

[PDF] The Warcraft: The Last Guardian: Last Guardian No.3

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Description:

Excerpt. © Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. Prologue: The Lonely Tower

The larger of the two moons had risen first this evening, and now hung pregnant and silver-white against a clear, star-dappled sky. Beneath the lambent moon the peaks of the Redridge Mountains strained for the sky. In the daylight the sun picked out hues of magenta and rust among the great granite peaks, but in the moonlight they were reduced to tall, proud ghosts. To the west lay the Forest of Elwynn, its heavy canopy of greatoaks and satinwoods running from the foothills to the sea. To the east, the bleak swamp of the Black Morass spread out, a land of marshes and low hills, bayous and backwaters, failed settlements and lurking danger. A shadow passed briefly across the moon, a raven-sized shadow, bearing for a hole in the heart of the mountain.

Here a chunk had been pulled from the fastness of the Redridge Range, leaving behind a circular vale. Once it might have been the site of some primeval celestial impact or the memory of an earth-shaking explosion, but the aeons had worn the bowl-shaped crater into a series of steep-edged, rounded hillocks which were now cradled by the steeped mountains surrounding them. None of the ancient trees of Elwynn could reach its altitude, and the interior of the ringed hills was barren save for weeds and tangled vines.

At the center of the ringed hills lay a bare tor, as bald as the pate of a Kul Tiras merchant lord. Indeed the very way the hillock rose steeply, then gentled to a near-level slope at its apex, was similar in shape to a human skull. Many had noted it over the years, though only a few had been sufficiently brave, or powerful, or tactless to mention it to the property's owner.

At the flattened peak of the tor rose an ancient tower, a thick, massive protrusion of white stone and dark mortar, a man-made eruption that shot effortlessly into the sky, scaling higher than the surrounding hills, lit like a beacon by the moonlight. There was a low wall at the base of the tower surrounding a bailey, and within those walls the tumbledown remains of a stable and a smithy, but the tower itself dominated all within the ringed hills.

Once this place was called Karazhan. Once it was home of the last of the mysterious and secretive Guardians of Tirisfal. Once it was a living place. Now it was simply abandoned and timelost.

There was silence upon the tower but not a stillness. In the night's embrace quiet shapes flitted from window to window, and phantoms danced along the balconies and parapets. Less than ghosts, but more than memories, these were nothing less than pieces of the past that had become unstuck from the flow of time. These shadows of the past had been pried loose by the madness of the tower's owner, and were now condemned to play out their histories again and again, in the silence of the abandoned tower. Condemned to play but denied of any audience to appreciate them.

Then in the silence, there was the soft scrape of a booted foot against stone, then another. A flash of movement beneath the lambent moon, a shadow against the white stone, a flutter of a tattered, red-hued cloak in the cool night air. A figure walked along the topmost parapet, on the crenellated uppermost spire that years before had served as an observatory.

The parapet door into the observatory screeched open on ancient hinges, then stopped, frozen by rust and the passage of time. The cloaked figure paused a moment, then placed a finger on the hinge, and muttered a few choice words. The door swung open silently, the hinges made as if new. The trespasser allowed himself a smile.

The observatory was empty now, what tools that remained smashed and abandoned. The trespassing figure, almost as silent as a ghost himself, picked up a crushed astrolabe, its scale twisted in some now-forgotten rage. Now it is merely a heavy piece of gold, inert and useless in his hands.

There was other movement in the observatory, and the trespasser looked up. Now a ghostly figure stood nearby, near one of the many windows. The ghost/non-ghost was an broad-shouldered man, hair and beard once dark but now going to a premature gray at the edges. The figure was one of the shards of the past, unglued and now repeating its task, regardless of whether it had observers or not. For the moment, the dark-haired man held the astrolabe, the unbroken twin to the one in the trespasser's hands, and fiddled with a small knob along one side. A moment, a check, and a twitch of the knob. His dark brows furrowed over ghostly green eyes. A second moment, another check, and another twitch. Finally, the tall, imposing figure sighed deeply and placed the astrolabe on a table that was no longer there, and vanished.

The trespasser nodded. Such hauntings were common even in the days when Karazhan was inhabited, though now, stripped of the control (and the madness) of their master, they had become more brazen. Yet these shards of the past belonged here, while he did not. He was the interloper, not they.

The trespasser crossed the room to its staircase leading down, while behind him the older man flickered back into the view and repeated his action, sighting his astrolabe on a planet that had long since moved to other parts of the sky.

The trespasser moved down through the tower, crossing levels to reach other stairs and other hallways. No door was shut to him, even those locked and bolted, or sealed by rust and age. A few words, a touch, a gesture and the fetters flew loose, the rust dissolved into ruddy piles, the hinges restored. In one or two places ancient wards still glowed, potent despite their age. He paused before them for a moment, considering, reflecting, searching his memory for the correct counter-sign. He spoke the correct word, made the correct motion with his hands, shattered the weak magic that remained, and passed on.

As he moved through the tower, the phantoms of the past grew more agitated and more active. Now with a potential audience, it seemed that these pieces of the past wished to play themselves out, if only to be made free of this place. Any sound they once possessed had long-since eroded away, leaving only their images moving through the halls.

The interloper passed an ancient butler in dark livery, the frail old man shuffling slowly down the empty hallway, carrying a silver tray and wearing a set of horse-blinders. The interloper passed through the library, where a green-fleshed young woman stood with her back to him, pouring over an ancient tome. He passed through a banquet hall, at one end a group of musicians playing soundlessly, dancers twirling in a gavotte. At the other end a great city burned, its flames beating ineffectively against the stone walls and rotting tapestries. The trespasser moved through the silent flames, but his face grew drawn and tense as he witnessed once more the mighty city of Stormwind burn around him.

In one room three young men sat around a table and told now-unknown lies. Metal mugs were scattered on the table's surface as well as beneath it. The trespasser stood watching this image for a long time, until a phantom taverness brought another round. Then he shook his head and pressed on.

He reached nearly the ground level, and stepped out on a low balcony that hung precariously to the wall, like a wasps' nest over the main entrance. There, in the wide space before the tower, between the main entrance and a now-collapsed stables across the bailey, stood a single ghostly image, lonely and separated. It did not move like the others, but rather stood there, waiting, tentative. A piece of the past that had not been released. A piece that was waiting for him.

The immobile image was of a young man with a skunk stripe of white running through his dark, untidy head of hair. The straggling fragments of a beard, newly grown, clung to his face. A battered rucksack lay at the youth's feet, and he held a red-sealed letter with a deathlike grip.

This was well and truly no ghost, the trespasser knew, though the owner of this image may yet be dead, fallen in combat beneath a foreign sun. This was a memory, a shard of the past, trapped like an insect in amber, waiting for its release. Waiting for his arrival.

The trespasser sat on the stonework ledge of the balcony and looked out, beyond the bailey, beyond the hillock, and beyond the ringed hills. There was silence in the moonlight, as the mountains

themselves seemed to be holding their breath, waiting for him.

The trespasser lifted a hand and intoned a series of chanted words. Softly came the rhymes and rhythms the first time, then louder, and finally louder still, shattering the calm. In the distance wolves picked up his chant and cast it back in howling counterpoint.

And the image of the ghostly youth, its feet seemingly trapped in mud, took a deep breath, hoisted his rucksack of secrets to his shoulder, and slogged his way toward the main entrance of Medivh's Tower.

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