nope nope nope.

He'd crawl all the way to Stormwind on his hands and knees rather than have that conversation.

~*~

"Why can't we come, dad?" whined Jaron for what was perhaps the thousandth time. Lanth could almost picture the pleading expression that would have been on his face back before the Scourge came, back when they took things like blood, muscles and facial expressions for granted.

"It's too dangerous," replied Lanth, leading the horse out its stable. "The humans don't like us. I expect them to demonstrate this with arrows, fireballs, swords and axes."

"But you've got the letter," said Jaron.

"True," conceded Lanth, "but the problem is that I have to get close enough for them to read the letter before they set me on fire."

"But..."

"And as I've already pointed out, we only have the one horse and it passed the point of being on its last legs more than a few years ago. It wouldn't carry all three of us." He patted first Jaron and then Marlow on the shoulder. "I'm sorry. You two stay here, look after each other, try to stop the Sons digging up anymore of our crops." Jaron nodded, reluctantly admitting defeat. "Good lad. Hold on to the reins while I get the last of my gear out of the house." He left Jaron with the horse and went inside. "Now, I think I've got everything," he muttered, sorting through the supplies and equipment he would need. Well,

not need so much as want; just because he was undead didn't mean he was happy to go without a campfire or a comfortable place to lay his head.

"Uh, dad?" said Jaron.

Lanth shook his head; as annoying as it was there was something admirable about his son's persistence. He still wished the boy would stop it though. "Son, I've told you, you're not coming to Stormwind with me," he said as he went outside. He was taken aback to see both his sons looking like they were trying to stand up straight, and Marlow's tongue was quivering the way it did when he was nervous about something. "What's got into the pair of you?" asked Lanth.

"Uh..." said Jaron.

"Your son is trying to indicate that you have a visitor, farmer Lanth Ringsson," said a sharp voice that was filled with hollow, metallic echoes. Lanth looked round, and then up until he found himself staring into a pair of glowing red almond-shaped eyes. Sylvanas Windrunner, the Banshee Queen, the Dark Lady, leader of the Forsaken, leaned down until she was nose to nose with Lanth, the pale blond hair that framed the smooth, ice-blue skin of her face swaying with the movement, and the gold-trimmed, purple leather armour that covered her breasts, shoulders and legs whispering slightly. "Tell me, farmer Ringsson, why are you going to Stormwind?"

So, thought Lanth in the one distant corner of his mind that was still functioning in any kind of coherent way, *this is what heart-stopping terror feels like. What a relief that my heart doesn't beat anymore. Ha ha. Ha ha. May the Light have mercy on whatever's left of my soul.*

"I, er, got a letter, Dark Lady" said Lanth. He held it up in front of him like a shield.

"A letter?" One perfectly sculpted elven eyebrow rose as the Dark Lady plucked the letter from Lanth's grasp and held it delicately between the fingers of her purple and gold gauntlet. "You are summoned to appear at Stormwind Crown Court two weeks from the date of this letter in order to establish ownership of the Ringsson Farm, in Silverpine Forest," read Sylvanas. "They are trying to take my land through a court? What madness is this?"

"Well, it's my wife, see. She inherited it after I...you know. But I'm still here sort of thing." Lanth nervously scratched at the back of his head. "I don't really know why she wants it, to be honest, so I thought I'd go and find out, sort of thing. Er, is that okay?" As he spoke, Lanth noticed a faint smile lift the corners of the Dark Lady's pale blue lips; it was somewhat less than reassuring.

"And this letter guarantees safe passage into Stormwind for you and your legal representative?" she asked.

"Er, yes, Dark Lady, I believe so," replied Lanth, wondering where this was going.

"Do you have a legal representative, farmer Ringsson?" said Sylvanas, handing the letter back.

"Er, no, Dark Lady."

Sylvanas's smile broadened slightly. "You do now."

~*~

Lanth did not like heights. He had never liked heights when he was alive and he had developed no great fondness for them in the years since he had died. The fact that he was

sitting on the back of a huge, armoured war-charger, which was riding along several hundred feet in the air, with his arms around the waist of the Banshee Queen was doing nothing to quell his fear. It was at least faster than trying to ride his own horse, which Sylvanas had taken one look at and declared that she would not be seen either alive or dead entering Stormwind with, assuming it even made it to the end of the lane without falling apart.

So now they were flying, the lands of the Easter Kingdoms racing past beneath their feet. A long way beneath their feet. Much too far beneath their feet.

“Farmer Ringersson, you do not need to cling on, you are not going to fall,” said Sylvanas, looking back over her shoulder.

By dint of an extreme effort of will and nerve, Lanth managed to relax his grip on the Dark Lady’s waist. A sudden thought occurred to him.

“Ma’am, would you like some soup?”

Pulling on the reins, Sylvanas brought her mount to a snorting, stamping halt, and looked round at the farmer. “What?” she said.

“Soup, Dark Lady,” said Lanth. He held up a battered tin mug containing a thick, orange liquid. “I made some for the trip.”

“Soup?”

“Yes, Dark Lady. Made from the vegetables I grow. Well, the ones that don’t just rot away, anyway.”

Sylvanas took the cup, which looked tiny in her armour-clad hands, and sniffed the contents. Then she took a sip as Lanth looked up hopefully. She swallowed and, though her face remained as impassive as always, there was a tensing up of her neck muscles. “That was...unique. Not for the first time since taking up residence in the Undercity, I find myself glad that I now have a very limited sense of both taste and smell,” she said, peering down into the cup.

“There’s plenty more, Dark Lady,” said Lanth, holding up the large flask.

“No, farmer Ringersson, I believe this will be more than sufficient,” said Sylvanas. “I would like to take a sample for my chemists to analyse, however.”

“Would you like a bap with it?” said Lanth, holding out a small, rock hard bread roll.

The tall, lithe queen of the Forsaken, who had once been the greatest ranger in the Elven realms of the Eastern Kingdoms, and had stood against the might of the Scourge without flinching, regarded the small bullet of bread and decided that there were some challenges that she was not inclined to face. “I think I will pass on that, farmer Ringersson.”

~*~

The horse touched down with a thump and a whinny, tossing its mane as its hooves thudded across the turf a short distance from the front gate of Stormwind.

“We’ll walk from here,” said Sylvanas, gracefully dismounting, barely disturbing a single blade of grass with her feather-light tread. There was a thump as Lanth dismounted with rather less agility.

“Ow,” said Lanth. He looked around. There was a boy watching them from beneath a nearby apple tree; his wide eyes were fixed on Sylvanas, his mouth opening and closing silently. Lanth could sympathise; it wasn’t every day the dreaded Banshee Queen of the undead unexpectedly turned up right in front of you. The boy whimpered loudly and then

sprinted away as fast as he could run.

“Um, Dark Lady, is this a good idea?” said Lanth. He could see the spires of Stormwind over the tops of the trees and it was suddenly very real to him that he was about to walk into the human capital in the company of one of their most hated enemies.

“Possibly not, farmer Ringersson, but it is at least an entertaining one,” she said. “It may well start a war but the look on Wrynn’s face would almost certainly make it worthwhile. Come.” She strode off, heading directly for the city, with Lanth shambling along behind, trying as best he could to match the Dark Lady’s long-legged pace.

~*~

The Stormwind guard, standing vigilant outside the front gate of the great city, had only been a qualified guard for a little over a week. They’d given him a nice uniform that didn’t have too many holes in it and was largely free of bloodstains; there was shiny armour that looked really good as long as you didn’t look closely enough to realise how thin the metal was; he had a pike with a head that only wobbled a little bit when you shook it; and he got to take home ten silver a week to his mum. It was a good job, really, you just had to stand out front, nodding to the merchants and adventurers going in and out and keeping an eye out for any troublemakers. He really didn’t feel he had done anything to deserve having the baleful red gaze of Sylvanas Windrunner looking down at him.

“Will your associate be long?” she asked. The metallic thrum in her voice made his bladder quiver.

“She should be back quite soon,” he replied, then felt like he ought to add something. “Your, um, ladyness.” He was painfully aware of the pike he was ostensibly supposed to be holding up in front of her to demonstrate the martial prowess of the Stormwind guards. He hoped she couldn’t see how badly it was shaking. He *really* hoped she wouldn’t think he was a threat.

Behind Sylvanas, trying to hide in her shadow and look as inconspicuous and nonthreatening as possible, Lanth fervently wished that he had ignored the stupid letter, the one that the Dark Lady was currently holding out towards the guard, who appeared very reluctant to take it. Lanth wished that he had been as circumspect.

“I really don’t see the problem,” said Sylvanas. “My client has been summoned to Stormwind at the request of your court and has been granted safe passage to and from the courthouse alongside his duly appointed legal representative.” She smiled at the guard in what she possibly thought was a reassuring manner.

The guard whimpered and the end of his pike fell off with a loud clang. There were a few sniggers from the increasingly large crowd that was gathering. On the one hand, yes, this was Sylvanas, the very essence of evil, but on the other hand this promised to be the kind of show they could tell their grandkids about.

That crowd was nothing compared to the one that awaited them outside the courthouse once the captain of the guard had arrived and very reluctantly, and with a sheen of sweat on her brow and a tremor in her voice, agreed that yes, farmer Lanth Ringersson and his legal representative (and here there was a pronounced gulp), Sylvanas Windrunner, were granted safe passage to and from the courthouse and were now officially under the protection of the Stormwind guard.

Pinned by the gazes by hundreds, if not thousands of members of the Alliance, many of

them decked out in terrifyingly ornate armour and wielding absurdly large, dangerous-looking weapons, Lanth came to the conclusion that there was indeed a fate worse than merely dying and this was it.

~*~

King Varian Wrynn, the lord of Stormwind and defacto leader of the Alliance, looked down at the papers on the desk in front of him and tried to force his mind to become interested in grain yields. It was a battle he fought on a regular basis and, unlike most of the fights he had been involved in down the years, it was one in which he had yet to prevail. Desperate for a distraction, he became dimly aware of a hubbub outside. Relishing the opportunity to look at something, *anything* else, Varian rose from his seat and crossed to the window. There was a huge crowd outside the entrance to the court. He frowned, there were no high profile trials occurring that he could remember, and he did usually try to keep abreast of such things if only because they were slightly more interesting than having to read agricultural reports. He craned his neck, trying to make out what was at the centre of the throng that was slowly creeping up the court steps.

His eyes widened.

No.

No, it could not possibly be...

Of course it couldn't, because someone would have come to tell him if it was. Perhaps he had imagined it; he had been working well into the night the last couple of weeks, perhaps he had been overdoing it. Yes, that had to be it, it was a far more likely explanation than believing that Sylvanas Windrunner was strolling through his city and no one had come to tell him yet. He should go and have a lie down, maybe, or take a walk in the private gardens. Yes, that sounded like a nice idea.

There was a knock at the door and his private secretary burst in without waiting for permission. The man's eyes were like saucers. "King Wrynn," he stuttered.

Varian closed his eyes and rubbed gently at his temples. "Yes, Bancroft?"

"It's...there's...she..."

Varian muttered a variety of curses under his breath and wondered idly if the Warchief of the Horde had to put up with nonsense like this.

~*~

Sitting on a plain wooden bench, Lanth looked around the courtroom, taking in the pristine white walls, the cathedral like high ceiling and the heraldic banners that fluttered in the gentle breeze that blew through the tall windows. It was at least quiet in here, the Stormwind guards having been able to keep the crowds outside the court itself. He was trying very hard not to hear the faint, muffled sobbing coming from the seats on the other side; his wife...his widow, rather, had not really been expecting her deceased husband to show up. He was glad that the tall figure of the Dark Lady was blocking his view.

For her part, Sylvanas appeared to be enjoying herself, surveying the frantic chaos around her with a detached amusement.

At the front of the courtroom, the clerk of the court suddenly stood. "Court is now in session, the honourable Judge John Dee..." An assistant leaned over and tapped him urgently on his shoulder. There was a whispered conversation. "What, really?" said the clerk. The assistant nodded. "My apologies," said the clerk. He cleared his throat nervously.

“The court is now in session, the King of Stormwind, Varian Wrynn presiding.”

The door behind him opened and the King of Stormwind entered the room, albeit sideways so that the wide shoulder-plates on his armour would fit through the narrow door. He was a tall, broad chested and imposing figure, especially when dressed in the shining armour that emphasised his physique and stature. His long black hair was tied back into a pony-tail, and the eyes that glittered above the horizontal scar that ran the breadth of his face were fixed on only one figure in the court.

“Be seated,” he said, his voice deep and loud, his gaze never leaving Sylvanas. Before he could say anything further, he noticed a loud scraping sound coming from the ceiling. With a muttered curse he beckoned the clerk over. “Send a dozen guards up on the roof. They have my permission to arrest anyone who is riding a dragon around up there. And if they are scratching the tiles then tell the guards they can shoot at their own discretion.” The clerk nodded and disappeared into a back room. “Right, before we get started on this apparently vitally important property dispute, could counsel please approach the bench.”

The lawyer acting for Lanth’s wife, a small man with nervous eyes and a poorly disguised bald spot, stood and edged out, clinging to the side of the table in an attempt to stay as far away from Sylvanas as possible. She gestured for him to go first, which did little to settle the lawyer’s nerves.

When both of them were standing in front of Varian’s elevated podium he lowered his voice to something barely above a hiss. “Why?” he said to Sylvanas, completely ignoring the lawyer.

“I am looking after the best interest of my client,” she replied smoothly.

“Your client?” spluttered Varian. “I had not realised there was a school of law in the Undercity.”

“Well, I’m not qualified, but I have read the Laws and Ordinances of Stormwind,” said Sylvanas.

“What, really?”

Sylvanas shrugged. “I don’t sleep. It gives me a lot of time to kill.”

“So you’re just here to look after…” Varian looked down at the sheet of paper in front of him. “Farmer Ringersson?”

“That is correct.”

“It’s not just to try and annoy me and get under my skin?”

“Of course not,” said Sylvanas, making no effort to disguise her smile.

Varian was about to reply when shouting echoed down through the roof, followed by a cacophony of scratching and scraping. Seconds later, they heard what sounded very much like tiles smashing on the cobbles outside the courthouse.

“Whoever let those idiots ride around on dragons has a lot to answer for,” muttered Varian.

“It’s collisions in the Undercity,” said Sylvanas, dragging Varian’s attention back to the courtroom.

“What?” said the king.

“Collisions. Lots of narrow, low-ceilinged corridors in Undercity and no one ever bothers to dismount. It can get messy.”

Varian nodded sympathetically, then suddenly realised who he was sympathising with

and cleared his throat. “Right, counsel dismissed, let’s get this over with so I can get you out of my city before the weight of the bloody dragons brings all of the roofs down. So...” Várian looked down at his notes. “...counsellor Farthing, is it? Yes, good. What is it you want?”

Surprised by the abruptness of the questions, which went directly against the long standing traditions of needless waffling beloved of both the court system and lawyers who charged by the hour, the small man spluttered for a moment before he was able to collect himself. “Your maj...your hono...your majestic honour,” he began, “I called for these proceedings to ensure that my client receives what she is entitled to as the widow of the late Mr Lanth Ringersson.”

Várian shifted his gaze to the sad looking Forsaken sitting next to Sylvanas.

Lanth waved nervously. “Here,” he said, unsure if he was supposed to respond to that.

“Indeed you are, Mr Ringersson,” said Várian. “The whole city has noticed. Continue, counsellor.”

“As the next surviving member of kin to Mr Ringersson, she is entitled to ownership of the farm that they previously owned together.”

“Okay,” said Várian. “And this farm is where, exactly?”

“It is located in Silverpine Forest, your majestic honour.”

Várian blinked once, then twice as the sheer manifold stupidity of the world was brought crashing down upon his kingly shoulders. “Silverpine.”

“Yes, your majestic honour.”

“The forest next to the ruins of Lordaeron, the place currently occupied by the Forsaken. That Silverpine.” Never again would he complain about agricultural reports.

“Yes, your majestic honour.”

“But...why, in the name of the Light, would you want to own any property in that forsaken hell hole?” He glanced at Sylvanas and Lanth. “No offence.”

Sylvanas shrugged slightly, still smiling serenely in a way that was really starting to get under Várian’s skin.

“My client is entitled...” began counsellor Farthing.

“Counsellor, your client is barking mad. I’m assuming, Mr Ringersson, that the farm is not in the best condition.” Várian directed a look at the Forsaken farmer.

“Well, your, um...”

“Your honour will suffice.”

“Well, your honour, it’s a bit rundown, and the damp’s a bit of a problem. And there’s a giant green spider in the loft but it keeps itself to itself most of the time.”

Sylvanas rose smoothly to her feet. “Your...honour,” she said, smiling at Várian, “in spite of his unfortunate death, my client is very attached to his family home and still tries to maintain it as a working farm, despite the challenges of trying to grow crops in Silverpine. Alas, the environment is truly not suitable for anyone living. At least, not if they wish to remain that way.”

Before Várian could say anything further, there was a commotion from the couple sitting alongside counsellor Farthing.

“No, I will not shush!” insisted the woman, standing up despite her partner’s protestations. She wasn’t a tall woman, and she had a healthy build, but she held herself

proudly; currently her cheeks were flushed and there were red rings around her eyes. “Your honour,” she said in a quaking voice. “I never wanted this.” She gestured at the courtroom. “All of this. My husband - my new husband – said we needed to established ownership for when you take Lordaeron back from the undead.” She refused to look across at the two members of the Forsaken. “He said it would be valuable real estate.”

It was Lanth’s first proper look at her since he had arrived in the courtroom, his first in over ten years since he had waved her off on her trip to see her mother in Stormwind. She was still just as lovely as he remembered; a few more lines around the eyes, a few more grey hairs. He envied her those; he had always thought they would go grey together.

His former wife was still speaking. “I just want it to be over with,” she gasped, then she collapsed back on to her chair, sobs wracking her body.

Varian watched the distraught woman for a moment, the man next to her – presumably her new husband – hugging her in a futile attempt at consolation. Varian’s gaze shifted to the poor woman’s lawyer, who seemed entirely unmoved by the outburst, and his gaze hardened; lawyers and property speculators, twin plagues upon his city. Maybe he could ask Sylvanas to take them all off his hands, toxic plagues were very much her sort of thing, but even she would probably draw the line there. “Mrs Warner,” he said, trying to keep the irritation from his voice, “I can certainly sympathise with your feelings there, and I also find myself questioning why the clerks of this court felt that such a court case was in anyway necessary, and why they felt compelled to send a summons to Silverpine.” He looked over at the court officials for a moment. “Rest assured that I will be asking them these questions as soon as we are done here.

“As for the question of ownership of the farm... there is no point debating it now given the current circumstances. When the day comes and Lordaeron is reclaimed by humanity – again, no offence.” Sylvanas waved magnanimously at his words. “Then you can lay claim to whatever’s left of it. Presumably by that point, Mr Ringersson will have moved on.” He turned to look at the late farmer. “Mr Ringersson, since you have been kind enough to come all this way and have not yet had a chance to have your say, is there anything you would like to add to these proceedings before I throw this nonsensical case out of court so we can all get on with our lives, or whatever the undead equivalent of that might be?”

Lanth stood, subconsciously trying to hunch up even smaller than his normal stance as he felt the eyes of the courtroom focus on him. “Well, uh, your honour,” he said. “I’m sorry for all the fuss, I didn’t mean to upset anyone, and honestly I don’t mind if Marissa... if Mrs Warner wants to claim the farm. I’d let her have it now but, like the Dark Lady said, it’s not really a place for the living these days. I just wanted to hang on to something from back when I was alive, try and stop it turning into a ruin, but they’re welcome to have it when I’m gone.” He looked down at the table and said quietly, “I really only came so I could see her one last time.” Then he sat back down, still staring at the table, trying not to listen to the muffled sobbing from the other side of the courtroom.

Varian cleared his throat. “Thank you for your time, Mr Ringersson, Ms Windrunner.” That earned him a raised elven eyebrow and an amused smirk. “The court is sorry to have inconvenienced you. Likewise, Mrs Warner, I’m sorry you had to go through this. The case is dismissed. Could someone send some guards out the front of the court to clear away what I’m certain is a massive crowd of gawping, drooling idiots. On dragons.” A malicious

thought occurred to him. “And hand some shovels out to the clerks of the court, they can help with the post-dragon clean up.”

“Your honour?” said a quiet voice. Mrs Warner rose from her seat and looked up at Varian through her red-rimmed eyes.

“Yes, Mrs Warner?”

“I was wondering if... would it be okay if I spoke to Lanth, to Mr Ringersson for a moment. In private.”

Varian glanced across at the Forsaken farmer, who had raised his head up at the mention of his name. “That can certainly be arranged. Are you quite sure, Mrs Warner?”

“Yes, your honour.”

~*~

The room was quiet and peaceful, with plain white walls, unadorned save for a single tall window, and a few wooden chairs placed around the room’s edge. It felt a long way from the hooting, hollering crowds outside the courthouse.

“Sorry if I smell a bit musty,” said Lanth, finally breaking the silence that had stretched between them for several minutes. “It just sort of happens, not that I can really smell it.”

His widow, Marissa, gulped. She had been staring out of the window since they had entered the room, never once turning to look at him. “We waited for you, me and Liandri,” she said eventually, mentioning their daughter’s name as if she thought Lanth might have forgotten it, “for years, hoping you’d somehow found your way out of Lordaeron.”

Lanth couldn’t think of anything to say to that. He settled on, “Sorry.” It seemed inadequate compared to what had happened. “How’s Liandri doing?”

“She’s great, smart and pretty, seventeen years old now and apprenticed to the city’s top Inscribe. I never told her you had come back, you know. She’d done her grieving, she didn’t need to have to do it again.”

Lanth nodded, even though his widow couldn’t see it. “I’m glad for that,” he said. “The boys miss you. I’m sorry about the presents; I don’t have the heart to stop them.”

“It’s okay, Lanth.” For a second, he thought she was going to turn around, but her nerve failed. He was relieved. “Give them my love, won’t you?”

“Of course,” he said, then paused. “I’ll try to keep the farm in one piece for you.”

She snorted. “I wish I’d never mentioned it to Alex.”

“I’m not,” said Lanth. “I’m sorry it hurt you but I can’t be sorry that I got to see you again.”

“Does your new lady not mind you dragging her all the way down here to see your old wife?”

Lanth’s world tilted as he tried to readjust to his wife’s view of reality. She had never been one for keeping up with current events but even by her standards this was a bit of a stretch. “Do you mean...Lady Sylvanas?”

“She’s pretty, in a cold, scary kind of way.”

“The Dark Lady. She’s the leader of the Forsaken. She’s not my lady. I don’t have a lady. Couldn’t do anything with a lady even if I had one. It, er, fell off somewhere outside Silvermoon.”

“It? What do you mean...oh. Oh, I’m sorry.”

Lanth shrugged. “No big deal, got no blood to make it work anyway.” It wasn’t a place

where he'd expected the conversation to end up but at least it had lifted the sadness a bit. "I should go. I don't want the Dark Lady getting impatient, it's a long way back to Silverpine. Thank you for talking to me. I'm glad I got the chance to say goodbye properly."

Marissa bowed her head but still didn't turn around. "Goodbye, Lanth," she said, her voice soft and quiet.

"Goodbye, Marissa."

~*~

The horse touched down on the lane outside the farm with a thump, clouds of dust kicking up from its wide, sharp hooves. Lanth slid gracelessly from its back, relieved to be back on the ground but, if he was being honest, a little sad to be away from the clean, sharp lines of Stormwind and its bustling life. Then his boys came shambling out and the ache lessened somewhat. He looked up to the mount's rider.

"Thank you, Dark Lady," he said.

"No need to thank me, farmer Ringersson, it proved to be very entertaining," she said, then she leaned over in the saddle so her glowing red eyes were staring down into his yellow ones. "Now you will tell me if you receive any more letters from the Alliance won't you?"

"Uh, yes, Dark Lady."

"Goodbye, farmer Ringersson," said Sylvanas, turning her charger around and setting it into a walk. "I'll send one of my alchemists along for your soup recipe."

"Dark Lady watch over you," said Lanth without thinking.

The charger stopped and Sylvanas looked back over an armour-plated shoulder. "I think that would require a complicated arrangement of mirrors that would prove quite cumbersome, but thank you for the sentiment." She dug her heels into the charger's sides and it launched itself into the sky with an angry whinny.

"Dad," said Jaron. "You told the Dark Lady to wat..."

"I know, Jaron."

"You told her to watch herself!" Though you couldn't tell from his face, there was definitely a hint of a smile in the boy's voice. Marlo's tongue was also wobbling back and forth in the way it did when he was trying to laugh.

"Get back inside, I'll tell you about Stormwind."