

# The Fall of Legends

The Venture Co - 2008

## Chapter 1

### Fauarl

The sun was beginning to rise as the ragged Grin forces entered the swamps. A great fog erupting from the stagnant waters permeated all around them. Fauarl led the Grin deeper into the swamps while the flies buzzed around his ears and eyes. Moths fluttered around the giant flame of the torch he carried in front of him.

SPLASH!

Fauarl quickly turned around to face the direction of the noise.

"Blech, I can't see a damn thing," exclaimed a cow now buried under the water and fog.

"Quiet, Feress! Did you forget why we are doing this in the first place?" Fauarl walked over to the spluttering shaman and lifted him out of the water.

"Sir! We should've stayed and fought!" Feress stared defiantly at Fauarl, reminiscent of only a few nights earlier.

"We've been over this a thousand times. Our war is over." Fauarl turned and led the group solemnly forward. The torch making them a bulb of light in the enveloping fog.

### Two weeks ago:

"Hold the line, maggots!" Arrows flew through the smoke filled air. PLUNK! Fauarl looked at his shoulder; one had embedded itself into his thick leather armor.

"Sir!!"

"I'm fine! Why are you staring at me like some slack-jawed ogre?!? Get in there!" Random sieges had been occurring on Taugrek's Stand ever since the Battle of Ironforge. This one seemed to be a hired band of mercenaries, they were well-armed and plentiful. "Bellmont! Kill that priestess of theirs!" The undead rogue was locked in combat with a stout human warrior. Upon hearing the tauren's yell for him he shifted his weight. The warrior lost his balance and fell forward; taking this opportunity, Bellmont quickly stabbed him in the side of his unarmored neck. He looked up at Fauarl to see why he was being called. "The elf!! She is..."

Fauarl stopped after he saw the elf priestess run towards Bellmont. She began chanting words of prayer over the fallen warrior. And he knew only too well what would happen after that. He ran towards Bellmont as the newly healed warrior made for the sword that had fallen out of his hand. Fauarl kicked him in the gut, denting the plate mail sharply into his diaphragm, and quickly cast a wrath in close range at his head.

"Kill that elf," he panted. Bellmont nodded and vanished into the shadows. Fauarl took a moment to check his surroundings. He saw Yalim tending to the wounded near the mouth of the cave. "Yalim! I need you to cover me, I'm going to charge their lines! These new grot are falling over themselves!" Yalim nodded and Fauarl began to morph into his moonkin form. His skin hardened into a thick hide and his vision became much sharper. Unable to speak, he looked at Yalim once and made his charge into the fray.

### One week ago:

"Warchief, we need to cut our losses! They know where we live. The Burning Steppes are no longer safe for us." Fauarl looked around at his fellow officers to see if they agreed. The Sythegar, Warlord, and Warchief of the Grin all sat in the cave of Taugrek's Stand in conference.

"What're you trying to say?" Gorfrunch had just returned from a week's journey to revive the old treaty with the Amani. His scowl only deepened with Fauarl's suggestion; things with the trolls had not gone well.

"I am saying that while you have been off vacationing in the bungalows of the trolls, we have been dying! Your hard head and dimming vision are going to get all of us killed!"

"That a challenge?" The old orc picked up his axe and shield and charged at the druid. Fauarl quickly shifted into moonkin form and head-butted the charging orc. His horns caught the Warchief under the arms, and

with a mighty heave, Faquarl lashed his head backward, sending the orc into the air, landing behind him with a crash as his metal armor crushed the chair under him. Gorfrunch crawled to his feet, shaking off the impact daze with a roar. He ran at Faquarl again, slicing downward with his axe. Faquarl caught the blow with the handle of his mace, holding both ends as he strained against the might of the greying orc. Gorfrunch used this precious moment to swing his shield under the bull's guard, catching the younger Tauren in the chest with his spike shield and pressing him to the wall. Silence filled the cavern. The last Sythegar to try to interfere had not come out as well as either Gorfrunch or Faquarl.

"You'll learn yer place someday, Jo." Faquarl stared into the old orc's twisted, smiling face and shifted into a prowler, Gorfrunch throwing a foot out forward as he fell into the wall Faquarl had been pinned against. He reshifted into a moonkin again immediately behind the orc, and willed what little life remained in the cavern to grow. Roots started ensnaring the warchief's arms and legs, restraining him down on the ground. Faquarl sighed as he began to cast wrath. The first wrath hit Gorfrunch in the back, as did the second. While casting the third and final wrath, Gorfrunch strained to get his foot into the armhold of his shield. Once secure he lifted with all of his remaining strength. His leg broke through the vines and his foot raised the shield. The last wrath rebounded off of the shield directly towards Faquarl slamming him on the side of the face.

The momentum knocked Faquarl down and he could no longer maintain his form. He shifted back into a tauren and remained on the ground panting. Gorfrunch grabbed his axe and used it like a crutch to lean on. He limped over to the druid with a look of disgust painted on his face.

"They're gone, Gorfrunch! Yagyru hasn't been seen since Ironforge, probably dead. Stokes left us. As did Eddard, Bread, and Wampus. Yagyru was the most loyal of us all and his blood is on your hands! You've become an uncaring shell since your return. I think you seek death for not only yourself, but all of us. Well just so you know, Warchief, if you die here. I will not let this clan mourn you, we will celebrate the death of a senile. The Second War is over, we have lost. Now we must rebuild."

The two political powers stared at each other.

"You have a patrol to lead, Warlord. I suggest you not forget your duties." Having given the command, Gorfrunch stalked out.

### **3 days ago:**

"Jo?" The warchief entered Faquarl's room in the cave.

"Yes, Warchief?"

"You... you were..." The orc paused, as if searching for words. "We can't train grot here. We will move to the Swamp of Sorrows. We will make base in a cave within the swamps....the Grin was destined to die in Ironforge, it seems. This world no longer has a place for us. Maybe the Alliance will forget us, and let us leave, and live."

"I spoke rashly, Warchief. We will continue our efforts in Khaz Modan, we just need time to build and train the youth."

"No, as you said, I am an old orc. The Second War is over. Now go out there and order those soldiers to pack light, you leave as soon as possible."

"And you?"

"I am already packed, and will ride down to find us a place to call home."

"Yes, Warchief." Faquarl walked out of his room and closed the door. His booming voice could be heard reverberating off the rock walls. "GRIN! PACK UP! WE'RE DONE HERE! WE'RE FINALLY GOING TO HAVE PEACE!" An even louder roar echoed. Less joyous cheering than curses. The old orc listened and smiled to himself.

"Faquarl has lost faith with all of these unknowns attacking." The old orc muttered to himself. "He is soon going to realize my war is far from over. This is just an interlude." The orc laughed as he grabbed his pack. He smiled as he walked past Faquarl, the Warlord returned it. Gorfrunch mounted his dire wolf and headed toward the swamp.

### **Four hours ago:**

"I lost track of him, Marcus."

"Nur is going to have our uniforms for this. I can't even imagine what he will say when we tell him that we let the 'Dreaded Warchief of the Grin' out of our sights." Two rogues from the Keepers of Stromgarde walked slowly through the shallow waters of the Swamp of Sorrows.

"It don't help that it is so bloody dark eith-" The dwarf never finished his sentence. A troll-shaped form emerged from what had looked like a tree root, and slid a sword easily into the dwarf's gut. He then rose and looked towards the human.

"Don't hurt me! Please! I have children! My...PLEASE!" He looked around frantically, but behind him were a tauren and another orc, this one with black armor, and crimson shield and axe. The new orc walked toward the human and grabbed him by the throat as the other cleaned his sword on the tunic of the still-twitching dwarf. He pulled him close and spat at him in broken Common.

"You... tell... leader, Grin... be... here." The old orc threw the human into the waters. Marcus quickly got to his feet and scrambled away in absolute shock. The Warchief looked at him with a suspicious glance, the human was running south towards the blasted lands. Stromgarde was north. Dushin shot him a questioning glance, nodding towards the north, then moving to follow the human.

Gorfrunch waved him down, he knew the rogue would tell someone. It would only be a matter of time.

### **Present:**

Faquarl saw the black smoke rise. It was the Warchief's signal to meet there. He grinned, carrying a now unconscious Feress over his shoulder.

"I still don't see why you had to knock him out, sir," Felora said as she walked beside him.

"He wouldn't keep his mouth shut. This was the easiest way to get him to agree with me. Besides, I enjoyed it, and that is all that matters." Faquarl grinned at her and looked back at the smoke. It would be the beginning of a new age for the Grin, Faquarl could feel it. An escape...

### **Bellmont**

Bayne's hooves let out a loud echo as they clopped upon the forlorn, rocky landscape of Deadwind Pass. The armored skeletal steed's rider, Belmont, sighed as he braced himself for the change in climate as his horse approached the murky waters of the Swamp of Sorrows.

Upon a few minutes of trotting into the Swamp of Sorrows, Bayne broke out into a gallop. This was not to hasten his speed in order to reach some urgent matter, but rather to avoid the swarms of mosquitos that swooped down upon him.

Suddenly, Bayne let out a loud scream and threw Belmont off of his saddle, rearing once more and then galloping off into the swamp. Belmont hit the ground hard, obviously unprepared for his horse's sudden fleeing. Getting up slowly, Belmont began externally voicing his protests of his current situation.

"DAMNIT ALL! I am sick of wastelands, I am sick of swamps, I am sick of haunted forests, Scourge-infested towns, enemy fortresses and any man, woman or child who ever stood under the banner of the new Alliance!!!!" yelled Belmont, violently slashing at a tree as if it were Arthas or some other amalgamation of his hatred.

"Now what of all things could have spooked that cowardly little beast!" said Belmont, turning toward the swamp to see two orcs and a troll with torches, wearing the tabard of the Horde.

"Lok'tar, scouts. I am High Executor Belmont on route to Stonard under the royal command of the Queen herself. I have little time to converse." said Belmont, feigning respect in his tone.

However, the small band of Horde outriders continued to gawk at Belmont. By the time he realized the tabard of the Blacktooth Grin was clearly visible, the first outrider had already charged. Drawing his dagger quickly Belmont parried the blow while swiftly drawing his longsword with his other hand and cutting the outrider's arm off.

The Horde outrider cried out in pain and collapsed to the ground, grabbing the stump near his elbow now gushing with blood. His cries were quickly silenced with another quick movement of the longsword. Two dull thuds were heard as the outrider's head hit the ground, followed by the remainder of his body.

The troll outrider immediately took off, the remaining orc was not as fortunate however, as Belmont's dagger was thrust through his jaw and into his skull. The orc outrider gasped and fell over, spasming and

spewing blood from as mouth as he lay dying.

Carefully aiming, Belmont whipped a throwing axe at the fleeing troll, the axe catching him dead center in the back of the knee. The Troll let out a horrible cry of pain as he collapsed into the murky waters of the swamp.

"Please, mon! Don't hurt me! I didn' do notin' to ya, mon! I got two lil' ones, please!!!" the troll outrider begged as he struggled to stand, each attempt sending jolts of pain through his body and throwing him back down into the waters.

"I WON'T BE TELLIN' ANYONE DAT YA HERE!! PLEASE!!! I DID NOTHIN' TO YA!!!" the troll continued to plead as Belmont drew closer, drawing another throwing axe remorselessly.

The axe flew at great speed, cutting off a good portion of the troll's ear but still hitting the desired target - a crocolisk slowly rising to the surface, attracted by the blood now clouding the already murky waters.

The troll, startled and in shock, rolled onto the muddy land and grabbed his partially intact ear as he began to crawl away from Belmont. Not wasting any time, Belmont muttered some guttural words and seemed to disappear with a quick movement, reappearing in a portion of a second in front of the troll.

"Please... please," was all the outrider could manage to say, the loss of blood and the intense pain draining his fatigue. Belmont carefully picked up the troll by the neck, grabbed one of his tusks with his free hand, and with some force snapped it off at the midway point, bashing the troll in the head with the blunt end of it. Knocked out by the blow, the outrider hit the ground and stayed unconscious.

Bellmont looked around, dragging the corpses of the two orcs over near the troll and looking around for a likely committer in these acts. Upon catching the movements of a crocolisk near the riverside, Belmont approached the animal and silently spied on its meal.

Though distorted, bloodied and torn, it was evident this was the body of a dwarven rogue wearing the tabard of Stomgarde.

"I was unaware Nur's interests fell so far... perhaps this 'peace' Faquarl speaks so highly of will not be long-lived...or perhaps this is simply an unlucky adventurer." Belmont inquired out loud to himself. Quickly snatching the bloodied and torn upper torso of the dwarven spy, Belmont lured the crocolisk to the location of the two dead - and one unconscious - Horde outriders.

Taking the sentry horn from the backpack of one of the fallen outriders, Belmont let out a long call before stuffing it into the hand of the dead orc. He then carefully placed the troll's broken tusk into the hands of the dead spy and disappeared into the marshes.

If all went right, Thrall would hear tell of Stromgarde going on the offensive. And even if such a bold conclusion was not made, if the troll was wise, he'd keep quiet about the Grin's location and silently thank the spirits for Belmont's mercy. And even if he made such claims - they were hardly believable with the Keepers' corpse so near. Either way, this unexpected detour may have aided the Grin.

"There you are you idiot!" hissed Belmont, upon finding Bayne outside a misty cavern. Upon glancing inside, Belmont grinned and patted his steed on the head.

"Apologies, Bayne. You saved me quite the trek." said Belmont as he grabbed his horses reins and guided him, disappearing within the mists of the cavern.

## Huizopotl

### *Two days ago:*

Faquarl walked into the lodge, and his nose was immediately assaulted with the acrid odor of an unrecognizable herb blended with the smoke from the fire. Bending low as he pushed aside the flap, he narrowly avoided tangling his horns with a woven mess of bones, shells, and assorted charms that were hanging from the low ceiling of the room. He nodded to the wizened troll seated close to the firepit as he entered, but received no response as he took a seat on a reed mat next to him.

Faquarl cleared his throat and said, "Have you drafted my unit reports yet?"

The troll turned to him slightly, grimacing unpleasantly in what must have been a caricature of a smile.

"Yah, ah got dem. But joo dont come tah mah lodge foh reports 'less dey be late. Wha' joo want, Jo?"

Faquarl followed his movements intently as the troll slowly rose and rummaged in a sturdy desk he had claimed after a raid on Northshire Abbey. When the troll returned with a roll of papers bound by a leather strip,

he accepted it wordlessly without giving it a glance. He accepted an offered flask with the same taciturn silence. The two sat like this for some time, drinking in peaceful quiet, sharing a camaraderie that words would only weigh upon. At one point, the troll gestured to Faquarl, who left the lodge long enough to return with wood to place on the fire.

Eventually, it was Jo who broke the silence. "What will you do now that we are going to be done with fighting, Pokes?"

The troll began to chuckle, which turned to a gasping wheeze as he inhaled smoke thrown up by the green logs just placed. "Don'joo mean, what JOO gonna do? Ah know joo got no inneres' in mah days aftah de war."

Faquarl started and began to rise in protest, but the troll waved him down. "Come clean! Joo got no lies wid me, an' no reason foh dem. So ah give dat in return - joo foolin' jooseff. De day joo chose dis dance, dis dance chose joo. Joo may be done wid IT, but it shore as 'ell aint done wid JOO."

Faquarl sat back down thoughtfully, biting his tongue as the troll continued.

"...war oh nah, Chief oh nah, dem spirits wot sing dese songs gonna be a chorus ever'where joo go. Dem wot dead - Yagy, Stokes, all de oddas - dem gonna sing too. Joo aint done wid fightin'! Joo fightin' even now, 'ere in mah lodge." The troll looked into the smoke, and sang a line quietly in Amani, before returning his gaze to the tauren.

"Peace gonna come when joo learn tah accept dat."

Faquarl ground his teeth in raw emotion and stiffly rose, not so careful enough to avoid tangling his horns this time. Wrenching his head away angrily, he glared hotly at the troll as he began scooping up the fetishes. "You have no idea what you are talking about, troll. I imagine that to a savage like you, bloodshed is as natural to everyday life as birth. I was foolish to come here. I expect your men ready to leave tomorrow, Sythegar." And with that, he left.

After he had finished cleaning up his charms and carefully rearranged them in their proper places, Pokes watched the flap that Jo stormed from, his face a mask of wistfulness. Drawing smoke from a bone pipe deeply into his lungs, he blew them out after the tauren whispering sadly, "Ah'm so sorry brodda...."

With that, he rose and gathered his belongings - the Chief was relying on him to engineer a war, and his handpicked men were ready to ride.

## Morthala

Morthala sat just out of range of the shaman's totem, aware of the steady press of heat that would alert them to his presence. He sat and bided his time until Belmont or Faquarl revealed themselves...he could wait.

## Fromeister

### Several days earlier:

"We are all here it seems. Then let's get on with it. Jerome and his Keepers have brought news to us, Danath. They believe that the Blacktooth Grin did not perish in Ironforge. They are regrouping in Stonard as we speak."

This meeting of Stromgarde's leadership was held in the crypts like always, a meeting in shadow and darkness but one protected by the Three Brothers and the spirits of the fallen. Present were the last of the Trollbane lineage, Galen, Danath and Jerome. The Guardians of the Keepers - Palenti, Myrias and Nur - were also present. In normal times Cassiopeia would have been present, but her whereabouts were unknown at this point. She had been gone for a few weeks now.

Jerome started, "The Grin among many other tribes ran amok in Stromgarde. They destroyed our families, killed all our friends and left the place a desolate example of what it stood for. This is our home, the fallen our family and friends. They must be avenged. There is no question that the Grin have committed the most heinous crimes in our history, slaughtering man, woman and child for no reason. We cannot let them leave this land and return to Outland to rebuild."

Galen and Danath were silent for a moment, before the older one spoke. "Jerome, we have all lost family in this business. We have lost all those who we love, and I for one will be happy to rid the Grin of these worlds.

But our response should be measured.”

“Measured by what, Danath? Weakness? We have the ability to crush them and wipe them off the face of this earth. Their death will weaken the Horde, and bring peace to the spirits in this very crypt. There is no measure for the Grin, why should we use any ourselves? Burning their damned fortress to the ground and burn them as well.”

“Your words betray you, Nur. Have you fallen back on your past ways? There is much to be said about your bloodlust and those priestly robes you wear now.”

Nur was about to respond with an accusation, when Jerome’s plated fist slammed into his face. “Nur, you will not speak to Danath in such a manner. We are on the same bloody side. I suggest you keep your term and your tongue under control for the coming battle.”

Palenti, often the sage council for the Keepers, stepped up and merely took Nur by the shoulder into a corner. Myrias quickly tended to Nur’s wound. “Danath, my brother. Though I don’t agree with Nur’s harsh words I agree with the sentiment. There is no choice. The Grin must be destroyed. They must be eradicated from our world so that our people can rest in peace. Galen knows very well that children still dream of the Grin in their nightmares killing their family. Most children fear the Burning Legion and demons. Ours fear mortals of green skin. This has to end.”

Galen was the first to speak after a long moment of silence. “Very well. Kill them all. Let’s be done with this nightmare we have all been living through.”

Danath continued, “There is no need for measure. This is war, you aim to destroy those who have killed your own. The Grin showed us no mercy since the day they arrived and even since they have done nothing to earn trust or respect. Slaughter them like animals. If some do survive we will get them at the gate. They will not be allowed to enter Outland.”

“My brothers, Honor Hold is now your second home. The sons of Lothar will stand by Stromgarde once again, as many of them are Arathor themselves. Consider Honor Hold your home away from home. We will provide supplies and clerics there.”

Jerome looked to the rest of the Guardians and started to issue orders at once. “Inform those battling in Outland to make haste and head to Stormwind. We will use Stormwind as our base of operations for now. It is better defended than Nethergarde Keep and we can purchase supplies there as well. Inform Darimund and Tagoris we will need them right away. Let those of a healing persuasion know that they better hone their art as best as they can.”

“We ride to battle my friends. For Honor and Vengeance.”

## Faquarl

“Gorfrunch! Gorfrunch!” Belmont rushed into Stagalbog cave, knocking over a grot in his blind fervor. “Report, rotter.”

“Alliance...tons of them...marching north from the Blasted Lands.” Faquarl noticed that Belmont’s rotting body had no sign of fatigue other than the tone of his voice and his wheezing. However his breathing did not seem to give him any relaxation, perhaps due to his undead state. “They looked to be Keepers.”

“Hrrrmph. Alright, rally the troops. They have five minutes to get into a defensive position. Get your best rogues and put a watch on Stonard, they’ll strike there first.”

Faquarl looked shocked at the news of another battle so soon. “We just arrived! Let them burn Stonard, they will pass over our cave without us having to bother. Why are they even here?!?”

“Warlord, now I guess is as good a time as any - in my scouting I found a dwarf body heavily mauled by the crocolisks. They may be out looking for him.” Belmont’s explanation was good enough for Faquarl and he looked at the warchief to veto his rally to war.

“You don’t send an army to look for a scout,” Gorfrunch said. “They’re here for war and Stonard hasn’t done anything recent to cause any reprimand from the Alliance, the only change is our presence. We must assume the worst and defend our new home.”

Many of the Grin were already wearing their armor, relishing a chance at battle again. Faquarl’s idealistic peace had not settled well with most.

“Fine, but this is going to be our last battle. I swear it.” Faquarl kicked a murloc in frustration and went to grab his armor.

Thirty minutes had passed. The mud-covered Grin sat camouflaged in the swamp water. Faquarl and Gorfrunch were receiving reports from the rogues stationed around Stonard.

“Alright Jo. You take ten men and hit from the east. I’ll take my ten and hit from the west. Wait fer my signal to charge them.”

“Yes, Warchief.” Faquarl may have resented the recent battles but he did not let it reflect in his leadership. War was war whether you were for it or against it. Might as well put full effort into it if you have no escape. “Mount up! You ten! Follow me!” Faquarl led the small band into more swampland and gave them the signal to stop. Another five minutes passed until a faint cry was heard. It was quiet but unmistakable.

“FEAR THE GRIN!” Faquarl ordered his men forward following the warchief’s battle cry and the armies surged in. Loud thumps of armored boots slamming into mud caused an ambience that was all too common to the Grin. The orcs, tauren, and undead ran at the Alliance who turned to meet the oncoming force.

Faquarl stopped in shock. They were Keepers.

But these Keepers looked different. They wore bright new armor and looked less haggard then he had remembered in battles past. As the armies clashed, Faquarl saw that the intensity of their fighting had changed as well. These were not the Keepers of a disintegrating army. This was an army of a thriving nation. Something that seemed impossible for Stromgarde.

Faquarl was brought back into focus after he was shot by an arrow, and he began to feel dizzy as his mana began to drain. He refocused himself and ran into the battle, firing wraths off into the chaotic war zone. He saw a dwarf paladin cut down one of the Grin warlocks. Faquarl turned his attention to him and started casting a starfire. After two of the great beams of energy had slammed into the ground the dwarf was encompassed by dust. Faquarl moved in to see if he had claimed the kill when he heard the familiar ring of a paladin’s shield. Sighing, Faquarl took it as a sign that this would be a hard-fought battle.

## Bellmont

### *Six hours ago:*

Bellmont drew his longsword and swung it from behind the curtain of thick fog, cutting through the legs of one of the Stromgarde cavalry. The horse let out a loud cry of pain and crashed to the ground, sending the rider tumbling to the marshy ground.

Bellmont leapt up in the air, bringing his longsword down with all his weight straight through the rider's armor, then rolling to avoid several arrows and falling back into the shadows. Shifting his position to behind a dwarven paladin, he stuck his dagger in the dwarf's neck and dragged it from side to side. Blood spurted from the wound, and as the dwarf spurted blood from his mouth and cried for aid, Belmont pulled his right arm back and thrust his blade into the dwarf's back, killing the wounded crusader and rushing to engage another foe.

He locked blades with a Stromgarde warrior, but the armor, the tabard and the skill of his opponent quickly gave pause to Belmont. The majority of Stromgarde's normal infantry was relatively weak, having only basic training. These soldiers were different; their armor stronger and well-forged, they'd been trained and battle-hardened and were no scrawny militia. The tabard reminded him of ages past, and although Belmont could not place the exact origin, it was evident that these tabards were that of the Stromgarde from the Second War.

Bellmont shook off his thoughts and broke through the soldier's defensive, thrusting the dagger into the soldier's chestpiece. However the dagger barely pierced through the armor, and the soldier laughed and hit Belmont with his shield, sending the undead rogue stumbling sideways. The soldier rushed up and brought his sword down, Belmont clapping his hands together on the blade as it neared him, pushing it aside to throw the soldier off balance and sending him to the ground. Belmont began arming his goblin rocket launcher. He managed to shoot off an explosive projectile at the soldier, finally blowing him to bits.

Rushing to his feet he stood up and drew his blades, taking note of the banner once again and rallying the other assassins before fading into the shadows.

## Faquarl

An hour of back and forth conflict had gone by. The battle had easily become one of the bloodiest in recent

history. The swamp water was tinted red and the grass was caked with blood. The Keepers had given the signal to retreat only moments earlier and Faquarl couldn't be happier about it.

Gorfrunch had been right about one thing; they weren't looking for a scout. They had come with the sole intention of killing Grin. They forgot all about Stonard as soon as the Grin had arrived and attacked with viciousness unfamiliar to them.

The Grin began to reassemble inside Stagalbog cave. The murlocs indigenous to the cave had decided to raid the Grin armory and could be seen flailing axes and swords about. The grots soon went back to work in their small war against the murlocs. The other Grin circled up to discuss what had just happened.

"Did you see their banner?" Gorfrunch seemed shaken, a quality quite rare in the warchief.

"You saw it too? It seems so familiar but I can't remember where. It was from my days of life, so I know it was old." Belmont seemed to be one of the few who realized the significance behind the banner.

"All I noticed is that they were well-prepared for war. Stromgarde itself wasn't supplying them. The armor was far too fresh for that dying nation to provide." Faquarl was nursing several burns. The mages of Stromgarde were deadly; he was one of the luckier ones in those encounters.

"They were the banners of old Stromgarde. That was the sigil of Strom when Danath was their field commander." The room became quieter after Gorfrunch had spoken. While few of today's Grin existed during the Second War, many knew the history.

"Are you sure? Didn't he die?"

"Doesn't look like it. We need ter see this through. Jo, let's go south." Faquarl gave the warchief a nod, followed by a sigh. He had a feeling this was the beginning of something he couldn't stop.

The Dark Portal was standing in front of them, vast and seeping out fel energies. Faquarl and Gorfrunch looked all around them for clues.

"Lots of hoof prints around here. Looks like they came from Draenor."

"You mean we're going through that thing?!?"

"Course we are. Just keep yer eyes open, I don't know how that world has changed since I was last there."

"And when were you last there?"

"Before it exploded." The warchief gave a harsh laugh as they walked into the portal. The green energies wrapped around them. Faquarl saw the Blasted Lands melt and the colors began to rearrange themselves into a blurry new surroundings. When things became clear he saw he was in the middle of a battlefield.

"CHARRRRRRGE!" At least fifty orcs came from around a corner and ran down the steps of the monument they were standing on. At the base of the steps was a demon that Faquarl could only recognize as a lookalike to the statue in Orgrimmar.

"Let's go, this isn't our problem." Faquarl nodded at the warchief as he spoke and they found a wind rider stationed in the horde camp. Gorfrunch took a wyvern and Faquarl shifted into a bird as they flew over the demonic holdings. "They didn't notice we were Grin. I didn't think we were gonna get a wyvern so easily."

Faquarl just flew alongside the warchief thinking the same thing to himself.

"There!" Gorfrunch pointed towards a crumpling citadel made from pearl white stone. The banner that the Keepers wore was flying high amongst the rubble. As they flew in to see closer, a gryphon came from out of the sky and charged them. Faquarl flew lower and shifted out of flight; as he began to fall he threw a few wraths at the great beast causing it to fall from the sky. The warchief flew downwards to meet the druid.

"See anything, Warchief?" Gorfrunch looked grim and nodded.

"They are heavily reinforced. There is no way we are gonna break those lines. Danath is here though, I saw him. I saw him Jo."

"And? How is this our problem?"

"He attacked US! We aren't going to let that go. This is war, Jo."

"You said it yourself, the citadel is far too reinforced for us to break alone."

"Yeah. That's why yer goin back. We need help this time. Get the Thunderlords, they'll have the same goal in this as we do."

"Where are we going to set camp?!? You can't be serious?"

"Listen ter me, cow. Send someone ter Suncrown - there is an elf base just west of here."

"What makes you think Suncrown has any jurisdiction over here?"

"I don't, but they pledged themselves to us in Khaz Modan. Worst comes to worse, we use them as hostages." Faquarl snarled at the warchief. Things seemed to be developing far too fast. He couldn't stop it, and so he did what he was trained and honor-bound to do.

"Yes, Warchief. We will have made contact within a day."

"Good, I'm gonna stay here and get the lay of the land, this place is much different." Faquarl nodded and shifted into a bird again. He looked down at the warchief, who was walking toward a monolithic black keep. As Faquarl flew back towards the portal he noticed something new to his left - an orcish city waving the flag of the new Horde.

If Thrall was here, then things were going to be worse than he thought.

## Nur

### *Earlier in the day:*

Nur stood atop the walls of the Keep in the Arathi Highlands, contemplating the battle of the night before. He had not been there, due other pressing matters for the sake of the Alliance. While his brothers and sisters had fought in the Swamp of Sorrows, he had been to Ironforge and Stormwind on a diplomatic mission of great importance. Stromgarde, even with the return of Danath and the wealth found in Outland, could not fight the Grin alone. Well, rather - they could not fight the Grin with their allies alone.

As he stared at the Highlands watching the younger Keepers train in duels, his thoughts went to the briefing of the night before. They Keepers had successfully attacked Stonard and laid waste to the fortress. The Grin had come in numbers as usual and the battle was hard fought with both factions losing ground and gaining ground on a regular basis. The battle was supposedly even matched, though many in the ranks felt that more could have been done to gain the upper hand.

But that was not the problem. As he was in Stormwind attempting to get the pathetic leaders of the city to ride out and destroy the Grin once and for all, the Horde had arrived to reinforce Stonard and the Grin. The outpost was abuzz with various other elements of the Horde - not just the Grin. There was not much that could be done in such a scenario. Being fool hardy was not a trait the Keepers tolerate in the regiment. A battle is won with intelligence, not rushing madly into the fray and losing the lives of men.

Lord Jerome walked up the battlement to Nur. "They train hard today. The battle must have invigorated their desire to defend our land."

Smiling, Nur responded, "They don't defend anymore, Lord Commander. You see the zeal in their eyes, that comes only when one believes that they fight for what is right, what is important. Many of these men are not Arathor, but this Kingdom is their home and they now ride out to avenge the deaths of those who they have loved and sworn to protect."

"War comes to us Lord Commander. But this time, it comes on our terms, at our will with only one outcome. Vengeance for our fallen. Stromgarde marches, Lord Commander, and may the Gods have mercy on those who get in our way."

## Gorfrunch

"Tried that a few times. Be surprised how ineffective it was, most go berserk immediately and kill a few whelps before we can put them down. What's your trick?"

The blade clicked against the glass as the hulking, plate-clad behemoth smiled fondly at the struggling Mag'har in the chamber.

"It must be pure. We have... the source."

Gorfrunch raised his voice to be heard above the moans and sobs of prisoners in the pens behind him and a strange, echoing bestial roar coming from the depths of the fortress that sounded almost like a voice.

"Hrrrgh. And the subject? Is the brown tone a transition? How long has this one been in the chamber?"

The plate scraped as the powerful stomach muscles beside him convulsed in a huge chuckle.

"Mag'har. Orcs caught in the blast of the world who have shrivelled and faded from their former selves. Attempts to try some of the human expedition haven't worked well. These wretches seem particularly... empty."

We simply refill them. Reinvigorate them."

Gorfrunch stepped closer, his breath joining the thin layer of steam already on the glass chamber in the sweltering fortress. The Mag'har glared at him, feebly struggling against its restraints, but convulsed with a sudden flow of energy, letting out a rage-fed roar.

"Beautiful. But I don't have much time. My forces will be flowing through the Portal soon, and we have plans to make about the human fortress to the east. Not only are the humans a problem, but the grasshuggers to the north..."

The two warchiefs strode down the hall, fel orc scientists saluting sharply before returning to their instrument panels as the Bladefist passed, the small, green Smashblade not even coming up to his shoulder.

## Agholinn

"So, I see that you are still wearing those pretty clothes," Faquarl rumbled with a snort, his steps heavy against the marble of Silvermoon's streets.

Arkonn whirled to put a face to the voice speaking to him, though he already knew who it was.

"What brings you to Silvermoon, Jo," Arkonn replied with a somewhat resigned tone. There was no arguing with the dark-furred tauren over his clothing and how they did not, in fact, make him look like a woman.

"I've got to ask a favor, Arkonn," Faquarl began, settling his weight into a bench that creaked and groaned in complaint, "The Grin and the Thunderlords want to go into Outland, and we need to set up camp. Thrallmar is right out, but Falcon Watch..."

The unfinished statement hung in the air like a rain cloud, full and ready to burst. Arkonn drew in a deep breath through his nostrils and exhaled gustily through his mouth. Ofearah, Arkonn's striped cat, made a similar set of noises from his place at Arkonn's side.

"You want to set up at Falcon Watch, and have me talk the Sin'dorei there into letting you," Arkonn finished, his words more of a statement than question.

Faquarl nodded his confirmation with a grim touch to his eyes and face.

Arkonn thought for a moment, weighing options. He ran his tongue along his teeth behind sealed lips. Finding the socket of the tooth he had given to Gorfrunch however long ago, his decision was made.

"I'll talk to some people. Rellen'thas - the Suncrown - probably know some people that can help," Arkonn tried to convey his uncertainty. Suncrown was an extended family of nobles and nobility. The chances Velurian would want to talk to the administrators at Falcon Watch on the Grin's behalf were slim. Esere and Renault, however, might be willing to lend a hand.

"Good!" Faquarl exclaimed, the word sounding more like a bark than anything else. He clapped Arkonn roughly on the back, and began walking away before the hunter could renege. Arkonn sighed heavily, watching his hulking friend walk away, and ran a hand through his hair irritably.

This wasn't going to be easy.

"So, again, what do you need done?" Renault asked of Arkonn, the older elf viewing the red-headed hunter over the rim of his spectacles.

Arkonn had come to the offices of the Fel'Solan, Suncrown's House Guard, and had asked to speak with Esere, Vice-Captain of the Fel'Solan. He hoped that she would help him without requiring an audience with Renault, who was Captain. Arkonn was not as lucky as he would have hoped, and now he stood in Renault's office with Esere hovering in the background, listening to the conversation.

"The Blacktooth Grin needs a safe haven in Hellfire, and they can't go to Thrallmar," Arkonn held up a hand to forestall any questions to that point, "Falcon Watch is their only option. They need to have someone arrange for their stay..."

"... and they figured that we were just the elves to smooth their way," Esere finished for Arkonn, a slightly bemused smile touching her lips, "I understand why they would avoid Thrall's outpost in the Outlands. Captain, we've fought beside the warchief before...certainly we could help them with this."

Renault frowned a moment and furrowed his brow as he weighed his thoughts, making a decision. He pulled his glasses from his eyes and set them down on his desktop. A silent moment passed before he cleared his throat to respond, "Fine. I don't see why not. Esere, have Lieutenant Elsadorian speak with her contacts at

Falcon Watch.”

Esere nodded sharply to Renault, a full smile gracing her lips, before opening the door for Arkonn. Arkonn made a brief nod to both the Captain and the Vice-Captain and left the offices as quickly as possible. Once outside, he whistled for his talbuk. He had a few things to finish before he made for Falcon Watch, himself... at least to check up on things.

“Ah, Lieutenant Elsadorian, how good of you to visit,” Ranger Captain Venn’ren exclaimed as he noted Analeia’s presence with him on top of the tower of Falcon Watch.

“A pleasure, as always,” Analeia responded with a jaunty smile, “I am here on business.”

“As always,” Venn’ren replied, “But surely business can be talked about over wine?”

Analeia made a short laugh and sharp nod, following after Venn’ren as they translocated from the tower’s top to his office. She settled herself in a chair in front of his desk, and accepted the glass of rich-looking red wine that he poured. She eyed him over the rim of the glass, sizing him up and judging his mood.

“So, what important business brings you to the Hellfire Peninsula, Lieutenant,” Venn’ren asked after his first sip of wine.

“I’ve some... allies... making their way across the Portal, Ranger Captain, and they will be in need of a facility to settle themselves into,” Analeia started, deliberately leaving details out of her sentence.

“Send them to Thrallmar, then,” he exclaimed in response, his eyebrow arched in curiosity.

“The Blacktooth Grin would not be so welcome at Thrallmar, Ranger Captain,” Analeia countered quietly, laying her cards out on the table.

Venn’ren stopped and swirled the liquid in his glass a moment before shifting uncomfortably in his chair.

“You mean to say that you want me to make some space and facilities available for a band of generally lawless marauders,” asked, not bothering to leave the sarcasm out of his tone.

Analeia nodded silently, meeting and holding the Ranger Captain’s gaze levelly. He shifted in his seat again before motioning for her to continue. Keeping her tone matter-of-fact and level, she took her time explaining the benefits, and even the detriments of allowing a collection of orcs, tauren, Forsaken, trolls, and rogue Blood Elves into Falcon Watch.

By the end, Venn’ren was intrigued.

## Huizopotl

### *Meanwhile, in Blade's Edge Mountains:*

“...Pokes! How are you, brother?!”

Chief Zamarak enveloped the wizened troll in a crushing hug, his short, barrel chested body accentuated by the towering height of the forest troll in his arms. Pokes grinned down at him, his tusks protruding grotesquely, as he said, “Ah be well enough, brodda. 'ows tings 'ere?”

The two walked and engaged in lively conversation for a time as Zamarak gave Pokes a tour of Thunderlord Stronghold, pointing out changes that had occurred since his last visit. Trailing at a respectful distance behind their commanders were Zurven and Burnsauce, who remained silent as they bore witness to the sworn brothers.

“...and this is where our old wrestling ring was. You barely recognize it, I bet!”

Pokes nodded in earnest assent, honestly surprised at how well the Thunderlords had done for themselves in the Outlands. He continued following Zamarak on the tour until finally the orc called for a table to be set with food and wine in the courtyard for a mid-day meal.

As they sat and ate, and the time grew closer, a kind of tenseness overcame the meeting. They both knew that despite their personal relationship there was business behind this visit that would soon be broached. It was the troll who spoke first. “It be good tah see joo, but dere be bidness about dis as well. Ah be shore dat joo've received repohts about Grin advance scouts goin' t'rough de portah.”

The orc nodded tersely as he tore at a piece of talbuk flesh, and gestured with his free hand, “Yes. Thrallmar Intelligence sent a warning to us. Apparently a young officer at the portal has been defrocked for not recognizing two notorious members of your clan, and giving them wyverns.” The orc snorted in flat humor as he

reached for a cup of wine.

Pokes gave Zamarak a shrewd, sidelong look and reached for a tube attached to his belt. "...what a nobah an' selfless ting oh dem tah do, hikin' all de way up 'ere jess tah give joo dat info."

The Thunderlord Chieftain paused in his feast for a moment, a shred of meat comically hanging from his open mouth as he stared at Pokes in a moment of surprise. Suddenly, he erupted into laughter, his ears wagging in good humor.

"You always were a canny one, Pokes!" the orc stood abruptly, gesturing to his friend to follow as he left the courtyard into his hall. "Follow me, I have something to show you."

The two, trailed by their honor guard, walked into the hall and turned sharply into a small room clearly designated as an officer's think tank. Maps, reports, and assorted literature were jammed into every conceivable place.

Dominating the center of the room was a round table with a crudely stylized map of Outlands etched into it. The party took seats around the table, and Zamarak handed Pokes a small scroll that was once sealed with wax.

As the troll read, Zamarak studied his face for any clue of his thoughts, but discovered nothing beyond the troll's concentration, as evident through his pursed lips.

When the troll was finished reading, he remained silent for a time, collecting his thoughts before speaking. "Joo git lettahs challengin' joo like dis often?"

The orc cocked his head to the side quizzically, and asked "How do you mean?"

Pokes tossed the scroll to the table disdainfully and clicked his tongue, "Seems tah me a bit fohwahd tah impose demands on joo in joo own clan territory. But den, ah suppose dat be de crux oh de debate between mah clan an' Thrall's, eh?"

Zamarak stared at Pokes, his expression equally blank.

"I prefer to think of his 'commands' more as 'suggestions', especially given that the resources of the Frostwolf and Warsong clans are stretched very thin out here. You make a good point however, and it is one I have considered in the past."

As the troll opened his mouth, Zamarak raised his hand in protest. "Please brother, let's not go over this again. Regardless of my personal feelings, I must serve the best interests of my clan, and I do not believe that breaking away from the Horde does so. We should not fight this day."

Pokes pursed his lips again before saying, "Den we wont talk about dat. Ah get tah de point. Joo an' ah bot' know dat joo aint gonna attack de Grin, no mattah 'ow strong Thrall suggest it. Especially when our bidness 'ere be summat dat align wid de- 'ow joo say it? Best interest oh joo clan?"

Zamarak nodded his cautious interest, and the Amani continued.

Zamarak and Zurven watched thoughtfully as Pokes and Burnsauce rode off south down the pass, deep cowls pulled over their faces and any identifying insignias not in public sight.

When they broke line of vision as they turned a corner, Zamarak said quietly to Zurven, "Do you think I made the right decision?"

The witch doctor studied his chief intently for a few moments before carefully saying, "Pokes say de right words. If we dont stand togeddah, den we die separate. De Alliance aint gonna stop wid dem."

Zamarak glared at Zurven in clear irritation and stomped off towards his stronghold. Zurven jogged to catch up and asked, "What be wrong?"

The orc snapped at Zurven, "I meant, was it the right decision to not assist Thrallmar and Danath in crushing them once and for all!" the orc stormed away, the rawness of his emotion clear to others who quickly scrambled to get out of his path.

Zurven watched after his chief sadly, and whispered in troll, "I know what you meant, my friend. I know all too well."

As he left to prepare his unit for joint operations with the Blacktooth Grin clan, Zurven's thoughts were overcome with memories of his people, and the politics that left them at the mercy of their enemies.

## Cadrian

"There's been some fightin' 'mong tha Illidari. Nothin' too serious yet, but I thought it'd be worth mentioning," the Wildhammer scout reported, easily keeping his gryphon hovering a few feet off the ground. Kurdran, Thane of the Wildhammer Dwarves, absently tugged on his beard while he digested the news.

"The Naaru think they can breach the Temple with that goin' on?" Kurdran asked. The scout shook his head.

"Nay. Even with tha in-fighting, Illidan's goons outnumber X'iri's boys. His orders are ta keep up tha siege and that's wot he's doin'."

Kurdran frowned. "Bah! Strike when tha enemy's weak! Still, what A'dal says goes. Good work. Get back to the flight." He dismissed the scout with a brief salute and the scout reciprocated before urging his mount back into the sky around the Stronghold. Kurdran watched him rise up, his mind running over battle plans and maneuvers. He soon realized he was treading over old, stale ground and turned to a more interesting topic: the brief message he had received from his old comrade Danath Trollbane. The fellow Son of Lothar was heading for Wildhammer Stronghold, far removed from his own base in Hellfire Peninsula, apparently carrying dire news. Kurdran welcomed his old friend on any visit, but these days, he wasn't certain how much dire news they could still handle.

Grumbling darkly to himself about demons and windchimes that didn't know how to fight a proper battle, Kurdran trudged back across the Stronghold and into the Keep, hoping Danath would arrive soon to break the monotony of the endless siege.

The aging human did arrive soon, a few hours after Kurdran received his report from the front. He flew in on a gryphon, flanked by several bodyguards from Honor Hold. As the flight landed, every dwarf in the Stronghold stood at attention, sharing their Thane's respect for Trollbane. Danath gave the men and women of the base a salute and a bow, but did not waste time making for the Keep. Kurdran met him at the gates and the two clasped hands in a firm handshake, countless years of battle and fellowship between them.

"Danath, ya old relic! What brings ye ta me Stronghold?" Kurdran asked.

"Good to see you too, my stubby friend. Come, let's find a place in your Keep and we'll talk things over."

The two strode quickly into the large building, hurriedly followed by their retinues. Though outwardly they bantered and moved comfortably, Kurdran had tensed. If Danath did not want to waste time on talk, then the news must be dire indeed.

A few minutes later, they were settled deep inside the thick stone walls of the Keep and had waved off any bodyguards and attendants that attempted to linger. When they were alone, Kurdran leaned towards Danath across the small table where they sat and spoke quietly, "What's got ye so worried ye had ta come and tell me yerself, Danath?"

The man was silent for a moment, swirling the potent dwarven ale he had been given around in its mug. He took a brief sip of it before replying, "I was reached by some soldiers from my homeland, Kurdran. The Keepers of Stromgarde."

"A good thing, aye?"

"Aye, but the news they brought was not so good. You remember the Blacktooth Grin?"

Kurdran's face twisted in anger. "Oh, indeed I do. I remember the Grin we fought back in the Second, and I heard o' tha new Grin that tried ta make a mess a' Khaz Modan lately." Kurdran took a deep swig of his own ale and continued. "But they got beat when they tried to take Ironforge, eh? Bit off a bit more than they could chew?"

"I thought so too. The Keepers reported differently, however. The Grin survived, hiding in the Swamp of Sorrows."

Kurdran spat on the floor. "Bah! Then march on 'em! Tell tha Alliance or yer Keepers or whoever and stamp 'em out!"

"I did. The Keepers attacked Stonard to try and lure the Grin out and were successful in that sense. But..." Danath went silent, swirling the ale in his mug around again.

"But what?" Kurdran insisted.

"But the Keepers bore the old banners of Stromgarde. The banner of my family and myself. And they were defeated."

Kurdran's eyes briefly widened in alarm. "They alright?"

"The Keepers will endure and continue to fight. But the Grin know we live Kurdran, and I doubt they are happy to hear the news."

Kurdran slammed his fist into the table. "Then let 'em come! We smashed 'em once, we'll smash 'em again!"

Danath frowned and held up his hand to calm the dwarf. "Really? My men in Honor Hold are stressed to the limit, assisting with the siege of the Dark Portal and trying to fend off the Fel Horde at Hellfire Citadel. Yours are under near-constant assault here and also have to run supplies between Shattrath and X'iri's men at the Temple. The Sha'tar, the largest friendly army left on this rock, are split between fighting in Netherstorm, Terokkar, and virtually every other front. What force does Outland have to hold off a sudden influx of bloodthirsty Horde?"

Kurdran sobered and stared at his friend grimly. "Then what is your solution?"

"Azeroth does not face the same stresses our forces on Outland do. They can bring us the aid we need. Do you know of anyone back on our home who can come to help us?"

Kurdran thought for a moment, tugging his beard, and then grinned widely. "Aye. I can think of a few people raring for a fight."

There was little time to waste, so a few minutes after Kurdran finished writing his letter, Danath and his guards mounted back on their gryphons and prepared to lift off. The dwarf followed to see them off.

"Remember, that letter needs to be sent to Aerie Peak. My boys there will know what to do with it from there."

Danath glanced at the rolled-up sheet of parchment in his hand before carefully placing it in his bag.

"And you're sure they'll come to our help?" Kurdran nodded.

"Pretty sure. The Reveries have no love for the Grin and I'm sure they wouldn't want the Stronghold 'ere to get stomped."

Danath nodded. "Very well then. Let us hope that the next time we meet, one of us is carrying the head of the Grin's chieftain."

Kurdran smiled and gripped Danath's arm. "Aye my friend. That'll be a fine meetin'!"

Danath's flight lifted off and Kurdran watched for a few moments as they glided north. Eventually, he turned and shouted out to the compound. "Oy! How many of ya miss the days a' bashin' greenskins?" Every dwarf in the Stronghold, though wearied from constant siege, roared in agreement. Their Thane smiled approvingly. "Cause they're coming back again."

## Agholinn

"Venn'ren assures me that you'll be treated no differently than any other traveler here," Analeia assured Faquarl as she led the long stream of Grin into Falcon Watch.

"My thanks, Analeia," Faquarl grumbled in response, gazing with an odd sense of wonderment at the marble tower. What sense did having a tower of marble make in a place like Hellfire? It didn't make any.

"The soldiers of Suncrown have bled with the Grin in the past, we don't intend to stop now. Your luck seems to bring the best brawls to your doorstep," Analeia responded with a smile.

Faquarl nodded.

"Just don't forget about us after this, Faquarl," she finished before making a final salute to Ranger Captain Venn'ren and riding off.

## Mandeville

Mandeville eyed the notice inside Aerie Peak grimly. The priestess had been busy taking care of personal matters in the last few days, and she had not fully realized the magnitude of the situation with the Blacktooth Grin. The last she was aware, there were only scattered sightings in the Swamp of Sorrows, with no reports of real bloodshed.

"So they've pushed through the portal, then." Mandeville read the letter pinned below the notice. "That puts Honor Hold in great danger. And, if the Grin are able to escape Honor Hold's defenses, it will be that much harder to track their moves, which puts a lot more people in danger." Looking around, she noticed the decreased

number of guards about the Peak, and she scolded herself under her breath for not seeing it sooner.

She shuffled through her bags until her hand clasped around her hearthstone. Activating the now glowing runes, she prepared to be transported into Outland. She would attempt to speak with the commander there, what was his name? Trollbane, at least she thought. Her time spent in Honor Hold had not been extensive, giving no reason to remember his face or his name, and she wondered if she could expect to be given any of his time in such a situation.

## Bellmont

"It is easy to become comfortable with the enemy you know, Bellmont..." said Varimathras as he looked down at Bellmont, expanding his wingspan to its full length, most likely to attempt to intimidate the undead rogue.

"Stromgarde...if your reports from years past hold true, then they indeed are the familiar foe for Gorfrak's little warband." continued Varimathras, in his usual condescending tone of voice.

"Gorfrunch, sir," corrected Bellmont in a respectful yet uncomfortable tone, as if to express his irritation with such lack of respect paid towards Gorfrunch.

"Orcs... humans... elves... it matters little of their names. All too bland and similar names to truly remember." said Varimathras, more to himself than Bellmont.

"Perhaps that is because the Nathrezim's have no less than eight syllables per word." said Bellmont, muttering the words under his breath.

Varimathras glared, but then quickly moved back to the main point of the conversation.

"The Midnight Reveries... the fools who believe in the powers of dreams, I believe...they've been at war with the 'Grin' since Gorfrunch's little campaign towards the dwarves of Ironforge, correct, High Executor?" inquired Varimathras, only really asking to be told once again he was right.

"Yes, sir." said Bellmont, rolling his eyes.

"Good, we now know that you can at least remember what your reports say." said Varimathras, seeming to apply something.

"The 'Blacktooth Grin' have been valuable...." Varimathras paused for a moment as he searched for the right word, "...hounds of the Dark Lady. Killing members of the League of Arathor was also quite unintentional for me as well. And despite the fact that you, as well as past incidents, drove the Grin to such actions in the name of our people, we have rewarded them." said Varimathras, lifting up one large finger to keep track of what the Undercity had done to aid the Blacktooth Grin.

"Kept Orgrimmar passive and confused as to their whereabouts, sabotaged a good deal of Orgrimmar's vessels when sending that platoon to deal with what was left of the 'Grin' after the battle of Ironforge, and allowing you access to Deathstalkers, apothecaries, Abominations and Deathguards to aid in the business of the Grin," said Varimathras, searching his mind for any other favor the Forsaken may have extended the orcish clan.

"Yes, sir. All this is very much true. However you have pulled me far from my duties in both the Grin and the Forsaken for this little talk so I assume you have something more to say." said Bellmont, impatient to Varimathras' games.

"Outland currently holds no benefit to the Forsaken, the only reason we are even there are to 'strengthen' our bonds with the orcs and the other various foul smelling, bipedal beasts of burden who now fight with us," said Varimathras, with a chuckle upon remarking on the trolls and tauren. "And I will give you three days' time to give me, personally, a reason to continue to extend these rather costly favors to this war band if they are not benefitting us. Choose your allegiances carefully, High Executor."

Bellmont was dismissed.

## Vesytia

Bellmont begins to head out of the Royal Quarter. He quickly spun around when he felt the rasping of bony fingers on his shoulder.

"What is it?"

"Patience, discipline," grinned the blind Abbess.

"Ah, Archimandrite Vesytia, what a pleasant - if not totally predictable - surprise."

A grinning Vesytia replied, "Power, tenacity, respect, my dear High Executor. The third order of the Forgotten Shadow has surveillance power that nearly match those of your beloved Deathstalkers. I come here to extend an offer."

"Here to absolve me of past sin, to aid me with my path to greater undeath and purity?"

"Oh, Lords, no." said Vesytia. "All of my missionary work in Shattrath, dear Bellmont, is just more cloak and dagger work."

Vesytia let out a chuckle, and Bellmont rolled his eyes.

"I see you're wearing the tabard of the Senjin Village People now," he said. "I assume this is what it's about."

Vesytia feigned a look of hurt and surprise.

"Why yes, dear Bellmont, this is exactly what this is about. Mind joining me in my Cloister?"

The pair made their way out of the Royal Quarter, heading north towards the War Quarter.

"Castor and his band of operatives have a great interest in this war of yours. War means profit for a band of mercenaries such as us, you see."

Bellmont nodded.

"The Grin thanks Senjin Village People for their aid in past battles. The sting of your leadership not aiding with the assault on Ironforge is noted though."

Vesytia sighed.

"I agree, we should have offered you more support than just prayers and stolen weapons shipments from Theramore. Which, oddly enough, is what this is about. Apparently we have come into possession of several crates of weapons, troop movement orders and other highly sensitive documentation that fell off a cart that was making its way to Telredor."

She hooked two of her long spindly fingers in the air above her head to add emphasis.

"How much, Vesytia," Bellmont said in an exasperated tone.

"We're not goblins, Bellmont. I personally would give them away, since we were paid for that job, but Senjin Village People is a business, my dear friend. Have faith, it won't break your back."

Bellmont groaned.

"I'm rather busy Vesytia, make it quick."

"We know about your movement into Outland, and I want you to know that Senjin Village People will aid you in whatever means we can provide. Some of our operatives are feeling a bit bored with being hired goons for the Peacechief and his petty resource wars. We hunger for glory."

Vesytia bowed before the High Executor. "I must go now, Bellmont. Keep in touch, my dear friend."

The diminutive priestess and the Deathstalker parted ways.

## Faugarl

Maps were strewn across beneath a tent of Blood Elf design. Leaders of the Horde sat discussing the war thus far.

"The portal was messy, half-baked plan." Zamarak bared his teeth at Gorfrunch.

"They knew we were coming. The portal's defense was weak, it was thought that Honor Hold would be the same. It just proves Danath is as deadly an enemy as ever." Faugarl was chewing his tongue as he spoke. It had become a habit for him recently. It helped take the pain away.

## **One week ago:**

*The Horde had crossed the portal and began pushing to Honor Hold. Little did they know a defense was already set up to stop them. As Horde and Alliance rushed against each other like two rams clashing to prove their superiority, Faugarl saw the flux of Alliance elites. Much Too Much had entered the fray with armor that put most of the horde to shame. Faugarl braced himself for the side attack, firing wraths off into their numbers. A gnome warrior charged him with a sword nearly twice his size. Before the druid could react his left eye saw only red.*

"We've been battling for control of the towers for weeks. Their defenses are susceptible to another attack. Belmont tells me he found us a new source of men. This war isn't over." The warchief of the Grin spoke with an aura of finality but it didn't seem to appease the warchief of the Thunderlords.

"Whatever you all may decide, I want to press upon you the fact that Falcon Watch is not a bastion for war! You mustn't lead them here again!" Venn'renn had been yelling at them for the entire week for leading the Alliance to Falcon Watch. Medics were running amok inside the tower tending to the wounded.

Faquarl stepped away from the meeting. He had already given more than he wanted to this war. He would let Gorfrunch argue with the others. He walked out to one of the ballistae and lifted his hand to feel for his white, unseeing eye.

## Whispclaw

Whispclaw tipped the night elf courier a coin as he read the note that had been sent to him. He recognized his mentor's seal, and opened it curiously.

*A'rano*

*As you know, we have been very successful in persuading the Cenarion Expedition to see things our way and not the way of the Circle. This has been in no small part thanks to your efforts. Before negotiations can continue though, they need our help. Their outpost in the Hellfire Peninsula has reported aggressive attacks in the area by the Blacktooth Grin, who I believe you have experience with. The leader in Hellfire, a human named Trollbane, has requested all aid in fighting the Horde and protecting their home, Honor Hold.*

*Keep Trollbane alive and his home secured, and we may gain another step in gaining the Expedition's trust.*

*F. Staghelm*

Whispclaw's eyes narrowed. He had seen the keep at Honor Hold, it was in poor condition and would not last long against an assault. The outlook was grim, but he knew he had no choice but to be there. And not just for his mentor's plans, but for his own. If the Grin were there, his enemy would be with them.

## Adeou

Adeou sat on what had once been a tower of the northern garrison of Honor Hold. The endless battle with the Legion had reduced the building to rubble, and the most recent assault from the Horde didn't help, but the rest of the Hold still held.

Sure, the bodies of humans and orcs alike were strewn together by the hundreds. And even the honored Marshal Isildor's charred remains lay testimony to the force of the Horde; but in the end, they had held them off.

Adeou picked up his war mace, examining the thick splashes of blood and other fluids that ran down its shaft. Rather than wiping it off as he may have done in the past, he runs a finger down its length, collecting some for the joy of sampling its lovely aroma. The pungent taste of iron mingled with other saporous ingredients to produce a bitter-smooth flavor he once attributed to herb tea.

His attention drew to the dead around him, noticing a few unmistakable tabards. A smile drew itself across his face. He was most disappointed, for reasons his own, when the Blacktooth Grin had vanished after their assault on Ironforge so long ago. But there is no questioning it now; the Grin is back in force. And they brought friends...

He looked westward, in the direction of Falcon Watch where the Grin had both come and gone. He had to resist the urge to fly there right now. Soon, he told himself.

He left quickly for Aerie Peak.

## Esere

It was obvious that they weren't going to see eye to eye on this.

They marched back to Falcon Watch after the many-hour siege upon Honor Hold. The shouts and excitement all around her were victory enough, and the pulse of her heart still rang loudly in her ears. She kicked the talbuk's sides with her heels and pushed him into a fierce gallop toward the Sin'dorei tower.

Celebration was the first order. Amidst the chanting of the Grin, she stood to the side with two of the Suncrown guard.

"I think after this, I have to request some time off," Kallise murmured at her shoulder.

"You shall have it, Miss Kallise." Esere nodded to Analeia too, and they both quickly departed.

"Hail Chieftain Gorfrunch!" She called over the din, edging around the rowdy Grin as she approached the old orc. They exchanged words of congratulations and thanks all around, keeping alive the vows to support the other should they march to war again.

"If you have need, Chief, you shall have my help. And if Commander Venn'ren gives you any trouble...." she trailed off, smirking in the direction of the head of Falcon Watch, who was attempting his best to not panic as the Grin started dragging supply crates from their semi-organized piles to push them into feast tables.

"Not much that he can do now that we're here."

"But he is a Sin'dorei, and they have a tendency to whine."

Arkonn stepped near Esere's shoulder, slipping into their native tongue. "They came here seeking peace."

She drew in a deep breath, beating back down her less civil words. "You must carve out your own space of peace with your own hands." Just the edge of her vision was dedicated to watching the huntsman, even as her expression betrayed nothing of their conversation to the nearby orcs, tauren, trolls, and Forsaken.

Arkonn rubbed the back of his neck, not nearly keeping his emotions so in check. "This is not Azeroth."

"I am *well* aware," she stressed, "of the differences between the Outlands and Azeroth. When you run out of land here, you fall into space instead of drowning." She turned, looking at the duel between a particularly rowdy pair of tauren.

Just slightly behind her shoulder, he continued, "They do not want war."

"Then they are free to leave, Arkonn. You managed it." This conversation was going nowhere, but he would not beat her on the moral high ground.

"They are my friends."

"And you had no right to bring Miss Fiora into this battle."

"I cannot control her," Arkonn sighed, also noticing that the young noblewoman stood on the other side of the gathering and tried to look uninterested in conversation with the Forsaken that had approached her. "I'm protecting her."

"You protect her. You protect them. You cannot control her. You cannot hope to control them." She turned to level her eyes at him, meeting his eyes for the span of several heartbeats before she called her windrider to her side and took to the sky.

## Eleryn (KoS)

Eleryn leaned heavily on her staff. She had not left Trolbane's side in a week since rumors of the Grin's attack first came to her ears. She had been there when the Grin and their allies had come crashing into the Keep.

"There are Suncrown rogues in the buildings! They're everywhere! "

The first shouts of the battle, and soon enough Eleryn and her fellow guards would be battling off a handful of blood elves. But shortly after this nothing. Nothing for hours, till they finally broke through.

The Keepers and friends had been pushed into the Keep itself and the Grin made full advantage. They stormed to the top and entered the heart of the Keep, where Danath himself stood. Eleryn's attention fell on a Forsaken rogue, and she began hurling bolts of frost at him, attempting to freeze him. With remarkable skill he avoided her magical attacks, until he was feet away. Seeing the wretched grin on his face, Eleryn fired one last bolt at him, which he failed to dodge this time. Freezing his legs to the ground, several guards rushed into claim him. But he was not done yet, but with ease, he freed himself from the ice and vanished. One failed attempt. One of many to come. And Eleryn stood by Danath's side for all of them.

But now the battle was over, Danath was alive, Eleryn's gathering of men had not been in vain. She stood by the paladin Auralaas, saying nothing. They both knew the Grin would try again. And they'd be waiting.

"Well done, Lady Eleryn," the holy warrior said. "Go, take your rest, you need it. May the Light bless you."

She thanked him and left, only to relive the battle in her troubled dreams.

## Bellmont

### One day ago:

Bellmont rolled out of the way of the warhammer as it slammed the ground near him. The paladin raised her weapon to strike at him again, and the sythegar evaporated into shadows as the warhammer neared him. He appeared behind the paladin on his feet and drove his longsword through her.

She let out a silent cry, calling to the Light to heal her. But it was too late - with a swift jerk of his left hand, Belmont drew the longsword out of her body and decapitated the paladin, putting an end to her desperate prayer. He faded into the shadows as a new wave of Midnight Reveries, Keepers of Stromgarde, and other soldiers from various chapters of the Alliance's more courageous guilds came from the main gates of the hold.

The troops' advance was quickly shortened by a sudden wave of ice and snow that swept them up and threw them to the ground. The archmage Shadiel's incantations brought down razor sharp blocks of ice from above and thick waves of snow and frost from all directions.

The Alliance's soldiers began calling to each other, trying to regroup and charge from this magical blizzard, praying for warmth and an end to the frozen onslaught. Sephris answered such a prayer. As Shadiel's spell came to an end, the soldiers were greeted with an incorporeal dragon. A blast of flame engulfed and charred the members of the charge that had survived Shadiel's frosty bombardment.

Bellmont rushed over to Warlord Faquarl, leaping up and in mid-jump sticking his dagger into the neck of one of Faquarl's many attackers, dragging him to the ground and garroting him in one swift movement. Faquarl morphed into his moonkin form and bashed one of the Alliance's soldiers into the air with his newfound strength. Belmont grabbed the soldier in mid-flight and whipped him down upon the garroted body of the previous attacker.

"Warlord, any word on how Suncrown fairs in their assassination plot on Danath?" inquired Belmont, watching wearily for any more attackers.

"Not well...it seems the Alliance knew of our plans," said Faquarl.

"Perhaps one of the Reveries' visions, or glorified educated guesses." Belmont said, in a partially sarcastic tone.

Faquarl and Belmont both glanced over to their left upon hearing a familiar cry.

"GET ON YOUR MOUNTS, YA GITS, AND CHARGE FROM THE SOUTHEAST!" hollered Gorfrunch, mounting up with the remaining parts of Suncrown's contingent.

The rest of the Horde war bands did the same, flying around the walls of Honor Hold to its flank and charging past the guards. The sheer number of the Horde's cavalry trampled the Alliance's now meager rear defenses. Leaping off of Bayne, Belmont made his way into the keep with the rest of the army, cutting down various Alliance in his way.

Out of the corner of his eye, Belmont saw Gorfrunch locked in a battle with a paladin. Instinct driving him, Belmont shoved various members of the raid out of the way, whipping blinding powder into his Chieftain's face, and bashing the paladin on the head before knocking him unconscious and kicking him down the staircase into the cellar.

Bellmont vanished into the shadows before Gorfrunch noticed Belmont's seemingly unprovoked treachery, the angered orc wiping the dust from his irritated eyes and looking around for his opponent. He gave up after a few moments and turned his focus to the raid.

"CHARGE!!! STRAIGHT TO DANATH!!!" bellowed Gorfrunch, knocking down several of the war band's members as he rushed to the head of it, running up to the command center.

The advance was soon cut short by Marshal Isildor and a group of elite Honor Hold bodyguards.

"Men...it's been an honor to fight for you. Bring up the barricades on Danath's rooms... make sure he lives to see the end of these foul barbarians," said Marshal Isildor, as he began chanting some guttural words.

Though Belmont was sure Gorfrunch and the others mistook Marshal Isildor's final order for a war cry, he was given pause out of respect for the Marshal. Self-preservation quickly jolted him to action.

"HOLD YOUR GROUND!!!" ordered Belmont.

A good number of the war band's raid members turned their attention to this Alliance hero and were

overcome with bloodlust. The entire Horde turned their attention to him and began rushing at the now fluorescent Marshal Isildor.

The Marshal empowered himself with the Light as he saw the coalition of death charge at him. His muscles tightened and he began to rush into the fray. He lifted the sword he had taken from the armory and began to cut down as many Horde as he could. As they began to overwhelm him, Isildor listened to the noise upstairs. The chaos around him seemed to die down and the sounds of Danath giving orders could be heard. They needed more time and Isildor planned to die for them to have it.

He rushed Gorfrunch himself and locked blades with the orc. Both were aptly skilled. Isildor caught the old orc off guard when suddenly he was hit from the side by four blasts of ice. The mages smiled as Felora, in cat form, slunk in for the kill.

The Horde barreled its way up the stairs only to find the Alliance completely regrouped around Danath. The two armies clashed once again within his chamber. After thirty minutes of intense combat, the Horde began to buckle beneath the Alliance's renewed fervor.

“RETREAT!” ordered Belmont to the remainder of the raid.

“DANATH WILL DIE TODAY ONE WAY OR ANOTHER, SYTHEGAR! DO NOT-” Gorfrunch’s counter order was interrupted by Faquarl.

“CHIEFTAIN! Too many have died and we’ve yet to reach Danath’s position. If we continue on this path not only will you end the Grin but you will doom our allies. I will NOT allow this to continue,” cried Faquarl.

Gorfrunch stood in parallel to his stood officers, as if ready to strike at either at them in a fit of anger. The old orc growled and twitched, eventually giving a reluctant nod at Faquarl and Belmont and making for the exit.

“TO FALCON WATCH!” yelled Faquarl as the raid began retreating, leaving Honor Hold with a commander, but with ground warm with blood with both supplies and men.

### Six hours ago:

“If I questioned your loyalty, Belmont, I would have long ago dealt with you. You are not the one in question. The one that is, Gorfrunch, has been quite annoying of late. Under your request we picked up the Grin when they were down and bleeding, and your chieftain repays my efforts with what, almost killing the youngest of Windrunner blood? By almost killing my sister’s son?” inquired Sylvanas, looking down upon the kneeling Belmont.

“My Queen... he did not know he was the nephew of your Highness, I assure you,” said Belmont.

“Perhaps. Do you, Belmont, think that would have made any difference in his actions if he had known who he fought was Arator?” asked Sylvanas.

Belmont stayed silent for a few seconds.

“No...” said Belmont quietly.

“As I thought. This chieftain of yours has yet to speak with me personally, send an emissary or even so much as nod at us. The Grin was useful in the past – however, now they are becoming a thorn in our sides. Another thorn we cannot afford at a time like this. Do not think that the funds that keep Thrall’s eyes blinded would not be welcome to support our growing operations in Northrend,” said Sylvanas, motioning to Belmont to rise.

“Yes, my Queen. I will make sure that Gorfrunch makes no such mistakes once again.” Belmont said, standing and bowing.

“Good,” Sylvanas said, running the side of her finger along Belmont’s cheek, almost causing the undead rogue to faint. “Do not forget where your loyalties are, Belmont.” She nodded at Varimathras to speak.

“Upon this orc’s next folly, I will confront this fool personally.” Varimathras said with a laugh. “You are dismissed...High Executor. Now get back and put a leash on your warchief before I put a noose around it.”

### Sillen (M2M)

Sillen tossed the parchment back to the table from which she had picked it up with a huffy pout. “Who does he think he is? Did Fordragon’s stellar reconnaissance fail to notice our presence at the last two attacks on Honor

Hold?"

"Calm down, Sillen, your anger accomplishes nothing," her wise elven companion soothed her, eyes not lifting from his sewing table at their Stormwind apartment.

"Even now, you are still repairing the damage to my robes from the last battle! Perhaps we should send him the bill for the materials?" Sillen watched as Birr applied another patch to her fine silk robes, blending perfectly into the rogue-torn gash as though it were never there. The over-confident mage had yet again found herself entangled with some of House Suncrown's finest assassins, and she had only barely escaped with her life. Not easily riled, Birr ignored her borderline-treasonous comment.

"Your energies would be put to better use by gathering what men you can find on this short notice and portaling them to Outland. We do not have much time to prepare, and we are under contract as you know." Sillen sighed, inwardly admitting that as usual, he was right. Myzari's contract negotiations with the Highlord had gone well; Much Too Much would be paid a hefty sum for their services. Convenient that Bolvar was reaching out to them now. Where was his precious army two days ago, or the week before that? What had changed that they were needed now?

"I think I will see if Mene is available to go... early. Something is amiss, and I don't like it."

"Do not endanger one of our premier assassins. Gorfrunch and his warlords would anticipate that maneuver, and Falcon Watch is too small to risk such a plan," Birr scolded her, finally looking up. Sillen frowned, then rolled her eyes. She began to focus her energies on Ironforge, opening a rift in the arcane energies surrounding them to teleport herself.

"Fine. Make sure those robes make it to Shattrath with you later; I'll be needing them."

### Easton (M2M)

Easton pointed at the stripling undead warrior, who shook his head in confusion and slavered some unintelligible gibberish. "Who...has...sent...you?" the mage said again, slowly, shrugging his shoulders to indicate a question. The beast shrugged back, but seemed to have nothing more to offer. "My nation fell to this", Easton said in despair, indicating for his elemental minion to see to the death of the monstrosity, an execution soon aided by the two paladins who accompanied him. Easton strode from the basement and quickly made his way to the gates of Honor Hold's keep.

"It was inevitable," murmured Sillen, beside him. "They can kill anyone, if they are not defended," agreed Menelek." Easton shook his head in disappointment, regretting the loss of Trollbane, yet another of the heroes of the Alliance. Fordragon would not be pleased, and their cut of the pay would be reduced. What's worse, Myzari would be displeased. Easton resolved not to be present when the mercenary leader discovered their pay would suffer as a result of their inattention. It was past time to be gone from the decaying outpost in Hellfire, anyways.

It had been a well-fought battle, with Falcon Watch and its commander being similarly decimated, followed by a number of attempts at the well-guarded town of Thrallmar. Success was not to be theirs, however, and the deception was quickly discovered as word came that Trollbane was under attack in Honor Hold. Yet another disappointment.

Striding to his gyrocopter, Easton began to turn the fuel crank, levering a foot across the strut to the clutch. Stretching his other arm into the air, he began the spin of the rotors, and pulled the starter with his teeth. He was rewarded for his efforts with a face full of soot.

Not for the first time, he longed for his gryphon. He reached to the engine, and began to turn the fuel crank again. One of these days, he would buy some runes of portals and get back to the easy way of getting around. Until then, he would content himself with the whirr of gnomish engineering, and make his way slowly back to Toshley's Station and commence repairs on his robes and ride.

### Bellmont

Bellmont shook with anger and fear. The others around him cheered and rejoiced, victory at last, and Danath Trollbane now was face down in a small pool of his own blood, as were many other Alliance soldiers.

Indeed it was hard to traverse Thrallmar without stepping in the fluids of some dead Alliance attacker. However, this mattered little to Belmont. Anger brewed within his soul. In a clear act of treachery, Belmont had

given Gorfrunch a detailed warning as to the intentions of Sylvanas if Gorfrunch incurred her wrath once more.

It had been laughed at, and thrown back in his face. Gorfrunch was even overconfident enough to suggest killing Arator, the nephew of Lady Sylvanas. The only reason Arator had been spared from such an action was Danath Trollbane's death.

These relatives were not his own; it mattered little to him if Alleria died. She was but an acquaintance he had met many years ago towards the end of the Second War and never seen since. Sylvanas, however, wanted her sister very much alive, regardless of her loyalties.

For a brief moment, Belmont felt a sense of righteousness. Let the old orc be a fool! The very thought of Varimathras snapping Gorfrunch's neck gave him a rather blissful feeling of retribution. But his manic thoughts subsided quickly.

Bellmont's loyalty to the Grin was unquestionable, and why he could not willingly allow its destruction. If Gorfrunch was killed, it would be like the days of the Shattered Guard - all of the officers squabbling, trying to take what power remained for themselves.

And in this world that would surely mean doom for the Grin in general. He would prevent Alleria's death - and by extension Gorfrunch's - and that of most of the Grin's higher ranking officers, even if it meant risking his own life.

At this point, it mattered very little. He sat down in the Thrallmar in and began writing in Common, thinking of who, perhaps, in the Alliance would actually allow the Grin's spymaster to meet them alone. To be brought behind the walls of a city and given an audience with one of their heroes.

He stuffed the letter in his bag, all but finished save for the address. He'd search through the census of the Undercity and the Grin once more. There had to be but one member of the Alliance who would be trusting enough...hopefully.

## Zurven

### **One week ago:**

Zurven wandered the battlefield, lost and distraught. He has witnessed his chieftain die before him, then set upon a funeral pyre, as were his last orders. Zurven Raptorbane, Warlord and Witch Doctor of the Thunderlord Clan, felt he had nothing more to live for. He stumbled into Falcon Watch, bleeding from various wounds while dragging Machette with him kicking and yelling.

"LET GO OF ME RIGHT NOW ZURVEN! I WILL NOT BE TREATED THIS WAY! WHEN I GET OUT OF THIS I WILL-" Machette fell limp, stunned by the blow to the head by Zurven's shield.

"Don joo eva stop talkin?" Sighing, Zurven summoned an earthen shield around Machette, keeping the shadowy priest subdued.

"Brudda!" Zurven looked up to see Pokes come running up to him. "What happened?!"

"We were hit hard, we lost too many...Zamarak...he's..." Zurven choked on the words, unable to finish the sentence.

Pokes nodded. "It be ok, Zurven, Ah'm here fa ya." He noticed the torn and tattered Thunderlord tabard then looked up at Zurven. "Joo would be betta in black, brudda." Pokes held out a black tabard to Zurven who smiled at the other shaman.

"Heh...fear da grin...brudda."

## Gorfrunch

"Fool orc! I may not be part of your damned war, but I know my way around a battle. You need subterfuge to take down their leader, charging headlong into their prepared defenses is no way to -"

Venn'ren's lecture and Gorfrunch's snarled retort were both cut off by the arrival of a panting blood elf scout whose uniform couldn't be made out under all the dirt caking it. His clipped salute could have been for either commander.

"Sir! They followed! There's a huge force coming right this way, both airborne and on the ground. They've swung around to the north face!"

"Ready a def--" Both Gorfrunch and Venn'ren stopped as their words ran each other over, then turned to

face their respective subordinates and began issuing frantic orders to prepare the battle-weary troops scattered around the burning Falcon Watch plateau.

“We have only one choice, Chief. There are no friendly bastions here, and unless we mean to retreat with pursuit back through the Portal and take hiding back in the swamps, we must convince them to shelter us.”

Venn'ren shot a glare of pure hatred at the two Grinners as he frantically sent pleas for assistance through a sending stone, two attendants looking extremely worried, and the scrying pool next to him blank. Gorfrunch's calculating eye, ignoring the blood elf commander, slipped past Jo's blood-spattered face, to Hellfire Citadel, then he silently shook his head, took his hand off a flare gun at his side, and looked farther on to Thrallmar. All the while, the remainder of the Warmonger forces still fighting formed a circle around the spire Gorfrunch, Jo, and Venn'ren stood atop of. They wouldn't last long. They hadn't.

“So be it. Sound the retreat.”

The call for the retreat went out, and wyverns spiraled down to the tower just as a squad of Alliance mages leaped off their own gryphons and filled the top of the spire with a flood of fire and ice. Gorfrunch leapt for his wyvern, and Jo flew off the roof, as Venn'ren turned and had half his face cracked open with a bolt of frost, and the other melted to oblivion by a fireball. The rest of his body stood, half frozen to the ground, the other side hanging, melted and steaming.

Wary Thrallmar guardsmen looked down over the ramparts upon the exhausted Warmonger forces huddled up near the wall. They looked battered enough, but the hundreds still far outnumbered the garrison. They hadn't fired yet, but any one of them looked ready to pick up their weapons any moment.

Nazgrel stepped out of the barracks, flanked by Thunderlord emissaries talking in both his ears, indecision plain on his face as he barely listened to the flood of words coming from the tauren and Forsaken. The dust from the new arrivals was beginning to settle, but another dust cloud was on the horizon. He paused, and looked to the gates, with refugees flooding inside. Standing in the center of the gateway, just outside, was the leader of the criminals himself, flanked by a bannerman holding up the despised teeth and two Forsaken wearing similar uniforms. The orc raised his axe in an almost mocking salute. Nazgrel looked again to the dust cloud.

“Let them in. Double my guard. Get some of these refugees armed; that cow over there doesn't look too bad off. GET THESE CATAPULTS TURNED AROUND!”

Skirmishes continued along the Legion front, but the bulk of Thrallmar's forces turned southwest as a flood of Warmongers spilled in the gates. Nazgrel silently counted the years he had lived, and gave thanks to the spirits for them.

Gorfrunch abruptly stopped scanning the horizon, and focused on the black bulk of Hellfire Citadel. If his scouts were correct, the Alliance were gathering in its shadow for their third strike...maybe this wasn't the time for defense after all. Maybe this was an opportunity.

“Squad leaders, regroup! We're getting out of here and hitting 'em while they're scattered. This may be our only chance! GET MOVING!”

Orders flew across Thrallmar, with the garrison looking confused, and many of the refugees and local adventurers let up a ragged cheer, and ran to whatever banners they could find, ready to take the battle to the enemy. A knot of shamans tending to wounded outside the inn muttered among themselves.

Gorfrunch smiled as he saw his units forming up, and unholstered his flare gun. He raised it, fired a blood-red flare, and then issued the order to march. An answering flare flew up near the Alliance forces.

Bodies fell off the black ramparts, thudding into the red dirt in the shadows below, fel orcs picking apart the dead, looking for anything they could salvage or eat. The battle had been quick - Warmonger forces flooding the entrance and flying in to flank the spindly line of Alliance along the outside of the fortress. Their forces had been completely unprepared, still tending to wounds, when the column of fel orcs had stormed out of the Citadel at the same time, catching them in the rear, and creating a complete death trap. Warmongers in front and to the side, and fel orcs to the rear, and the only way out was for those who could call their gryphons in time.

“Danath stopped us once before, but now we've caught his defenders in the open, his fortress lays lightly

defended. Move.” The order quickly spread to the rest of the forces. “Too bad that blood elf didn't live to see our success. Jo, lead the charge. I'll see you over Danath's corpse.”

Bellmont stepped forward. “Chief, where're you going? Why aren't you leading the charge?”

“My business is my own. I suggest you round up your Deathstalkers and get a more exact look at the defenses, Sythegar. Move.” Bellmont looked ready to protest, but a second look at Gorfrunch had him moving off, shouting orders even louder than normal. The army began flooding off the ramparts, by land and by air. Groups of fel orcs were disappearing back into the Citadel, having stopped fighting when the Warmongers were about to push through the last of the Alliance gathered there.

Gorfrunch readjusted his armor, getting questioning looks from the last of the Grin taking off. As soon as they were well on their way, he ducked around a corner and disappeared into the Citadel. A few minutes later, Sharpfur was galloping as fast as he ever had, covering the distance as quickly as his master could get him to.

Despite the retreat, cries of victory sprang from the Warmonger forces as they were chased out of Honor Hold by an even more ragged band of Alliance battling with even more fury than they had when Trollbane still stood. He had gone down fighting, and even now, a group of priests had had to hold him back when he attempted to spring out of bed with one completely mangled arm and a heart on the verge of stopping forever.

Their inability to hold Honor Hold's keep was small injury to the Horde's spirits.

Hellfire Peninsula was theirs.

### Strongbeard

Bodies were strewn all across the Keep in Honor Hold. Two men had arrived from a command post north of Falcon Watch upon hearing the news. They saw the flag of the Alliance at half-mast and feared the worst. Now inside the keep, it was verified. They went into Danath's war room and saw a dwarf medic tending to the bodies. Sitting in a chair above was Arator the Redeemer, his youthful visage caked in his own drying blood.

"Where is...his body?" The more decorated of the two men asked and began to choke up tears. The Horde was becoming an unstoppable beast that had evolved from a dying clan. Things were not meant to end this way but at this point, there was nothing anyone could do.

"Who do ye mean lad? I have a lot of patients, unless yer blind. I also have very little time, so hurry yerself up, aye?"

"Danath! We're here to claim his body."

"An' why in the nether would ye do tha'?" Arator stood up and walked to the human, oddly enough he had a worn smile on his face.

"Trollbane survived. He is in an infirmary downstairs. He has many broken bones and a collapsed lung but Isildor's sacrifice put an ancient protection on him. He is a lucky man to have such loyal men."

"Aye, Isildor was a bright one, he was. Daftest man Ah ever saw fer what he did, but he did it."

The two humans quickly ran outside to the infirmary. Bodies were all over the Hold from the Horde's first siege, but the general feeling was that of hope. The hope that was nearly snuffed out by the Horde was now blazing brightly. The two men ran in to the infirmary and rushed to a nearby nurse.

"Where is he?"

"In there." The two men walked to the designated door and opened it to see a weakened Trollbane lying in bed. Though looking as old as ever, he had a smile upon seeing his visitors. The two men began crying and embraced the hero gently.

"Galen...Jerome...I'm glad you're alright. Listen...the...the Horde may appear unbeatable to you now...but many believe I have...died. The Horde...will be overconfident...and this will be their downfall. Warn the Sons of Lothar of our...defeat. The Alliance will take the time to strike. Terrokar will be the final resting place of the Horde."

"And what of you, Commander?"

"I will take my time to recover...the Horde haven't won as much as they think."

### Tuhan

"Damn them."

On the newfound wings of the stormcrow, Tuhan flew over the smoking battlefields of Hellfire Peninsula. Nothing, it seemed, had been spared. Smoke rose wherever the druid's keen avian eyes looked. The smell of blood, fresh to his feral senses, was that of mortal beings rather than the acrid scent of demon blood that normally tainted the Peninsula. The light of mid-day gave no respite to the dying, and cast few shadows for those in hiding.

But the forces of the Grin had taken their retreat. The Alliance, having spent their fury on Falcon Watch, had fallen back to Honor Hold. Bladefist had returned to his Citadel. All seemed to be licking their bloody wounds.

Sounding a screech, the stormcrow that was Tuhan Stonehoof circled to the ground.

By the time Tuhan was aware of how much time had passed, the sky had already darkened to evening. The hours had been a blur of small skirmishes, healing, and work. He'd prowled alongside a group of wounded and disillusioned Sin'dorei pilgrims until they reached Falcon Watch. Once there, the tauren had helped with the healing of the injured until he was drained - then called upon the Earth Mother to innervate him and returned to his labors.

There was nothing the druid could do for the alternately frozen and charred corpse of Venn'ren.

Energies finally drained, the tauren returned to the field. Stragglers were helped to Thrallmar or Falcon Watch. Those of the Alliance who, craven, thought the aftermath a good time to prey upon the weak or wounded...they instead faced the wrath of bear or cat. In one thorn-tangled ravine, Tuhan spied a fallen night elf - knocked from her mount during the long battles and near death from the fall. Her allies would be unable to reach her before the nearby ravagers tracked the scent of fresh blood.

The blazing end that Tuhan granted the kaldorei, encasing her in starfire, was far more merciful than the teeth of the ravagers would have been.

That night, the druid sat at the fire of the Mag'har in their outpost above the Temple of Telhamut. Tuhan was known to the Mag'har, revered for the tasks he'd undertaken for the clan in Nagrand. Sitting around the common fire of the outpost, he shared bread and meat with Gorkan Bloodfist.

"It's the demon blood, I tell you," Gorkan said, "Hellscream may have freed the orcs that fell under that curse, but it was still a blood curse." The Mag'har orc nodded, "Blood will tell."

Tuhan silently bit into the haunch of roast boar. As he chewed, his tongue worried the place where a molar had once been - a tooth he'd given to Gorfrunch so long ago it felt like another lifetime. If not for the missing tooth to prove the memory was his own, he might have ascribed it to one of the lives he so often saw from other eyes. The others past.

"Perhaps," the tauren offered, then looked up into the streaked and star-filled night.

He snorted, and shook his head slowly. "Broken. So many are broken."

## Chapter 2

### Esere

"Thank you, Knight Greyseer." The Ranger General weighed the gold chain in his hand, his grief showing plainly on his face. The magister and regent did not so obviously show their sympathies. Halduron looked at the other two men briefly; they nodded in some vague signal before the General left the room.

"Knight, you knew the Alliance would not turn a blind eye to the fool hardy attempt on the Trollbane," Rommath spit out, the air around him shimmering with magic.

"I did not."

"How could you not? Are you as ignorant as these orcs we have allied with?"

Esere stood in silence, head bowed as it had been the moment they agreed to see her. Regent Theron raised his hand and the Grand Magister glared at him before stepping back and checking his anger.

"Thank you again for your returning Captain Venn'ren's badge of office," Theron started slowly, tasting every word before continuing to the next. "Rumor had it that you and several others had been scavenging our fallen brethren, but I am glad to see that it was only a rumor."

Again, she stood silent, her emotions calm and thoughts quiet. They stared at her waiting for her to say something. Anything. But the silence stretched on by the minute.

Finally the Regent Lord sighed, "You are free to--"

Esere cut in, "I request that no more pilgrims leave to join the Prince until Falcon Watch is no longer under the scrutiny of Honor Hold and suitable accommodations built to hold them."

"You request--?" Rommath once more began only to cut his words off short as Theron stepped forward.

"Do you wish to cut off our Prince's reinforcements, Greyseer?" Theron sneered at her.

"If any more leave this city before then, I will not be there to bury them, Regent. I would no more see our Sun King go without then you would. But until suitable defenses can be constructed, those Sin'dorei will never venture beyond Hellfire alive." The neutrality faded from her voice. "I beg of you, Regent Lord. Let no more of our brothers and sisters march to find their death."

All three gauged one another as tension sang in the audience chamber.

"I will leave reconstruction to the next to lead Falcon Watch, Knight Greyseer. As well as deeming if additional guard is necessary." Theron nodded to a scribe, sending the robed youth scurrying to fetch parchment. "I assume that the Blacktooth war band will be leaving Falcon Watch."

"They ride already, Regent Lord. Their business in Helfire has concluded."

## Burnsauce

Burn stood with his younger sister, Ghanima, in Falcon Watch, watching as blood elves quickly worked to repair the damaged outpost. It had been a few days since their victory and Burn couldn't help but hold a large grin on his face, despite his bottom jaw hanging on by a few strands of decaying muscle.

"Sssso Danath iss dead?" Ghanima questions her brother. The shadow priestess was not part of the assault, as she was more concerned with the protection of her homeland of Tirisfal than this new onslaught of war in Outland.

"Yes. It was really quite remarkable, Ghanima, you should have been there." Burn said in a proud voice. He conjured a small flame in his hand, snapping his fingers closed, watching as the fire dissipated. "I should have burned the remains to make sure."

Ghanima scowled at her brother, furrowing her brows. "Why do you fight this pointless war, brother? Our allegiance is to Sylvanas, not this warmonger of a warchief. Return with me to Tirisfal, help defend our lands - this is a perfect opportunity for the Alliance to attack our home and reclaim what they feel is theirs. It is our land now!" Ghanima's voice was rising as she spoke, and her last words were filled with passion and vigor, veins straining from her neck, as if she had flowing blood.

"They are my brothers now, Ghanima, I owe them my life. When this assault on Outland is over with, I will return with you to Tirisfal. I have my own debt to settle with Renault." Burn attempted to reason with his hot-headed sister, shaking his head. Ghanima chuckled.

"Dear brother...when will you let that go? You were a human then, and those vendettas should have died with your human life. Renault and Kel'Thuzad are no longer of your concer--" Ghanima attempted to protest but was quickly cut off.

"I decide what vendettas I hold and drop, not you! Those two ruined my life, and I will suffer for eternity because of it. I will not rest a wink until I have both of their heads on a plaque! You are so quick to forget your human life, little sister, have you forgotten what Renault has done to you?" Burn said in a condescending tone, talking down to his little sister. Ghanima burst into shadowform, infiltrating Burn's mind with a mind blast, sending him several yards backwards and off his feet.

"You are just as bad as Renault, Sephris. You destroy innocent lives for the sake of another's cause." Ghanima released her stinging words, said in a tone cold enough to pierce even a dead man's heart. Burn looked toward the ground in disappointment.

"I have somewhere to be, Ghanima. We will finish this argument later." Burn hopped onto his wyvern, flying towards Terrokar.

"Sephris..." Ghanima whispered as she hung her head, regretting her painful words. She moved back

toward the Dark Portal.

## Eleryn (KoS)

It had only been a few days, and already the Alliance was showing its teeth and might to the Horde. They had attacked and ravaged Falcon Watch and had apparently made attempts on Thrallmar, against the advice of Eleryn. She had remained in the Keep, with Danath.

After she had left her Lord's side, things had turned bad and his death had been reported. But magic works in strange ways, and thanks to the sacrifice of some random man, Danath was safe. And Eleryn was grateful.

In order to prevent further attempts on Danath, Eleryn had not left his bed side. She over saw everything that went on, what the priests did, what he drank and ate. Nothing happened without her being there to see it. Nothing.

On the third day of her vigil, Danath finally acknowledged her presence.

"I'm not a child, you know, girl. I can fare well enough for myself." He spoke roughly and slowly.

Eleryn hardly looked at him, "Be still or you'll tear your stitches." She waved her wand, gently pushing the struggling man down again.

"There'll be more like this." And he watched Eleryn closely.

"Of course there will be, it's the Grin."

He cut her off. "No, more attempts on heroes, on the figures of the Alliance."

More silence. This hadn't occurred to the mage. Who would they strike next? She stood up suddenly.

"That's a good girl, go find the others." She knew that he meant, "Make sure they're safe."

And with that Eleryn set off to look for the other great heroes of the Alliance. Alleria was first.

## Bellmont

The cold mist of Terokkar Forest gave Belmont's face a slight chill as his gyrocopter drifted through the night air. Landing the strange machine on a hill overlooking Allerian Stronghold, Belmont began a running jump toward the city, a good distance away.

As he jumped, Belmont activated his parachute cloak. Hidden in shadow by a dark cloud blocking the light of the moon, he landed on the top of a human tower toward the corner of the stronghold. Sneaking down the winding steps and exiting the tower with relative ease, it was clear that Belmont had indeed chosen the ideal time of night to deliver his message.

The town was quite sleepy, as most are in the dead of night. He silently approached a paladin, wearing the raiment of judgment, who tensed up and looked around.

"Hello?" the paladin whispered, glancing around with his hand on the hilt of his blade.

"Evening, Arator," said Belmont rather casually, coming from the shadows behind him.

Arator whipped around and thrust his blade at Belmont, who leapt to the side and gave the blade a good shove, causing Arator to fall onto the ground.

"You've grown quite a lot since the Second War. Some level of training you've had but you still have a bit to learn. You most likely don't remember me, but that's not important." Belmont said.

Arator swung at Belmont's legs. Belmont hopped up and stepped on the blade with one foot, holding it to the ground while kicking Arator in the face with the other.

"You really think if I was here to kill you I wouldn't have already done so, Arator?" asked Belmont, lightly stepping on Arator's throat and stealing the blade away from him.

Arator grabbed at Belmont's foot and shoved him upward, causing the undead rogue to skyrocket into the air. Belmont, however, twisted and landed on his feet, clearly somewhat annoyed with this consistent barrage.

"You're one of the ones who attacked Danath. I don't know how you know me or why you're here, but you won't be for long," said Arator, rushing at Belmont.

Sighing, Belmont shot his hand out, catching Arator by the throat and lifting him up. "You're a fool, you know. I'm the one who sent the letter, you idiot. I wish to save your mother." Belmont lowered his hand and Arator to the ground.

Arator rubbed his throat but stayed his blade. "Really. So why am I not to believe this is some sort of deception?" he asked, glaring at Belmont.

"You know, I've saved your life twice now, you really should be a bit kinder. I'm assuming you're aware that your mother, Alleria, is not an only child, correct?" inquired Belmont, leaning against a tree.

"Doubtful. But I'll listen - and yes, I'm not a fool." Arator held his blade toward the ground but refused to sheath it.

"I would expect such a pedigree to not produce a simpleton. I am a...emissary from Alleria's sister, Sylvanas, Queen of the Undercity." Belmont said, bowing.

Arator blinked. "On what terms...and why do you not see my mother personally?"

"For two reasons. The first mainly because her reaction would most likely be the same as yours and a bit more effective. Second, because I am not coming for the purpose of an alliance, truce, trade rights or even so much as a family reunion. I come to warn your sister of impending doom." Belmont said.

"Really?" Arator tilted his head, clearly in disbelief.

"Yes. You remember the assault on Honor Hold that led to the assassination of Danath Trollbane. Well, the next heads that the chieftain of that clan wants is yours and your mother's. I managed to convince him that you weren't worth the effort. Your mother, however, he wants dead," said Belmont, drawing his finger across his neck quickly to emphasize the last word.

"I don't have much problem believing that. I've heard Gorfrunch's name before. He is spoken of with great fear and hate. But why go here? What do you have to gain from this?" asked Arator, still suspicious.

"Me? I have nothing to gain. But you Alliance tend to see us Forsaken as monsters; we have feelings too, particularly for our families, regardless of their opinions on us. Sylvanas still loves her sister, Arator. The wrath that would be brought down upon her murderers if she were to be killed may be more than you can fathom. And as a trusted servant of the crown, I am attempting to keep my queen happy, by keeping your mother alive."

"I believe there's more to this than you're telling me. Where are they planning to attack?" asked Arator, sheathing his blade.

"Here. The Horde rides to Allerian Stronghold to kill your mother."

Arator grinned at the rotting undead.

"My mother has been missing for years. The Alliance will be waiting for you. Guards!"

Belmont cursed at the sly bastard and vanished to return to the army. If Arator was smart, he would leave. The mysterious disappearance of Alleria worked to his advantage.

## Bobwhite (TGC)

*Far from Outland, in beautiful Azshara, a meeting was taking place at Freelance HQ...*

"Balbanes, old friend!" Bobwhite Fritzsprocket reached up to shake the paladin's hand. Balbanes removed his helmet, revealing a grey mane and a travel-weary face.

"Hello Bob, it's good to see you again." Balbanes smiled warmly.

Bob motioned towards some seats near the windows. "Have a seat, have a seat." It was a sunny afternoon in Azshara, and the sunlight filled the top room of the tower. The gnome warrior took a deep puff of his cigar, and blew out a thick ring of smoke, relaxing in the chair. "I know you don't have a great deal of time, Balbanes, so why don't we get down to business, eh?"

Balbanes nodded. The Midnight Reveries warlord's face became serious. "As you have seen for yourself these past weeks, we are at war." He shifted forward in his chair. "And although I know you have chosen not to get formally involved, I have come to ask you to fight for the Reveries. The Blacktooth Grin have great numbers, and help from many others."

"So..." Bob hopped out of his seat and took a few steps away towards a globe. It was a globe of Draenor. "You want my services on the battlefield? You're hiring me?"

"Yes." Balbanes stood up as well. "I could have hired a larger mercenary force, but I think you and your associates would be more effective..."

The gnome took another puff of his cigar. "I'll accept."

"You will?"

"Of course. The Blacktooth Grin have been running on for too long, Balbanes." Bob smirked. "I've been

itching for a chance to kill some manaheads too."

"The elves? You sound bloodthirsty, Bob. I hope you will keep your cool when it counts. Because I'm counting on you."

Bob turned and stared Balbanes in the eyes. "My hands ache with bloodlust, yeah...I will fight in your battles, but make no mistake...I'm not going to give my life for the Reveries or their war. I fight for myself."

Balbanes let out a sigh. "... As long as I can count on you on the battlefield, Mr. Fritzsprocket. It's a deal then?"

"It's a deal. I will join the Reveries in their battles against the Grin and their allies..." Bob spun the globe of Draenor. "... and I'll have Gorfrunch's head."

## Tuhan

On stormcrow's wings, Tuhan flew in the skies of Terrokar. From the holding of Skettis, he flew over Allerian Stronghold.

Movement. Too much movement. He spiraled down for a closer look.

Warlocks on the towers. A rogue swimming in the moat. Tuhan flew over Allerian Stronghold daily as he helped the Skyguard in their fight in Skettis...and he'd never seen this much Alliance activity.

He sensed the mark of a guard on his back, felt rather than heard the tensing of a bow.

"Too close, fool," he thought to himself. A few strong wingbeats took him out of range of the Alliance. Northwest, to Stonebreaker Hold.

As he landed at the Hold, it was a mirror of what he'd seen moments ago. Too much. Too many. The Grin. Suncrown. Mounted and on a war footing. Suddenly it made sense.

"Tuhan!" Zurven, once the Witch Doctor of the Thunderlords, wore a tabard of Grin black. He called out to the druid as Tuhan flew into the hold. "Come join us, mon."

"I don't agree with th' Chief's war," Tuhan said, "I can't. But I won't stand in your way, either."

A terse nod from Zurven, "I understand, mon."

Before the tauren could reply, the call to ride rose. Zurven, along with the rest of the force, rode out of Stonebreaker on a road Tuhan knew led to Allerian Stronghold.

It only took a moment for Tuhan to shift into a stormcrow and make up the distance.

"Be wary," Tuhan struggled to speak in this form, still new to him. To be heard over the thundering hoofbeats. Even if Zurven heard him, would it make a difference? "They're on th' towers. In the moat."

"They're waiting."

## Bellmont

"Excellent news, High Executor. You have once again reassured my faith in your skills. Though I am a bit disappointed as to the lack of information on my sister," said Sylvanas to the kneeling Bellmont.

"Even her son knew little of her whereabouts. Where she is I cannot say, though if I learn more I will inform you immediately, your Highness," said Bellmont.

"Good. But this chieftain of yours may still become a problem. I'll be asking you to keep an eye on him and report your findings. I intend to meet with this Gorfrunch personally," said Sylvanas, motioning for Bellmont to rise.

"Very well, my Queen. I believe his other tasks will be the elimination of the other veterans. With Alleria and Turaylon missing, I believe that means only Kurdan and Khadgar still remain, and the latter sits at the foot of A'dal the Naaru. Thus I doubt it will be a problem," said Bellmont.

Bellmont left the Undercity with a grin. If he was lucky, Alleria wouldn't turn up in any more incidents, and Arator was likely safe. Though the battle at Allerian Stronghold seemed to be utterly pointless.

There was something driving this war forward that wasn't of the normal means. Though it was obvious Gorfrunch had begun the fight with the Keepers of Stromgarde and stumbled onto Danath's forces, something seemed... off.

There was something else that was to be obtained from this war other than dead veteran's heads and the usual spoils of war, and Bellmont would find out what it was, and if necessary, take it. The Grin could still be useful to the Forsaken, if Bellmont played his part.

## Derken

Derken sat in the back of the World's End Tavern poring over his latest find. The book described the destruction of Draenor in detail.

"Sir! I have word from the Portal!" The young elf from the Kanoste Hyanda Agarwaen seemed quite upset.

"So, the demons broke through the blockade then."

"No! A group of Horde came through to Outland and assaulted Honor Hold! They are now here in Terrokar! It is assumed Allerian is their next target!"

Derken's ears perked up and he shut the tome. "What would Thrall want with Honor Hold? There's nothing there...unless..." He looked up at the messenger, eyes giving away his feelings of fear. "Did they say anything? A war cry?"

"Yes sir!" the messenger awkwardly tried to speak in the language of the attackers, but relayed the information.

"Rally the knights, anyone available! Now! That's not the war cry of Thrall...the translation is, 'fear the Grin!' The Grin does not stop in one push; that is not their way." Derken pushed past the messenger at a full sprint and rushed in to the city streets beyond.

Derken arrived in time to view the aftermath of the battle at Allerian. Riding his gryphon he surveyed the battle site just outside of town.

"So many deaths..."

As he took the view in his ears perked to some distant sound.

"They are enjoying this." He reared his mount and headed over the hill to get a view of Stonebreaker Hold.

"What is your next move I wonder?" The jutting pain in his shoulder told the tale. The bony hand out of the corner of his eye twisted slightly sending further shocks of pain through Derken's body.

"Damn!" The gryphon reared at the extra burden and took to the sky. Derken began to feel the poisons covering the blade enter his body as the gryphon continued to rise. As the wings lurched, the extra weight descended to the river below and Derken took the blade from his shoulder.

"I was a fool to think...it's over..." As Derken began to fade his mount changed course. Derken's mount slowly flew back to Shattrath carrying its burden.

## Zurven

"FEAR DA GRIN!"

The charge across the bridge was called when Zurven came pounding up to the rest of the group on his raptor. Taking a quick glance around, he knew he was going to be busy. Hearing a roar, he saw Ashenrock charge into the Alliance forces. Zurven placed an earthen shield on the druid just as a fireball exploded on his shield, knocking him to the ground. Flipping his shield to his back, he quickly worked his way to a orc with a few arrows in his leg. "Hold still. HOLD STILL!" Zurven grabbed the orc and quickly yanked out the arrows, purging any poison from the wound. Ripping some netherweave from a larger piece, he bandaged the wounded area. "All set. GO!" Smacking the orc on the side of the shoulder, he ran off to the next casualty.

"Fall back to the tower!"

Growling, Zurven hefted an unconscious blood elf over his shoulder and jogged back to the old tower. Laying the elf on the stone floor, he crushed some earthroot in his hand, waving the pungent herb under the elf's nose. "Coom on, back ta da livin world witcha." Stars exploded in his vision as something clubbed him from behind, and he felt two daggers bite into his sides. Unable to move or focus, he could feel the daggers digging deep, multiple times. Shaking his head clear as he felt the blessings of nature's guardian touch him, Zurven brought his shield up between himself and the rogue. Just as he thought he was done for, Sparticus came barreling through the crowd, cleaving hard down onto the rogue and smashing it where it stood. Quickly sending out a chained nature energy to himself and Sparticus, he grinned at the orc. "Good job, now get back in der!"

As the fight continued, Zurven fell to a knee, gasping for breath. "Cova me, ma energies be spent!" Moving as best he could, Zurven clambered behind the stone wall to replenish his mana energies. "Da Grin be needin' help," he murmured to himself. Closing his eyes, he placed his hand on the ground, seeking the mind of an old friend.

"Chieftainess Twalktuleeni, can ya hear me?"

"Zurven! What is wrong?"

"Da Grin be needin a hand, can ya spare soom troops?"

"I will make the call myself, we will see you there!"

"We be regroupin' at Stonebreaker hold, meet us der."

"On our way, Witch Doctor!"

Opening his eyes with a grin, he laughed lightly to himself. "Haven' been called dat inna while..."

Grabbing a quick mouthful of food and water he jumped up to the broken wall, tapping into his inner bloodlust.

"WITNESS DA BLUDRAGE O DA GURUBASHI!"

### Sillen (M2M)

"They're attacking from the rear! Defend the west entrance!"

Battle-weary yet determined, the defenders of Allerian Stronghold leapt back into action. They quickly filled the gap in the town's defense, supported by gryphon riders above. Near the back of the crowd, Sillen stood at range and sent blast after icy blast of frost at the advancing enemy line.

Suddenly, out of the corner of her eye, she swore she saw the shadows bend to the will of a stealthed foe near the center of town. Sure enough, an Allerian commoner wobbled moments later, temporarily incapacitated by the rogue.

Sillen beckoned to Menelek, who was nearby and stealthed himself. The two pursued the traces of the hidden rogue, wondering what he was after. Or whom. Alas, all they found was a lone shaman attempting to heal himself behind a building. Mene closed the distance on him quickly and saw to his demise. The pair shrugged and returned to the front lines, but Sillen's thoughts remained on the rogue. *What are they after in this tiny town, anyway? No major leaders here, not exactly a strategic location with Stonebreaker so close by...*

The next day, Sillen found herself again near the Stronghold, thinning the giant spider population in search of a rare type of silk for Birr. She paused atop a small hill to refresh with some glacier water and gazed to the south. The walls of Auchindoun rose in the distance, the sky above twisting into a spiral of clouds and nether dust. The usual assortment of creatures lurked mindlessly about the massive structure. Sillen focused her vision on a few in turn - a carrion bird, a scorpion...and then she saw them.

The spiders forgotten, she whistled for her nether ray and ascended. Staying as low as possible without being seen, Sillen quickly approached the Horde envoy. There were only two or three visible, not necessarily enough to be a band of adventurers attempting one of Auchindoun's treacherous halls. They moved quickly but constantly glanced behind as though they expected to be followed. Because of this, Sillen couldn't get close enough to distinguish a tabard. The envoy disappeared into a doorway. Sillen nudged her ray over the walls, trying to find them again on the other side. When she still had not several minutes later, she extracted a gnomish communication device from her bags.

"We need surveillance at Auchindoun. There are Horde here with ill intents yet unknown. Request four to six hour shifts; need stealth detection and maximum protective gear."

*We'll get to the bottom of this,* she thought, eyes narrowing in a final sweep of the temple before she flew back towards Shattrath.

### Zurven

Wounded were littered all over Stonebreaker Hold when all was done. Zurven wandered the many cots and beds, treating them as he went. Purging poisons, setting a bone or two, changing out the bandages and letting those that were too far gone a painless release to the afterlife.

Wiping his hands as he walked out, he looked at the night sky, wishing that he were back in Kalimdor,

back in Shadowprey Village with his wife and daughter. With a sigh he whistled to the skies for Godehsi. As the windrider padded up to him, he pet the beast's mane. "Ah know, Ah'm feelin homesick too mon, les take a ride, see iffen we can shake dis mood eh?" Shaking its head, the beast growled its agreement. "Les go mon, da element o air be havin company."

Laying back in the saddle, they flew over Terokkar, heading to Nagrand. Zurven closed his eyes as they passed over the Ring of Observance and suddenly went limp, his eyes glazing over white as a spirit trance took hold of him.

He was down in the ruin that were supposed to be beneath him just moments ago, his dagger and shield out and ready. As he settled himself into a fighting stance, a glowing female figure appeared before him. Dropping his weapons, the troll kneeled before the figure.

"Eonar, Titan o healin an life wat can dis humble shaman do fa joo."

"Zurven, there is an artifact that must be retrieved. Your chieftain, Zamarak, he sought this item for use of his own, I need you to take it and protect it, for it is truly a healing artifact."

Bowing his head, Zurven stayed on his knees, not daring to look at the titan before him. "Dis humble shaman will do as joo wish."

"You must act quickly, for the Alliance have gotten word of this artifact already, you must get there before them."

Zurven blinked as he looked around the skies him and Godehsi were hovering in once again, the vison passing. Shaking his head to clear his mind, he nudged the flying beast towards Falcon Watch, knowing he would have a few people to take with him to the ruins.

### 2 hours later:

"Why do you always drag me along for these types of travels, Witch Doctor - you know I don't deal with anything that is light or healing anymore!"

Zurven glared back at Machette. "One, because joo get yaself in trouble normally. Two, Ah need ya shadow arts ta cleanse it. Three, Ah'll steal ya lowa jaw agin. Four, because Ah said so. Any odda questions?"

The undead gulped as the troll's angry eyes burned at him. "Yesss sssir!"

Zurven, Machette and Zurven's old friend Sidicus, a Thunderlord, rode to the ruins. Zurven trusted these two with the information he had shared about his vision, but he knew he would have to report all this to Jo or Gorfrunch soon. Dust rose from their mounts as they pounded across the Bone Wastes.

"Alright, ya blue skinned elf, where is this trinket you were talkin' about?" Sidicus grinned at Zurven.

"We'll have ta find it, ya pug faced orc." Zurven grinned back, the old friends bantering insults.

"Alright, ya big nosed human, I trust ya, but there better be some fightin."

The old shaman tested his axe's edge. "Go boil ya head, ya dwarf lovin gnome." Zurven threw a water globe from his water shield at Sidicus. Laughing, the orc dodged it.

"I just bathed last month!"

The three quickly made their way to the bottom of the ruins. Zurven stopped and placed a hand on the ground, closing his eyes. After a few seconds he nodded to the west. "Dat way, by da crypts."

Nodding silently, Sidicus followed closely, dragging a silently protesting Machette. Zurven stopped quickly, ducking behind a piece of wall. "Pinkies..."

Grinning wolfishly, Sidicus drew both his axes. "Come on elfie boy, let's make sure you haven't lost your skills."

Winking at Sidicus, Zurven turned to Machette. "Joo two go, Ah got ya covad."

Machette clicked his boney fingers together with glee. "Anything to kill again, Witch Doctor." With a slight gust of shadow, Machette slipped from view.

Three figures were seen guarding the crypts' entrance. Suddenly one grabbed his head, yelling in pain. He fell to the ground as an orc came barreling in, axes gleaming in the moonlight. The three Horde jogged into the entrance, stepping over the dead bodies, and ducked around the corner.

Zurven spat on the ground. "Hakkari curse it, dem three were jus da minnows outta da school." A

makeshift base had been set at the entrance of the crypts.

"We can take them, elfie boy." Sidicus nudged Zurven, grinning. As much as he wanted to, Zurven shook his head.

"We do dat an oddas will coom lookin fa dem, we need more ta get dis "trinket" joo call it."

Grunting, Sidicus nodded, knowing what Zurven said was true. "I'll speak with Lady Twalk. You know I wouldn't miss out on a fight, elfie boy."

Grinning, Zurven turned to head out and tripped over a dwarven guard.

"SKOLDE! SKOLDE! SKOLDE!"

"Move it!" Zurven yelled as he kicked the dwarf's head in. Slamming down flaming totems, Zurven and Sidicus called for their fire elementals to fight, keeping the guards busy.

"Dat was too close."

"Agreed, but next time remember to look down, ya blue skinned elf."

Laughing, the three flew out of the ruins. Zurven flew hard to the Grin hideout. Machette headed to Brill, and Sidicus to the Thunderlord Stronghold - all three reporting to their respective superiors.

### Bobwhite (TGC)

*Under the dark skies of the Bone Wastes, Bobwhite Fritzsprocket converses with two figures...*

"Suspicious confirmed, Bob. Something is going down at the ruins..." Another gnome, a mage, speaks.

Bob lifts an eyebrow. "Auchindoun?"

"Yeah, but I couldn't get close to see what was going on without being spotted. Had to cloak out." The mage grunted. "Wish I could join ya Bob but..."

"Don't worry 'bout it. You've got more important things to take care of I'm sure!" Bob let out a chuckle, and gave the mage a jab to side. "Careful with those Fel Reavers, alright?"

"Haha! No promises." Energy formed around the mage's hands as he motioned them, and a portal appeared. He began to step through the nether, but stopped halfway and turned to Bob. "One more thing... Shrader wanted to speak with you. He said you'd know what it was about."

Something lit up in Bob's head. "Ahhh yes, yes."

"Well, try not to get yourself killed, Bob." And with that, the mage disappeared and the portal closed.

"Auchindoun...I wonder why? Or what?" The tiny warrior opened up his pack and pulled out his spyglass. He peered into it and gazed thoughtfully at the ruins in the distance. "I wonder..." He put the spyglass away, and climbed atop his mechanotrider. "I better meet up with the Reveries' troops. A storm is brewin'."

### Sidicus

The old shaman walked down the halls of Thunderlord Hold quietly, his mind lost in thought, the chain links of his armor rattling with each step. He had already reported to Twalktuleeni, his new chieftainess, telling her most of the details about the scouting mission with their former witch doctor and was now mulling over the events of the past few weeks.

He glanced to his left to see several fresh recruits trying to shoot arrows at straw dummies set up for them, and missing terribly. At their head Steelwater gave words of encouragement as Grimgrin threatened to "leave these poor excuses for archers in Shadowmoon to fare for themselves." At that even Sidicus had to chuckle, knowing that Grimgrin would protect even the newest of recruits with his life if need be.

"Lok'tar, Sidicus!" Steel waved happily as she caught site of the shaman.

Grimgrin turned to look at the orc as well and gave a grunt. "Throm'ka friend, what brings you to the training halls?"

Sid walked in and looked over the recruits. Each of them stopped firing as the old orc entered, their attention on him; some showed fear of the old shaman in seeing the many scars on his features and the two great axes at his side, his appearance more that of a warrior than a shaman.

"Train them harder, we will need all we can get in these upcoming days, my friends." Steel and Grimgrin both nodded and the expressions on the recruits faces turned to frowns as Grimgrin turned back barking commands and the arrows from the recruits started to fly again.

Steel kept her attention on Sid. "Are you ok, taskmaster? You seem...distant..." She let the sentence end at that.

Giving a weak smile, Sid nodded to his close friend. "I will be fine, Steel. Concentrate on getting these recruits into Grunt shape." At that Sid pounded his chest in salute to the two other taskmasters and turned from the room, heading back down the hallway to his private chambers.

He walked into the room and turned around, closing and barring the door behind him. He looked toward the center of the room where four wooden poles stood, each one inscribed with runes to represent each element. The battle shaman slowly and carefully removed his helm, gloves, pauldrons and heavy chainmail hauberk and placed them neatly into a nearby pile. He then removed his two war axes, crossing them and hanging them on the wall before moving into the totemic circle.

He sat cross-legged in the center, placing his bare hands on his knees.

"Spirits of the elements, I am in need of your guidance. Recently too many attacks have happened to be mere coincidence. The Alliance is becoming bolder in their hunt for the Grin. Our clan has suffered great losses, the most recent the fall of our chieftain Zamarak. Many of our number have fallen in battle or left our ranks with the chaos sewn with the loss of a leader." Sid paused, choosing what to say next carefully.

"Twalktuleeni is a strong tauren and a good leader. I believe she will lead the clan to the greatness it once knew - though she, like any leader, will need guidance. Our witch doctor is now with the Grin, a choice he made consciously and one I am not against. We all must follow our own paths. What must be done to protect the clan? What is best for the Thunderlords?" As he finished his plea, the totems each began to light with their respective colors and Sid closed his eyes, going into a trance and listening to the elements.

When he awoke, the glow from the totems subsided and he gave a nod, walking back to his armor. Putting it on once again, he moved to the door to find his chieftainess again. Before leaving, his eyes darted to the robes he had worn to wed Zurven and Bezaria.

"I hope you know what you are doing, old friend. I will stand beside you even if the clans do not." With a grunt he pushed the door open and moved toward Twalk's personal room again, to report to her what the spirits had relayed.

## Willowleaf (TGC)

Willowleaf's paws felt heavier than usual. With each slow step, the bear labored more to lift her claws from the ground. Finally overcome, she lifted her head and roared at the stars, "Who stops me in my path?"

"You cannot take this road yet, my child, my Willowleaf," said a familiar voice. Willowleaf bowed her head once before looking up at her goddess. "My Willowleaf, soon you can sleep and rest, but not yet. I need you to gather your forces again. Go to Auchindoun..."

Willowleaf opened her eyes and slowly stood. She sighed. She wished nothing more than to sleep in her den, deep in the hills of Moonglade. Reluctantly, she changed out of her bear form and clutched her hearthstone. A few moments later she was back in the city of Shattrath and soon flying south to the Bone Wastes.

She landed and switched instantly from her purple stormcrow form into a cat. She could feel the little creatures slithering around her, snakes whispering of the warmth of the ground nearby. They told her two sun lords had arrived and left the land warm, the snakes were gathering to that spot to lie on the heated sand.

Impatient, Willowleaf pawed at one of the snakes' heads, pinning it to the ground while the tail flopped around helplessly. "Make sense! Or at least show me where these sun lords were," she growled at it. As soon as it was released the snake slithered off to hide from the cat. Other snakes were moving and Willowleaf followed them to the crypt entrance. She could see scorch marks near the entrance and many more snakes bathing on the sand. "Elementals?" she thought, "Shamans attacking this place?" The truth dawned on her and she changed into the purple stormcrow again, flying fast back to Shattrath. As she flew she called to the mind of Oakblade, telling him all she knew. His response was muddled to her and sounded concerned. Concentrating she relayed the message again, forcing herself to speak and understand in elfish instead of bear...

## Faquarl

"Bellmont, come over here." The Horde had settled in Stonebreaker after the recent loss at Allerian.

"Yes sir?"

"I have heard some interesting information from Vesya."

"Oh?"

"Yes, it looks like your scouting trips have repeatedly sent you to the Undercity..." Belmont immediately tried to vanish away but Faquarl got him with a faerie fire. Belmont then threw dirt in Faquarl's face and dived into the shadows.

"Get him!"

Crunch and Ashenrock charged Belmont, pinning him against a building. Faquarl rubbed the dirt out of his eyes and threw another faerie fire on the rogue. "You warned the Alliance about us going after Alleria. You BETRAYED US! You disgust me. You have lost your usefulness."

Faquarl began charging a starfire, but Zurven rode into camp. "There be sumtin you should look at in Auchindoun..."

Faquarl stopped. "What is it?"

"There be some bad magic in da ruins. Sometin' powerful."

Faquarl nodded. This was something to check immediately. He looked at Belmont.

"Watch him. I'll be back."

Faquarl mounted up and rode into the ruins of Auchindoun. Zurven was right. Something was here, he could *feel* it. He began shifting some debris when he felt a sharp pain hit the back of his head.

All immediately went dark.

### Sillen (M2M)

Sillen looked on, bewildered, as Willowleaf approached with the prisoner. Immediately, some of the other soldiers amassed at the Tomb of Lights moved to attack him. Oakblade intervened, "Stand down! He is *not* to be harmed. We need him alive for the ritual!" His subordinates begrudgingly obliged, sheathing their weapons and instead growling menacingly at the incapacitated druid. Sillen recognized him at once – he had led the attack on Allerian Stronghold only days before. Frost itched at her fingertips as she too fought the urge to unleash her rage on the tauren who'd ordered his elite stealth squad to take out her love. Birr had survived his wounds, but was still recovering in Shattrath. Kritz and Menelek had a difficult time convincing her to leave his side this night.

"It is time. Come, into the temple," Willowleaf beckoned to the assembled raid. Quickly emptying the sacred grounds of its ethereal intruders, the Grim Covenant prepared to start the mysterious ritual. The summoners donned their scarlet robes as the prisoner was placed into the center of their circle. Sillen turned to face the entrance of the hall, ready to defend against the impending attack. The ritual would require time to complete; she only hoped these few brave souls could hold off the bloodthirsty Horde long enough to seal the evil relic.

"Here they come!" Someone at the front lines called out.

"Prepare yourselves – we make our stand here!" Oakblade readied his troops. Sillen and her fellow mercenaries exchanged glances, mutually unsure their defenses would hold. As the first line of defenders fell, she had a glimpse of their attackers through the open doorway...they were vastly outnumbered. Sillen called upon the deep frosts of her native Dun Morogh and silently prayed for a quick and painless end. She unleashed a mighty blizzard into the advancing enemy line, but found her enchanted words frozen in her mouth as a priest forced her tongue into silence. Then she heard them, behind her...the stealth squad was targeting the summoners one by one. The druid in the center seemed to come more into his senses as each fell. With a final burst of cold, Sillen tried to slow the druids and rogues...and then they turned on her. Her cloth robes did little to dull the blades dripping with poison as they tore into her flesh. Crying out in pain, she fell to the temple floor.

As the waves of agony washed over her, she tilted her head to see what had become of the ritual. Her heart sank to see all the summoners lay unconscious or dead on the floor. The prisoner was now fully aware of his surroundings and followed his rescuers out of the tomb. They had failed, she realized as her eyelids grew heavy. She let the light wash over her as she left her earthly form.

"Oh no you don't, lassie!" A dwarven priest stood over her in the Shattrath orphanage. Birr, still wrapped in bandages but sitting upright, breathed a sigh of relief as Sillen gasped for air.

"Not today. Your time has not yet come; we have much to do," he said, gently kissing her forehead.

“What happened?” Sillen inquired, struggling to speak. Her sides ached with many dagger wounds.

“They left the Tomb in a blood lust and overran Allerian Stronghold. It was lucky they left as quickly as they did, or the healers might not have reached all of you in time. After they razed the Stronghold, they set out north into the marshlands.”

“But what of the...” Sillen cringed in pain as she tried to sit up. Birr shook his head.

“I’ve already had them followed. If an opportunity strikes, we will seize it.”

## Jonn

Not far off, Jonn watched a tauren pin Belmont to the wall of a crude, domed building as two other Grinners relieved the man of his weapons. It was not uncommon for Forsaken of high rank to be given difficult assignments overseas and beyond when their views began to conflict with those of the crown. In fact a good many northlanders in the service of the orcish Horde were currently on "extended loan" from Lordaeron.

But if it were true that Bellmount had been a spy, it would draw Jonn's own "mission" into question. If they had considered Jonn such a disruptive influence, why would the Queen and her supporters on the council put them so close to another obviously important mission? Not for the first time he felt the absence of his friends and allies of his homeland. He would have to be extra vigilant to see if anything of use to him could come of this event.

## Esere

She didn't notice when the lamp had begun to flicker. Only when the only light in the room winked out did Esere notice the dark. The dead of night in Silvermoon had become a friend, one she was growing more familiar with.

Her side project had seen no progress in days. There *had* to be a location for the war-weary Grin to lead quiet lives. She'd spoken with Bellmont about the biggest problem with finding the Warband a new home: it needed to be defensive.

Standing from her desk, she cursed as she ran into the corner of it as she searched blindly for a candle.

She had begun to suspect. Her faith in those she served was unwavering, or it had been. Now she doubted, now she mistrusted. The absence of her Captain on some emergency had marked the limit. She must stay.

It took several tries to compose the letter excusing herself from the escort. The Vice-Captain was offering so many false pleasantries as of late that it was instinct. *The warchief would not appreciate them*, she mused as she finally sealed the parchment. Miss Analeia would serve more than effectively during Esere's absence.

Heaving a great sigh, she blew out the candle and let her exhaustion finally beckon her into sleep.

## Faquarl

Faquarl opened his eyes. It was the first thing he noticed - he had both eyes again. His memory was all a blur as he fervently looked around him. He wasn't in Terrokar but in a similar location. He was home. He was in Desolace.

*"I can bring you here."*

Faquarl looked around at the sound of the voice. There was no one in sight, until he felt a rumble below his hooves. It was a familiar rumble of his childhood. He looked up a hill and saw hundreds of centaur. He quickly turned about and saw a hundred all-black tauren assembling. The two armies charged forward with Faquarl in the middle. Faquarl was just about to jump aside when he saw a familiar face wearing the chieftain's headdress of the tauren. It was his own.

*"I can bring you back to glory."*

Regaining his senses, Faquarl began running out of the basin he was in. The ground was shaking as the two hoofed war bands made their way to each other. The sounds of hatred and death soon followed as the armies collided.

*"I can end war and lead you to peace."*

A jolt of pain went through Faquarl's spine and he was suddenly woken up in a brand new setting, his

right eye once again dead to him. His left eye was blurred but the noises told him enough.

He was not alone.

Alliance were everywhere. The old tauren snarled and rushed blindly at the sounds, only to be shocked painfully again. He twisted on the ground in pain. Deciding to let his vision clear he saw what was containing him. Enchanters adorned with red were surrounding him by forming themselves in a pentagram. They fused their magic together and created a field of energy around him. Faquarl was familiar enough with the centaurs' crude practices to know what was happening.

He was being prepared as a sacrifice.

A few hours had passed with nothing to note. Alliance leaders babbled to each other with many pointings at Faquarl. They also held a map of Auchindoun which intrigued him. The air was getting harder to breathe as the cultists were finishing their spell. Faquarl's time was running out. Soon his time with the Grin would be over.

Suddenly, the temple shook loudly. The Alliance began barking orders and their warriors grabbed their gear.

Another loud boom. A cultist misspoke a word from the chant and the energy field around Faquarl weakened. Their leader, a night elf adorned with enormous plate armor, smacked the cultist in red. They continued chanting more fervently than ever.

A loud crash told him that something had broken down and roars could be heard above. Within minutes, massive amounts of orcs, trolls, and undead came pouring down the stairs destroying everything in their way. In the middle of the chaos Gorfrunch walked peacefully. He pointed at Faquarl and yelled out.

"Kill them casters!"

Rogues came out of the shadows behind Faquarl, led by none other than Bellmont. The two met eyes briefly as Bellmont led them to kill the cultists. Within minutes the operation was complete and the Horde exited the temple. Faquarl walked away from his cell, now free from the containment. He walked next to the warchief as if nothing had occurred.

"We need something from Auchindoun." The old orc nodded.

*"I can end war and lead you to peace."*

The last words of the disembodied voice had been repeating themselves in Faquarl's head since his escape. Gorfrunch had sent Arkonn and Yalim with Faquarl to the ruins of Auchindoun to find out what was releasing so much energy there. Yalim was the first to catch Faquarl up on missing events.

"Bellmont struck a deal. After you went missing he claimed to know where you were. Zurven told Gorfrunch about why you left and it was decided you could not die yet."

"Well, I appreciate that. What were the boundaries of this deal?"

"Bellmont gets to live, of course. But I am sure he will be hounded for every absence."

"Damn right he will." Arkonn's ears perked as they neared the ruins.

"There is fel energy permeating from there. I can...taste it."

Yalim nodded in agreement.

"Well good, you elves will need to find it. I want a full sweep of this area." The elves nodded and the three of them set to work. After hours passed by, they were still empty handed. Until Arkonn called out.

"I found it!"

Faquarl watched as Arkonn began digging and he could feel the successful recovery.

*"I can end war and lead you to peace."*

Arkonk came out with a long white staff. Simple in design but upon closer inspection it was cracked and bright green glowed out from it. Faquarl looked up into Arkonn's eyes and saw them glowing a brighter shade of green than ever. The tauren quickly took the staff from the elf.

*Faquarl was standing in the Twisting Nether. He could see planets fly all around him and giant beings waging war. He looked up at two of the humanoid behemoths and saw one fighting with an enormous white staff glowing like a sun. The other monster rushed with a giant axe and hit the staff causing sparks and a loud sonic crack. A tiny sliver of the staff broke off and floated in front of Faquarl. It was an exact replica of the staff they had just found.*

*"I can end war and lead you to peace."*

"Jo! We should leave it. This war is bad business already. This will only make it worse."  
Faquarl looked down at the elf with a smile on his face.  
"No, Arkonn. This is our salvation. Both of ours."

Days had passed. The Horde had recently entered Zangarmarsh. The plan was to transport the staff to Thunderlord Stronghold where it would be safe. The energies of the staff had intrigued every magic user in the Horde. Its potential energies were unknown. It could easily turn the tides back into their favor.

Gorfrunch was skeptical but he heeded the advice of his council. Especially when he learned it used demon energies. Demon blood made the perfect orc. Demon magic would do the same to a stick, he figured.

The Horde was resting in Zabra'jin. It would be their last stop before entering Blades Edge. The staff was placed with Suncrown. If anyone could tap the energies, it would be an elf. And when they were unleashed, Outland would face its second Sundering.

### Analeia

#### *A few days before:*

The lieutenant opened her newest set of orders from Vice-Captain Greyseer. Ana was to attend the Blacktooth Grin in their ongoing search of a new home. This particular mission involved the swampy lands of Zangarmarsh at the outpost of Zabra'jin. Ana held no love for the land. There was no way such a damp, dark place could be conducive to one's health. But Ana was a dedicated soldier, and she would not complain or waiver in her duty. She was also a more than capable leader, and the assigned members of the houses and charters attending would not question her authority. There was also something new in the orders Ana was not yet familiar with. Mention of a staff permeating magical energies intrigued her greatly, and she wondered what types of tests she may be afforded to conduct on the staff. Lieutenant Elsadorian began her journey to Zabra'jin hoping to hear more of the staff before she was due to arrive the three days later.

### Arkonn

Arkonn couldn't understand why he had been trusted with the staff. Of all the Suncrown, they had given it to the magic-blind one. The energies radiating out of it made him ill, and an odd voice skipped in and out of his head, accompanied by images. The first time he had touched the staff, it had taken him far away. The voice had promised him peace, and he saw himself sitting with Fiora, watching his child play in the soft green fields of Nagrand. It had promised him safe haven from all his worries, all his fears. Faquarl had taken it then, snatching the staff from his hands. Arkonn has felt a wave of rage pass through him then, but he had quickly fought it aside.

Now here he was, walking through Zangarmarsh on route to Zabra'jin, the staff carefully wrapped in netherweave cloth. His mind continuously went back to the image of his family in Nagrand, and it made him smile. He snapped out of it when the shout went through the caravan. The Alliance was gathering north of Zabra'jin. Arkonn burst into a sprint, running past the guards at the south entrance. He knelt by the corner of a building and gently place the wrapped spear to the ground, but not before it left him one parting image.

*He stood in the middle of the battlefield, bodies littering the ground, both Horde and Alliance. The spear floated in mid-air, glowing brightly. He fell to his knees, his stomach churning and head in pain as the magical energies ripped through him. The spear glowed brighter still, the exploded outwards in a brilliant flash of light.*

He was back in Zangarmarsh, the humid swamp air causing sweat to roll down his brow. The battle had already started at the north gate, and he picked up his rifle, rushing to help his friends.

#### *Sometime later:*

Zabra'jin had been overrun, and the Horde forces had retreated south. During the retreat, Arkonn had rushed to

the spear, only to find it wasn't there anymore. He looked frantically through the advancing Alliance, desperate to find the spear and pick a target, but he could find none. Now, as the Horde tended to the wounded, he set off to find Faquarl, his heart heavy.

## Bellmont

The fireball struck his gyrocopter, causing it to sputter and begin spiraling towards the swampy lands of Zangarmarsh. Bellmont leapt from the falling metal mount, falling for a good thirty feet before activating his parachute cloak.

Sailing through the air, he watched the battle below. The staff was nowhere to be found. Perhaps it had been taken by their side; it mattered little. The fact that he was able to deceive Gorfrunch into letting him live was good enough, now that Sylvanas was content and that he himself was still alive...relatively, this war meant little to him.

Still, Bellmont was unable to fight off a sense looming danger upon gazing upon the staff. He himself was fully aware he was about as sensitive to magic as a turnip, however some degrees of power are felt by all. And this item made the powers he felt in the presence of powerful magicians pale in comparison. Varimathras, Sylvanas, Thrall, and even Arthas had not inspired such foreboding in him.

Bellmont's thoughts were derailed as he approached the ground. Several shells from a dwarven sniper ripped the cloak to shreds, causing Bellmont to drop. Rolling as he fell he got to the ground quickly, drawing a throwing axe and lodging it in the head of the sniper.

Drawing his weapons he charged into the battle, where he would once again face his destiny.

## Sillen (M2M)

"Fall back! Regroup! Their numbers are too great!" Sillen called out over the din of battle. *Where are all these guards coming from? They seem...possessed?* Her thoughts betrayed her confident leadership of the Alliance forces assaulting Zabra'jin. This was not the same Horde they had fought in Hellfire and Terokkar. They seemed energized, as though fighting with renewed strength. *Surely they would not wield that staff in a skirmish like this... would they?*

Sillen's thoughts were interrupted by a pouncing druid. In a burst of ice she froze it temporarily to the ground, allowing just enough time to distance herself from the beast's claws. She readied herself for its next onslaught when a shield of light surrounded her, protecting her from the druid's attempt to shred the flesh of her arm. Knowing it wouldn't hold for long, she twisted the arcane energies nearby and teleported herself a short distance away. Somehow, she was able to reach her nether ray in time to escape. The Alliance forces were decimated, and the Horde pulled back to the safety of Zabra'jin's crude fence. Their normal lust for bloodshed seemed checked by their desire to protect the ancient weapon within those walls.

Sillen realized they could not recover the staff without more men. Rallying her battered troops at the ruins of the eastern twin spire, she gathered her fastest riders and sent them to Shattrath to seek out members of other guilds. Minutes later, she saw the familiar tabard of The Grim Covenant on an approaching rider. Oakblade himself dismounted and strode up. Sillen bowed deeply to the wizened night elf.

"I am sorry we were delayed, Sillen. I hope we can help now." As he spoke, more of his troops appeared on the horizon, flying low and fast towards the tower. Within minutes, the revitalized Alliance force encountered and razed the Horde assembled at the western spire and moved again towards Zabra'jin.

"Now is the time to strike, while they are reeling from their defeat at the tower," Oakblade offered.

Sillen nodded in agreement. "Push in as far as you can. Those guards will find us quickly and overwhelm us, most likely, but it should buy me enough time to grab it." She motioned towards the staff, visible now floating in mid-air near the center of town. He nodded grimly, accepting his place in the battle.

"We will lose many troops. Call to your healers; their services will be needed here."

With that, he turned to his men.

A rallying battle cry rang out as the brave warrior charged in through the western entrance. Alliance fighters streamed in after him, drawing the attention of the guards as anticipated. *Now*, Sillen prompted herself. Propelling her nether ray forward, she focused all her energy on reaching the staff. *Almost there...got it!* She

closed her small fist around the spear and felt its power pulse suddenly through her. The guards seemed oblivious, as did the reorganizing Horde force - at first. Sillen turned and made for the marsh just as orcish shouts of panic and dismay reached her ears. She quickly concealed the weapon, bending all of her considerable magical powers to the cloaking charm she had learned. Weakened, she was an easy target for the first guard who reached her. *No matter*, she thought, grinning through her pain. *We cannot be defeated now...*

Badly beaten by the guard, the healer who found her first was astounded that with the last ounces of her life force, Sillen was still grinning.

## Zarvin

The Alliance had the staff in their possession! They knew it was a powerful relic, greater than the Horde could have possibly surmised. The trolls of Zabra'jin were transformed into harbingers of death and that could of only happened one way - through the staff.

Zarvin was a simple squire to Danath. He had been in every Alliance headquarters during this war and Telredor was no different. When the Alliance flew in beaten and battered, Zarvin was grim. Danath's hopes were lying on this band of heroes and so far things didn't look like they would favor the Alliance.

Then one small mage was carried in, a gnome. Zarvin saw she was one of the generals from Much Too Much - Sillen, he thought her name was. He made a leap of joy to the gnome and was pushed back by her colleagues. The short-tempered dwarf let it slide, for the gnome held the staff in her hands! The Horde had lost their new weapon of destruction!

## 2 days later:

Khadgar had been notified immediately. He sent the brightest minds from Shattrath, but none who may've been affiliated with the Horde. The staff was locked up in Telredor, within the center of the mushroom city. The effects of the staff could already be seen on the usually starving townfolk. They started to get restless and some even tried to cut in on the war meetings, suggesting immediate attacks. The Alliance soldiers were warned of this; Khadgar suspected that this was what had happened to the trolls.

Near sunset an unexpected gryphon arrived, carrying Khadgar himself. The prematurely-aged wizard walked powerfully through the mushroom city finally finding Zarvin drinking by a fire.

"Where is it, Zarv?"

"Kh-khadgar? By Muradin's beard, what're ye doin' 'ere?!?"

"Do not make me ask you again. A'dal was not pleased that I am getting involved. With the Horde so close, we have little time to waste. They *will* be returning for it."

"O' course, sir. Follow me." The dwarf led Khadgar to the room which contained the staff. Khadgar waved the dwarf away and immediately set to work. He waved off the minor protective enchantments with ease, frowning at the terrible security. As soon as the enchantments were removed, the staff screamed out. A high-pitched shriek tore through the chamber. Khadgar began chanting a difficult enchantment in attempt to seal this failsafe and that was when he felt something within the staff.

"No... it cannot be." Khadgar felt a presence within the staff. The staff itself was a powerful artifact but the power that was permeating off of it was coming from something else. Something trapped within it. Khadgar cleared his mind and tried to communicate with the being inside the staff.

*Khadgar delved deep into the staff's energies, allowing them to flow within him. To any outsider looking to check on Khadgar, they would just see him in a trance holding the staff horizontally within his hands. Little would a commoner know that he had created a magical link between himself and the being within the staff.*

*Within the blackness of Khadgar's thoughts he tried to call out to the unknown being.*

*<What are you?>*

*<Oh, great apprentice to the Guardian. I am the tool made for you. Every event that has taken place has been predicted by great prophets. The whole point of the war was for you to find me and for us to become one.>*

*<Oh? That is quite fascinating, but that does not answer my question. WHAT are you?>*

*<I am the essence of a titan. Not just any titan, but the lord of all titans, Aman'Thul.>*

*<Ha! You think me a fool? The staff itself is no doubt beyond mortal comprehension, but your powers are not. You are no titan. You are the antithesis, or am I mistaken, demon?>*

***<Blechahaha, so you figured it out? I knew you would, but you cannot blame me for trying.>***

*<Ahh, so you're an Annihilan. I can tell by your guttural Common. How did you find this staff, demon?>*

***<I foresaw my downfall as emperor of this disgusting planet long ago. I found the Sliver of Orodur and poured my essence into it. Breaking my soul in two you could say. Now my physical body is imprisoned by orcs and my other soul is trapped in this staff.>***

*<Indeed. You realize you are under Alliance jurisdiction? This prison of yours will soon be destroyed by the greatest archmages of our day.>*

***<The Horde has tasted me and I have selected my new host. Your men will all die painfully and I will use the Horde to destroy Illidan and reclaim my throne. Then I will slaughter them. But first I will see if I may possess YOU.>***

*The staff began glowing bright green as its energies attempted to pierce Khadgar's thoughts. Khadgar began to focus on the blackness and two shapes formed. One was a giant pit lord and the other was Khadgar. Khadgar had successfully made them corporeal within the staff, if only briefly. This would make fighting the pit lord easier.*

***<YOU WILL FAIL! AND THE WORLDS WILL FEAR THE MIGHTY MAGTHERIDON!>***

*The pit lord charged at the mage with his war glaive raised high. Khadgar conjured a great purple arcane bubble around himself. As soon as the glaive made contact with the bubble, the arcane energy lashed out. The pit lord reared his front legs flapping his wings furiously to maintain balance. Khadgar began to conjure great boulders of ice around the pit lord. He clapped his hands and the circling boulders flew towards Magtheridon.*

*The demon roared and the blackness began to dissipate.*

***<No loss, human. My host has tasted me and soon he will return to claim me>***

Khadgar placed the staff back into its prison and sealed it with his own enchantments. He had looked up the name Orodur and found that the relic was indeed an artifact made by the titans. It was a shame that a demon corrupted it.

Khadgar said his good byes and rushed back to Shattrath to inform A'dal. What he didn't expect to see was an army of Horde already marching to Telredor below him.

## Faquarl

Arkonn had told Faquarl about how he had left the staff behind. Faquarl went into a rage for days. THIS STAFF WAS THEIR ONLY HOPE! THIS STAFF WAS HIS FUTURE! HE NEEDED IT! HE CRAVED IT!

The Horde marched on Telredor. Stealth reports stated that the elevator was a death trap and the guards were superhuman. This didn't matter to Faquarl; he would have the staff, and it did not matter who died before it fell back into his possession.

The Horde flew onto the mushroom town and the battle began. The Alliance were caught off guard - as expected - but the guards were not. They gleefully rushed into battle with pitiless eyes. Faquarl had no concerns with this. He became a prowler and searched for his prize. The explosions of warfare could be heard outside but he continued onward. He could smell the staff's energy calling out to him.

*"I can end war and lead you to peace."*

Finally, he found the room. It was guarded by three mages but they seemed to have fallen asleep. This troubled Faquarl. *Nothing* should be able to sleep with the chaos sounding outside. He unstealthed himself and murdered the mages. It was pathetic to see them put up no fight at all.

Turning to the staff, he saw ancient arcane runes flutter about its surface. He had no time for counter spells and they were not his specialty. Whatever defenses the mages had placed on the staff, he could recover from with the staff's help. He grabbed the staff and was rewarded with a severe pain in his hand.

The bones themselves seemed to be on fire, but he pulled with all of his might, retrieving the staff from the container. He looked at his right hand and saw that was charred to near uselessness. Another war wound and one he would be happy to bear. The staff was his.

Faugarl rushed outside back to the battle. As soon as the moonlight touched his fur, he grinned. Success. He lifted the staff high into the air to increase his brothers' morale.

Suddenly, time seemed to slow down to Faugarl. He looked behind to see that he had been blasted by a frostbolt, fireball, and an arcane blast all at once. As he staggered back, he saw his killers. The mages who he had murdered were, in fact, alive. Then realization dawned on him. They were the security system, mere golems activated by the removal of the staff.

Faugarl fell backward off of the mushroom city. The staff escaped his grasp. Was this the end of his dream? Faugarl closed his eyes as his gut seemed to fall away. There was only one thing that was true now.

He was falling...

Falling...

Falling.

With a great splash, a lifeless tauren hit the ground. The staff came soon after, stuck perpendicular in the mud. The war over Telredor was over. It was a chaotic battle for the staff now and both sides knew it. Horde forces disengaged and called their mounts to fly them down into the marshes.

A Telredor guard was the first to pick the staff up. He grinned and began rushing to the elevator. Both Felora and Ashenrock dropped out of their stormcrow forms in mid-flight and shifted into bears. They landed on the unlucky guard with a bone-cracking thud.

Ashenrock lifted the staff in his mouth and lumbered away. Khadgar's golems had jumped off of the mushroom to reclaim the lost artifact. They fired deadly blasts of energy toward Ashenrock, which he gracefully dodged each time. Felora charged one of the golems but was batted away and sent into a nearby mushroom. Ashenrock turned to look at her and in that moment he was struck by a pyroblast. With a loud roar he dropped the staff as his now exposed innards seared.

A night elf hunter picked up the staff with a smirk on his lips. He began firing his bow at any Horde that moved. Nothing would pry the staff away from him. Grin healers had made it onto the field of battle and tended the wounded druids immediately. The elf aimed at a blood elf priest and smirked; he pulled the string back and fired.

Huizopotl threw down a fire elemental totem, which pulled one of the great behemoth's straight from the elemental plane. The great beast erupted in flame, sending steam into the air and burning the arrow to nothing. The elemental turned to the hunter and attacked.

The hunter knew that destroying the totem was his only hope. He fired at it, filled with greater distress every time his shot failed to cleave the totem. He pulled out one more arrow when he was stabbed in his side with a serrated fist weapon. The troll shaman removed the staff from him and grinned his toothless grin.

"Dere be no killin' dese elementals. Dey be angry whichoo. An' Ah don't tink Ah be lettin choo escape choo punishment."

The shaman called lightning down on him and his eyes turned white with electricity. With the staff in his left hand, he charged into a group of Alliance. He slashed at them fervently with the fury of the elements at his beck and call. Whirlwinds surrounded him and his fire elemental burned the area behind him. The troll was getting surrounded. To the front of him were Birr and Sillen and behind him the golems had set their eyes on him. Pokes let out a fierce war cry and commanded his elemental to deal with the golems. Birr and Sillen were his.

He lunged at Birr only to be blasted aside by Sillen's frostbolt. Pokes charged a lightning bolt at Sillen. She was in the swamp water and was electrocuted harshly; only her iceblock saved her. Birr began to heal his companion as quickly as he could but Pokes hit him with an earth shock. The shaman moved in for the kill but the mage dropped her ice block to fling a giant flaming boulder at the shaman. This caught him off guard and he crumpled to the ground, letting go of the staff and allowing Birr to catch it.

"This may be the last night I get to live." The elf said staring at the accursed staff.

"Then make it worth it," said the gnome.

The orcish warchief had enough. The staff would be his. He charged at the two and a heated contest commenced. Sillen froze the water that the warchief's feet stood in and then she began forming lances of ice out of the steam that now filled the landscape. She hurled them at the orc only to have them reflected back by his shield. Birr threw a shield on the gnome to protect her from her own magic. By this time the orc had freed himself and lunged at the elf. Hammer met axe in a contest that was easily in the orc's favor.

Sillen jumped to Birr's aid and tried to blow Gorfrunch back with a cone of cold air. The orc wouldn't

budge and he slammed his axe at the gnome. Birr called out his shadowfiend and kicked it to intercept the orc's axe. The orc snarled out with rage. He kicked the gnome aside and charged at the elf. He raised axe and slammed it downward. The elf side stepped, which the orc expected. With his great shielded arm he backhanded the elf. This action caused Birr to lose his grasp on the staff.

The white staff glowed brightly as it fell right in front of the seemingly dead tauren.

Faquarl couldn't breathe. He was dying. There was no doubt in his mind that this was true. However, he would be damned if he let anyone use the staff but himself. If he could not utilize the staff's saving powers then *no one* could.

When the staff fell next to him he saw it as a sign from Therazane. He painfully made to grab the artifact. A deep and sickening crunch rang in his ears.

"Ahhhhhhhhh!" A golem had stepped on the tauren and bent to recover the staff. "Nooo," Faquarl snarled. He grasped the staff and focused every ounce of energy he had left into it. The power he was rewarded was amazing. He looked at one of the great mushrooms and it heeded his command by falling, knocking the golem off.

Faquarl stood up and raised the staff over his head. The artifact shone like a miniature sun.

"The war ends now!"

The great tauren slammed the staff into the ground, allowing it to release all of its energy. The water that the staff was placed in began to snake around the staff in a helix formation, finally soaking into the top. The two golems left standing began firing at Faquarl, throwing monstrous lances of ice and mountainous boulders of fire at him. As the two giant instruments of death neared, they degenerated and they too were absorbed by the staff.

The fire elemental turned towards some Telredor guards causing them to flee. It soon attempted to give chase, but it found itself being sucked backward. The entity gave an unnatural roar as its essence split apart and flowed into the staff.

Arrows and magic fired between Horde and Alliance forces changed direction and hit the staff.

The staff was absorbing everything. Nothing was safe. Finally when both sides stopped fighting to face the now blinding illumination the staff was emitting, it exploded.

Searing white light exploded encompassing everything. Not a single member of the Horde or Alliance escaped the release of energy. All there was to be seen by the armies was light.

Faquarl felt the immense warmth of the light only briefly. The staff grew cold in his hands and he felt something was wrong. He heard laughter in his ears and for the tauren all went dark.

## Chapter 3

### Faquarl

Faquarl was drifting in blackness. Was he dead? Was his part to play over? Then he heard a loud screaming. He opened his eyes and saw everything cascaded in a bright hue of white. He touched his right eye - it could see! He looked at his hand he had touched it with. The charred effects of the staff were nowhere to be seen. He was healed! He was alive! He looked around and could barely make out outlines of people finding the same effect had happened to them. This was thei-

"Run."

Faquarl turned to see where the voice came from but no one was near him.

"The battle is over, get your men to safety."

Whoever it was, they had a point. The staff was his again. Faquarl grabbed the staff and called out to the Grin. He ran over to Ashenrock and shook the great bear.

"Head to Zabra'jin. Go! All of you!"

The Horde, both previously fallen and those still fighting, began to fall back. Most were confused at what had just happened, and guidance during this chain of events was well accepted. Faquarl ran up to the warchief.

"Sir, we should go." Faquarl held out his hand to the orc who was still looking for a fight.

"You got the staff? Alright, let's go."

### Hours later in Zabra'jin:

"Those golems, they were Khadgar's doing. They were just as I remembered. Heh, lucky that staff saved yer hide Jo, those things rarely miss a kill." The warchief was briefing his men on what their next plan of attack was.

"So where is human?!? Crunck smash!" A yell of agreement rose from the ranks of the Horde.

"My intelligence told me he was in Shattrath. I'm surprised he lent his aid, but I guess after Danath fell he decided to take over military proceedings. It's no matter, we march at midnight."

*"Do not go to Shattrath. Do not give Khadgar the staff!"*

Faquarl looked around the room and then looked at Crunck, who was drooling with bloodlust in his eyes.

"Warchief, I..err...I do not think I should go to Shattrath. We would be delivering the staff right into Khadgar's hands."

"Ya have a point. I expect ya have a plan on where yer gonna go?"

*"Thunderlord Stronghold."* The voice echoed in Faquarl's head.

"Thunderlord Stronghold," he repeated aloud. "The security will protect the staff and we can make contact with the Thunderlords."

"Fair enough. Alright, you lot. Let's start gettin' ready." An elf stood up in the back.

"I'm going with Jo." Gorfrunch looked back at Shadiel.

"S'fine with me. Those of you who want to head ter Blade's Edge, report to Jo. Those who plan on taking the battle to Khadgar, you know where I'll be."

### Sidicus

Sidicus stood at the gates of the Thunderlord Stronghold looking south toward the marshes. The sun glittered off of his mail and particularly his axe blades. As he stood, his eyes to the sky he finally saw what he was looking for - a wyvern in the distance. He walked back into the hold and watched as the wyvern landed, the troll rider getting off and jogging toward him.

"Warlord Sidicus, Ah scouted wha joo told me to. Ah dunno wha made da light joo saw mon, but Ah did see some oh' dem Blacktooth Grin's comin diss way. Dey seem ta be comin from a battle."

Sid gave a grunt. "The Grin? You sure? They haven't been here since Za.... well since Zamarak was alive."

The troll nodded. "Ah'm sure it was dem, Ah saw dat black tabard wit der white grin on et."

"Very well, inform the guards to expect the Grin. I'll go tell Twalk and the witch doctor to expect some guests."

"O'course mon, I'll be tellin da guards right o'way." With that, the troll ran off toward the gates again to relay the message. Seeing the troll obey, Sid turned toward the keep and walked into the commons area.

"Any of you seen the witch doctor?"

"Wha' Joo want, pug face?" came the friendly and common banter from Zurven who was sitting at the other side of the room.

Sid just gave a chuckle. "Seems some of ya old friends are coming to visit, ya blue skinned elf. Scouts report a decent size of Grin were moving this way from Zangar. Not like them to stop here in such numbers unannounced, something must be up. I'll go tell the chieftainess."

With that, Sid walked out to find Twalk.

### Gorfrunch

The walls of Shattrath sat in the distance, partially obscured by the huge trees bearing glimmering blue fruit. Gorfrunch pulled out his spyglass and took a closer look at the ramparts as the Grin and Suncrown forces spread out in the forest around, patrols accosting and slaying or detaining any lone wanderers. Draenei in heavy armor stood on the walls, more seen hurrying back and forth behind. These were no unready sentries.

"They know we're coming." Gorfrunch packed his spyglass back into his case and stepped back inside

the command tent. Esere, Agholinn, Belmont, and Rue sat around a low table, a few bottles and an ornate hookah being shared by the two elves while the undead scratched their heads over the one incomplete map they had of the area.

"Surprise is out, then." Rue stated the obvious, and quieted Belmont with a hand as he began to protest.

"He's right. Where we had a chance at breaking in during the night, slaying Khadgar in his quarters, and hitting the aviary to make our escape on their own wyverns and gryphons, our force - even if we had Jo's detachment - has no chance against the prepared Aldor and Scryers, especially in that fortress." Esere leaned back and paused to sample her wine, as if she weren't discussing the possible deaths of hundreds. "We need another approach."

Gorfrunch took his seat among them, but turned back to gaze one more time at the sprawling city of Light. "I agree, we don't have the numbers to storm that, even if your estimates of their numbers are half as large as you put them, Agho'Linn. That leaves either surrounding and sieging them until they're forced to come to us, or baiting Khadgar out and taking him without their defense. I would enjoy the former, but the latter is more...possible. Ideas?"

"Well, he is the most powerful human mage of our time, dwarfed in power only by Medivh, who, you know, is dead. Therefore we must cater to his arcane tastes, and present something so exotic that he can't help but come to expand his knowledge. That's what fuels the mage, you know. Search for power. I say we rig one of these trees up with a good set of lights, maybe get some smoke going on top, with flashing bits going up and down it. Maybe an axe. Eredar? No, we don't want to intimidate him. The greatest bloom of raw ley energy seen since..." Belmont trailed off, his suggestion met with silence.

"There is one more option, Warchief." Agho'Linn leaned forward and drew out a small badge of rank, laying it on the table. "Peace. Shattrath is a city dedicated to it. If we come in peace, we will be allowed inside without a question as to our intent. From there, right next to Khadgar...I don't need to explain our options."

Gorfrunch stared at the map of Terrokar as he considered this, frowning. "No, I -" His protest was cut off by the arrival of a Grin elf bursting into the tent. "Blood elves. Everywhere. They surrounded us." Battle cries started to leap up from all around. "Orders?" Path stood, awkwardly awaiting the warchief's response.

"We defend. Get me my Champions. We form up on this hill." Agho'Linn placed a hand on Gorfrunch's shoulder as he rose to leave the tent.

"The Scryers have arrived, it seems. Remember, peace is their goal. I suggest giving them what they want, my warchief." Agho'Linn pocketed the insignia she had taken out earlier, and glided out past Gorfrunch, heading for the edge of the camp with no attention paid to the skirmishes going on around her.

"FEAR THE GRIN!" The cry was raised as Gorfrunch's reserves charged into battle, a slavering, plated orcling leading the charge as their warchief stared after the departing Suncrown...Scryer?

## Derken

*"The fire will not be put out until it engulfs everything."*

"Who are you?"

*"The fire has already started."*

"What do you mean? What fire?"

*"You and your kind cannot stop the fire this time."*

"What's going on?"

Derken awoke with a start. The wound in his shoulder still ached, but otherwise he felt better. He looked around the small room and focused on the druid sleeping in the corner. A small grin crept over the elf's usually stoic face.

A sudden image of orcs fighting elves in Terrokar forest erased Derken's smile. Derken grabbed his equipment and slipped out the door.

The Citadel of Light was bustling with activity. Conducting the traffic, Khadgar was oblivious of Derken's presence.

"What's the meaning of this?" Derken asked.

"There's an issue with the Blacktooth Grin. It's none of your concern."

"But..."

*"Leave here Derken. You're needed elsewhere."*

"What do you mean?" Khadger was no longer even looking at Derken.

*"You must find Lydros."*

"Lorekeeper Lydros? What for?" Derken looked to his side, at A'dal.

*"To defeat the corrupted staff."* The world around Derken began to haze until there was only darkness.

An image of a pristine white staff held by a tauren stood in front of him. The tauren snarled at the elf, his eyes hollow with a green blaze glowing within.

*"You and your kind cannot stop the fire this time."*

## Eseré

### 24 hours ago:

"Vice-Captain?" came a voice behind her, drawing her attention away from the large scroll before her. "I've heard you wanted to speak with me?"

Eseré glanced over her shoulder and nodded to the hunter as she motioned for him to enter her office.

"Yes. Thank you for coming."

Arkonn glanced down at Ofearah, commanding her to stay just in front the door. The she-cat rubbed her head against his knee once, and obediently took up position outside the Suncrown Guard office. "What can I do for you?" He glanced around the Vice-Captain's sparse office, stopping just short of the desk cluttered with rolls of parchment scattered all across the top of it.

Eseré started gathering up the miscellaneous scrolls, gesturing to the only one that lay open. "I've been drawing up maps for weeks now. There's a small village to the far east. Mok'Nathal..."

Her eyes shifted away from the sketch of Blades Edge to Arkonn, trying to judge his reaction. There was only a simple nod of understanding, his own eyes scanning the linework. "Yes, I've seen it."

So, she pressed on. "There are few key points of entry. It's relatively quiet and out of the way."

"It is, easy defensible," he agreed.

"It's as perfect as I could hope for. Without the stone walls."

"Several choke points."

She had a supporter. A phantom smile crossed her face as she nodded. Folding her arms over her chest, she gently broached the question, "What do you think? Have I found your once-brethren a home?"

"Here's the problem," he started. As he turned to look at her, she arched an eyebrow at his sour expression. "I'm not so sure they are looking for a home. Not Smashblade anyway. Isn't it odd to you?"

"Not all of them, no. But maybe some. I remember our conversation at Falcon Watch."

"Danath, Alleria... I doubt its coincidence."

Eseré leaned heavily against the table. "It's not. It's an old soldier trying to outdo his past glories. It happens sometimes. It's not good, but it does."

A deep frown broke onto his face. "We've been drawn in under false pretenses. And now I feel responsible."

"You are not responsible for this one. They owe us the favor, if you remember." Eseré ran a hand through her hair, watching Arkonn as he stubbornly continued on his spiel.

"We were deceived." The hunter carefully enunciated each word. "How many will die, before others notice? I know Faquarl has, and we've spoken. We need to find ourselves a way out."

Her eyes found the door, anything to keep from looking at him. "We can simply stop, Arkonn. We do not have to join their battles. We owe them nothing. But do you want to leave your once comrades to die?"

"You misunderstand me. I'm not leaving." Even his posture was defiant.

She gestured to the map on the desk. "I'm coming up with a solution. They will not doggedly follow until they've no feet to stand on. Even animals tire long before that."

"Gorfrunch will light that entire world aflame before he's finished. And I may not wear the colors anymore. But they are still my brothers. I'll see this through to the end, but it isn't your fight." His words brought a smirk to her face. It would be so easy to begin another argument with the man, but it would not get them a

solution.

Acquiescing, she opened her hands in surrender. "I know it's not. I'm not bringing in the others under my banner of Captain," she paused. "But I will not let those souls be worn down when they are ready to leave. A taskmaster is a taskmaster."

They stood there in the office in silence, each looking at the rough layout of the area surrounding Mok'Nathal. "It is as sound a place as any," he murmured finally.

It was done. She had at least one. "Thank you. I'll find my time and make mention of it to Faquarl."

"As will I. Faquarl and I..." Arkonn's words drifted, leaving her to wonder. "We have much to discuss."

The Blades Edge map was gathered up carefully, a slight smile lighting her voice. "I wait your word to bring this to him."

Arkonn nodded once as he joined his cat at the door. "I won't keep you waiting."

## Agholinn

She glided away from the warchief's council with Esere in tow. Emitting an aura of complete calm around her, it was only her eyes that gave her away. Only behind the green-glow of stolen magic could one see the utter panic rising within Agho'Linn.

"Esere," she whispered harshly to her friend, "Tell everyone to take off their tabards. Suncrown cannot be tied to this, we cannot be painted as traitors to Shattrath. There is far too much at stake."

Nodding imperceptibly, Esere grabbed the arm of the nearest squire to her, gave him instructions and sent him on his way. Soon, Agho'Linn could no longer see the crimson and gold of Suncrown on the field, and she breathed a small sigh of relief. Silently she cursed whatever miscommunication brought Suncrown to Shattrath with Gorfrunch, as opposed to Thunderlord Stronghold with Faquarl. Marching on Shattrath was idiocy.

"Vice-Captain! M'lady!"

Agho'Linn turned to the voice and saw Analeia there. She had an unreadable expression on her face and lacked a glass of wine in her hand. Her typical jaunty salute was delivered, but there wasn't the usual spring to it. Analeia didn't want to be here either.

"The outer patrols are already falling to the Scryers. It is like they had no idea what to expect! Agho'Linn, you did tell them what to expect, didn't you?" Analeia asked, her tone as accusatory as it could be without being disrespectful.

"Of course I told them, Analeia. I told them how many the Scryers commanded, and what type of gear their armory is filled with," Agho'Linn returned in a flat tone, holding Analeia's gaze with her own. Esere stood to the side, her arms folded, listening to the conversation taking place, knowing full-well that Agho'Linn had not been terribly specific with what she had told Gorfrunch. The shouts and sounds of battle swirled around the trio, the three elves seemingly oblivious to it all.

"That is really awful of you, Agho'Linn," Analeia stated, her cold stare never leaving Agho'Linn, as she realized what Agho'Linn had done.

"It would be worse if we to be caught here by the Scryers. I don't know about you, but I've come to enjoy my rank in their number," Agho'Linn bit back harshly, "Besides...Danath was one thing, Alleria was another, but Shattrath? Smashblade is out of his skull. I don't want to see Suncrown blood spilled for insanity's sake."

"She's right, Lieutenant," Esere agreed, nodding towards Agho'Linn, "We've been dragged into a private war, but we're in too deep now to get out easily."

Shouts and hollers interrupted the discussion, pulling their attentions away from each other. The Scryers weren't killing anyone, they were capturing them, and bringing them back to Shattrath in chains. That meant a trial. Agho'Linn laughed bitterly to herself...she had said that Shattrath wanted peace, and she was right. At least she hadn't lied about that.

"Kael's balls!" Agho'Linn exclaimed, "They are taking prisoners! We *can't* stay here."

Within seconds, Esere and Analeia had called up their mounts and were racing towards the different units of Suncrown's soldiers, rounding them up and bustling them out. In a surreal moment, Agho'Linn watched them in slow motion, hearing their hollered orders. She smiled to see the stream of chargers, hawkstriders, and talbuks galloping safely away from the chaos.

Chaos she was still in the middle of. She whistled and her cobalt talbuk came racing towards her. Swinging into the saddle, she began to race towards the top of the hill, where Gorfrunch would be. She pulled down her hood, shielding her face from any Scryer that might see.

"Gorfrunch," she roared, grabbing the attention of the warchief and others before jumping down and in front of him, "Suncrown cannot help you here if we are to help you with what is to come. Don't worry, we will take care of it. Remember, Warchief...peace!" she said to him in harsh tones, before turning, jumping back astride her talbuk and tearing off in the direction Suncrown left by.

She found Esere waiting anxiously for her, and once they had met up, the pair raced their way deeper into Terrokar, away from Shattrath, dodging their way around trees and brush.

"What kept you?" Esere asked, barely audible as her voice was ripped from her lips by the rushing wind.

"I had to remind the warchief," Agho'Linn hollered back, "We'll see if he heeds my words."

## Faquarl

It was dark; dust covered the many astronomical wonders usually present in the sky. There was no sun or moon. Perfect conditions for traveling. As the Horde under Faquarl made their way up the mountain paths, many obstacles arose. The top soil was causing a great impediment to the travelers as they were climbing the steep pathways. Oroki and Felora were the only two who seemed unphased as they traveled in their graceful feline forms. The rest slid down a foot after every three steps taken.

The other problem had to do with the beasts that resided here. They were everywhere and most seemed to be carnivorous. Signe and Arkonn had their weapons out at the ready nearly the entire trip, shooting at anything that moved. Sentient or otherwise, nothing should know of their existence until they arrived at the Thunderlord capital.

As the sky began to glow with a fiery hue, Jonn was the first to call out what the haggard Grin saw.

"Thunderlord flags. We made it."

The tired force smiled amongst themselves and Faquarl nodded and proceeded forward into the city. The voice that seemed to have found him had been repeating one phrase throughout their journey and they had never led him astray yet. He could feel the ringing in his ears that always seemed to come before the voice delivered his message.

*"The answers you seek lie in Shadowmoon."*

## Zurven

### **The night before:**

"Da Grin be coomin...dey mus be havin it..."

Zurven sat, staring into the fire down in the lower courtyard of the stronghold, watching the flames dance and flicker in the dark, deep in thought. He flicked an ear, hearing the soft sound of plate armor...one person...small stature. He relaxed as he felt a hand on his shoulder and a kiss on his broken tusk.

" 'Ey der Cyaa."

"Hello m'love and Warlord, it's getting late and Cregga would like you to read her a bedtime story." His wife, Bezieria, looked at him with pale, sightless eyes. A tinge of worry could be seen on her face.

"Could joo read it ta her fa me? Ah have ta meet wit someone tonight, shouldn't be too late." As he got up, he threw a few more large logs onto the fire.

"Alright...please be careful." He grinned down at the blood elf, his scar across his face shining slightly in the fire light.

"No worries, jus a quick meet, no fightin." With a quick kiss to his wife and daughter, the shaman walked back outside, letting out a shrill whistle.

A large orange raptor came padding up to him, nuzzling into his hand. "Missed ya too Ziondeh, wat joo say we go fa a run eh?" With a cry of agreement and a light head butt, Zurven slid the reins onto the beast, hopping up onto the war raptor. "Alright den, les shred mon." With a spur, the raptor took off into the night, puffs of dust rising from its claws as they both traveled south to meet up with the Grin.

## Bellmont

### Two days earlier:

Bellmont emerged from the shadows onto the road. Several Scarlet Crusade scouts backpedaled upon on seeing the High Executor.

"Show yourself." commanded Belmont, his cloak blowing about in the winds of Tirisfal.

Another Forsaken stepped from the shadows into the pale yellow glow provided by a derelict street lamp, adorned with the tabard of the Grin.

"It seems unnesecary to have come this far." said the other undead rogue, looking around.

"Perhaps, but precaution is always good to have, Valenthe. Now, as you're no doubt aware, the Grin is splitting up its forces. I'm keeping an eye on Gorfrunch's but I'll require you to do the same to Faquarl's...keep a particular eye on Huizopotl," ordered Belmont.

"May I inquire as to why? I thought the Dark Lady was content with the present situation," asked Valenthe, somewhat confused.

"She is, to my knowledge. This information your gathering does not concern the Dark Lady, but rather the Grin as a whole. I have a sneaking suspicion that the troll is up to something," answered Belmont.

"Under what regards do you hold such suspicions?" asked Valenthe.

"Mainly he was quick to send me with Gorfrunch, who already has many eyes on him already. As to the rest, you will learn personally if you fulfill your orders to their maximum, Valenthe. I don't intend to die in a war that only fuels the pride of an aging old veteran," said Belmont. "Report anything suspicious. But be wary... Huizopotl is more paranoid then you may believe - he'll notice any mistake you make in spying on him, and deal with you efficiently."

Valenthe twirled his maces in a mildly impressive flourish.

"Oh, I won't be making any mistakes, I can assure you. And if worse comes to worse..."

Valenthe smashed his mace down in the air violently.

"Valenthe, I am telling you to watch, not to kill. If you do then you will escape or suffer the consequences of your folly. Relations with the Undercity have become difficult enough without Deathstalkers killing high officers," hissed Belmont.

"I was J-O-K-I-N-G. You take things far too -" Valenthe was cut off mid-speech, the hilt of Belmont's sword catching him in the head.

"Mind your tongue and stay your hand, assassin. I take war very seriously. You might one day, too. Until then, move out. I have urgent matters I must attend to as well."

The two rogues faded into the shadows.

## Arkonn

The early evening breeze had done little to lessen the oppressive mountain heat. Arkonn leaned back against the wall of the small hut, pulling off his mail spaulders. His mind was far away, but he was brought back to the present as Yalim poked his head through the door.

"Faquarl wishes to speak with you." Arkonn smiled up at his friend and nodded.

"Tell him I'll be there in just a moment." He finished pulling off his gauntlets and unclasped his cloak, ducking his head as he exited the hut. Walking quickly, he crossed the village, stopping quickly to admire the sky. Arkonn smiled wistfully, thinking of Fiora and their upcoming wedding. He would be returning to Silvermoon in the morning, but if anything made these trips worth it, it was the Outland skies. He shook his head and crossed into Faquarl's hut.

The great tauren looked ridiculously large in the small hut, looking over small maps. Arkonn cleared his throat quietly, and Faquarl looked up, a smile crossing his weathered face. The old druid nodded once to Yalim, who got up quietly and left, patting Arkonn on the shoulder as he did.

"You wished to speak with me?" Faquarl nodded, and motioned for Arkonn to take a seat. The ranger smiled as he looked around, picking out a small corner and settling down.

"Word has reached me, Arkon'driel, that you've found a wife." Faquarl watched Arkonn as he spoke, "So I wanted to offer you a wedding gift."

Arkonn smiled and shook his head.

"I'm honoured, Jo, but there's no ne -" The druid cut him off.

"I insist, Ark. By now you must've noticed, I've regained the use of both my eyes." Arkonn nodded. He has indeed noticed, but had chosen not to ask questions. Things had been...odd, since Zabra'jin. "What If I told you, you could too?"

Arkonn's remaining eye opened in shock. "How?"

Faquarl reached over, and carefully unwrapped the gleaming spear.

"You know very well by now that this staff will be our salvation. But it can do more than just end our war, it can heal our wounds, Ark." The hut fell silent, elf and tauren considering the words that now hung in the air. Arkonn was the first to break the silence.

"How?"

Faquarl smiled, and held the spear out. "Place your hand on it."

Arkonn reached out, trepidation in his mind. He closed his hand cautiously around the staff, and Faquarl closed his eyes, concentrating. A warmth began to spread up the hunter's arm, into his torso and throughout his body. He felt an odd bulging in his right eye as the warmth began to flow back out of him, exiting through his arm. Faquarl opened his eyes and smiled.

"Take off the patch, Ark."

Arkonn reached up, and slowly slid his eyepatch over his head. The light of the soft fire was blinding. Pain jerked into his brain, and he blinked rapidly. It slowly began to reside, and he was able to see images clearer and clearer. His eye had indeed been returned to him. He smiled giddily, and looked up at his friend.

"To be able to look down at my wife, with both my eyes..." Arkonn shook his head and laughed. "I could think of no greater gift."

Faquarl reached over and clasped Ark's shoulder.

"Jo, our wedding...it's mostly her family, and friends. I'd be honoured if you could be there, and stand beside me."

Faquarl's smile slipped, only slightly. "Ark...my place is here. I'm needed."

Arkonn sighed heavily. "I understand."

Faquarl laughed softly. "Don't be disheartened, I'll see what can be done."

The two friends spoke and laughed until the late hours of the morning, retelling tales of past battles, and friends long gone. Only when dawn approached did Arkonn excuse himself. He made his way to his hut and gathered his gear. Mounting his talbuk, Garen, he took one last look at the early morning sky. Somehow, it looked even more dazzling.

## Faquarl

Faquarl looked up from their camp; it appeared that someone had taken notice of them. He grabbed the staff and stood up. Large heavy steps could be heard in quick succession. It was a raptor.

"Zurven! Good to see you again! So this is where you ended up!" The troll shaman rode up to the druid and gave a vicious grin. He nodded at Faquarl.

"Whachoo be doin' 'ere in Thunderlord territory?" The troll had asked the question as a formality it seemed. Surely he knew.

"The war still wages. We need Thunderlord assist -" Pain screamed through Faquarl's head. The tauren roared out loud as he felt a sharp pain make his mind numb and slow.

***"THE GNOMES TO THE NORTH HAVE DISCOVERED YOU! THEIR CITY MUST BE RAZED AND ANY DEVICES CAPABLE OF COMMUNICATING YOUR PRESENCE MUST BE DESTROYED! TELL HIM! TELL HIM!"***

The voice that had guided him ended with a guttural tone. Faquarl wasn't sure...how could they know? What, why now? Why, when Zurven was here, did this happen?

"P...Pokes. Take our best warriors...head north...city there...raze it...everything." Faquarl could barely think, his head throbbed. He turned back to Zurven and then collapsed.

## Huizopotl

Pokes sat in the saddle of his raptor, the fires of Toshley's Station casting dancing shadows along the articulation of his armor. The raid had been executed to perfection, his forces entering the gnomish community under cover of darkness.

It was too easy. The troll reflected on the event the day before, Faquarl's unusual behavior as he insisted that Toshley's Station knew of their presence.

If they were aware of their presence, then why were they so easily ambushed? He paused in his ruminations long enough to bark out some quick orders and direct a band of his Painted Tusk trolls to a children's creche that even the hardened orcs of the Blacktooth Grin had been hesitant to burn.

Never send an orc to do a troll's job.

But this wasn't war. This was a slaughter. Mostly researchers and engineers working on assorted projects. Pokes didn't object, as he understood to value of these efforts in war, but he also knew something was amiss.

It was that staff. The spirits feared it, and the very earth recoiled from its touch. It radiated a kind of vile sweetness, like a succubus fawning over her "master" in feigned subservience.

Biding her time.

Pokes didn't trust it. He closed his eyes and began humming softly, casting his mind back in a recapitulation of the fight in Zangarmarsh several days ago. He relived his battle with Khadgar's golems, his blood quickening as the memory of his rage surged through his veins.

But it wasn't the euphoria he was after.

There it was. The staff.

It lay there innocuously in the brackish swamp water, but its *other* self was not so dormant. It seemed to roil in glee, drinking in the rage and fear of the battlefield.

It was feeding on the carnage. Some kind of malignant intelligence within it was becoming gradually more self aware.

Pokes opened his eyes again, and bellowed out orders to leave. His former apprentice rode up to him as they left and leaned over in his saddle.

"What is it, Pokes?" Concern registered on the tauren's scarred countenance when the troll turned to look at him. "Your spirit is far away."

"Jo aint de only one bein' tricked, Dushin. We bein' fooled, all oh us." Dushin nodded in faked comprehension, hoping to lull the troll into sharing more, but was met only with silence.

Pokes rode the rest of the way back to Thunderlord Stronghold in silence, alone with his thoughts. He would speak with Zurven when they had time in private.

There was some fel nature to this staff, and he would find the root of it - before it was too late.

## Path

Path paced her assigned patrol through the forests of Terrokar, the elven hunter at ease in such surroundings despite the many years since she had left her homeland. Contemplating the high walls of the city of Shattrath rising above the forest canopy, she grinned tightly at the prospect of the killing to come.

A snarl, audible more in her mind than her ears, brought her mind back to the moment, the spectral cat at her side stared into the forest to her south.

"I feel it, sister," she reassured the cat - and feel it she did, that indefinable sense of many eyes marking her presence. "We must warn the warchief." As she turned toward the tent where the warchief, his officers and the emissaries of Suncrown were planning their strategy, a glimpse of an elven face through the trees revealed the identity of the watchers.

Rushing back to camp, Path spotted several more Sin'dorei converging on the warchief's location. Bursting into the tent she addressed the warchief. "Blood elves. Everywhere. They surrounded us." Battle cries started to leap up from all around. "Orders?" Path stood, awkwardly awaiting the warchief's response.

"We defend. Get me my Champions. We form up on this hill." Agho'Linn placed a hand on Gorfrunch's shoulder as he rose to leave the tent.

"Aye, sir!" Saluting crisply, Path left to carry out her orders. Blood would be spilled even sooner than she had hoped.

## Gorfrunch

Golden chains skittered about the strangely clean paving stones, linking orc to elf to Forsaken, emanating from six chanting draenei in ornamented blue robes arrayed in a hexagon. Five more similar hexagons lined the walls of A'dal's chamber, each with a group of Grin with dented armor and ripped robes, but completely healed wounds, sitting and muttering amongst themselves.

"Good charge there, Groki. Maybe you'll make Champion if we ever get out of this alive. And as Grin." Grimnir sat across from the young orc that had led the final charge into the Scryer ranks that had almost broken through. Groki grinned and mimed swinging an axe back and forth, then suddenly sighed and sat back. The others in the hexagon spoke in low voices; the first to try a battle cry had found silencing spells were already prepared.

"Could've done so much more, with a few more..."

"Masters did not listen..."

"Sentries farther out..."

Silence spread through the chamber like a wildfire as their chieftain marched into the chamber, his ankles and wrists locked by similar chains of Light. Six high-ranking Scryers marched to either side of him. Low hisses went up from the nearest hexagon of prisoners as Agho'Linn brought up the rear of one of the groups. Gorfrunch stopped in front of the pedestal in the center of the room, where A'dal floated and Khadgar stood.

"You have been arrested for starting a war." Khadgar's magically amplified voice boomed across the chamber. "This land has seen enough war for twenty generations, and Azeroth twenty more." Khadgar looked down upon Gorfrunch with a hard gaze, though he didn't quite frown. His eyes snarled.

Mutters spread through the Grin prisoners, and Aldor guardians spread between the hexagons and the Alliance ranks before any young got ideas into their heads.

"I ent done that." Gorfrunch glared back at Khadgar.

"You deny bringing an army into Outland with intent to pillage?"

"Brought an army here. We's chasing Keepers, 'at raided our home in the Swamp of Sorrows. Killed many young, ripped down all our defenses and torched our supplies."

"Your crimes are far greater." Khadgar began listing off numbers and locations, ranging from Honor Hold to battles still occurring in Blade's Edge.

"And more necessary. We's fought with Stromgarde, and Ironforge, and Aerie Peak, but the Grin's seen enough war. We retreat to Swamp of Sorrows and try to make peace, but war found us."

"And that explains your rampage across Hellfire, Terrokar, and Zangarmarsh?"

"We making a pilgrimage. Alliance forces attack us the whole way. Our assaults on Honor Hold and Allerian Stronghold were necessary to make it across the whole distance without our supply lines being cut to pieces." Gorfrunch snarled at Khadgar, whose mouth opened to respond, but nothing came out.

<A PILGRIMAGE WHERE?>

The voice physically pressed against the bodies of everyone present, some of the younger Aldor chanting the chains into being even looked startled for a moment before resuming their spells. Gorfrunch raised his eyes from Khadgar to the floating presence.

"Nagrand, and here. Heard there's peace here, and orcs in Nagrand."

<A PILGRIMAGE IS ACCEPTABLE. THE PRISONERS WILL BE MOVED TO THE NAGRAND BORDER, AND OBSERVED AT ALL TIMES BY ALDOR AND SCRYER REPRESENTATIVES.>

Khadgar jerked his head up, then slowly returned his gaze to Gorfrunch, with a visible effort.

"His crimes still stand."

<THEY WILL BE REPAID IN THE BURNING LEGION'S BLOOD.>

Gorfrunch dropped to both knees, and lowered his head.

"My Grin will fight for your peace, if you'll let us have ours." Agho'Linn smiled.

<THE TRIAL IS OVER. MAY PEACE AND THE LIGHT REIGN.>

## Agholinn

<THE TRIAL IS OVER. MAY PEACE AND THE LIGHT REIGN.>

The burning-hot glares of the Grin didn't matter as A'dal's words echoed and rounded throughout the room. The warchief had remembered her words, and he used them. Privately, she was impressed at his use of the word 'pilgrimage,' but that was neither here nor there. The Grin were to be let free, save for a pair of nannies attached to them.

And one of those nannies were to be a Scryer...

Before the Scryer contingent could empty from the room, Agho'Linn swept her way over to where Voren'thal stood, her sweetest smile plastered on her face. She made a deep and flowing curtsy to the older elf, a formality he returned with equal grace. Voren'thal was a push-over for tradition, and Agho'Linn knew it.

"Miss Nerel'thos, a pleasure to see you here," he opened quietly, a smile growing on his face.

"The pleasure is always mine, Arcanist," she returned with a small laugh, "I hate to repeat myself each time we meet. It makes me feel as though I am nagging."

"You never allow yourself the pleasure without reason, Agho'Linn," Voren'thal countered with a grin, "You've visited me in the Library on one too many occasions for me to believe otherwise."

"Voren'thal, you know my rank within the Scryers, and I know you've heard the rumors that I merely bought and traded my way into the position. I need something to do...something that will prove the nay-sayers wrong...something to show them I've worked for what I've achieved," she spoke fiercely, forcefully, not an ounce of pleading to her tone, "Give me this. Give me the opportunity to show them."

He regarded the red-haired elf carefully, eyeing her. Agho'Linn kept a businesslike posture, and carefully folded her hands in front of her. His decision made, he nodded to her.

"You have it, then. You are charged with keeping an eye on these...warriors...as they make their pilgrimage to Nagrand," he made a bow as he finished his words, taking his leave a moment later.

Agho'Linn turned back to the crowd of Grin, and grinned wickedly at the lot of them before strutting her way out of the room. There were letters to be sent, arrangements to be made. She would let word of her appointment reach Gorfrunch's ears when they would. Otherwise, he would simply have to be surprised when he suddenly had her at his side as they rode to Nagrand.

Her laughter rang out in the room as she exited.

This was going better than she could have planned.

## Faquarl

Faquarl woke up.

The past few days had been a blur. Arkonn's wedding was a lift in the depression but he barely made that. His talks with the Thunderlords had been scarce due to his condition. What condition? Why did he feel so frail and feverish now? This could not go on.

The old tauren got up from his cot and made his way outside to see the Grin dueling and enjoying themselves. Arkonn looked up and saw the tauren. The elf walked up to his friend with a grin on his face.

"How've you been holding up?"

"Nothing I won't get over. We need to get the Thunderlords up to speed. Find Sidicus and Zurven."

The elf nodded and gave a salute as he went out in search of them.

"What's going on with you, sir?" The soft voice came from behind Faquarl and he turned slowly to meet it.

"Hello, Felora. I will explain later - gather all of the Bhurkas. I don't have time to discuss this now."

As he finished speaking he heard others begin to march toward him. He saw Zurven and Sidicus marching toward him with Arkonn leading the procession.

"So joo finally ready to tell us what be goin' on?" Faquarl nodded at the troll and began explaining everything. He told them of the staff and the small war that was held over it. The explosion was the staff releasing its energy, which was a healing force. Finally he asked them for Thunderlord assistance in the conflict to come.

## Sidicus

Sidicus had just returned from assisting with the attack on Toshley's Station and sat repairing his armor when the elf found him.

"Jo is up and feeling better, he wishes to talk to you and Zurven." With that Sid gave a nod and stood, putting his armor back on. Several of the metal rings jingled loosely as the old orc started to walk to the camp the Grin had set up.

When he walked out of his room, Zurven was already waiting for him. "Took joo long enough, pug face." The two started marching behind the elf until they came to Faquarl.

"So, joo finally ready to tell us what be goin' on?" Zurven asked. Faquarl nodded and proceeded to explain the recent events. Sidicus sat there listening quietly as the tauren explained what he knew.

"I am willing to help the Grin when I can, but as for the clan, the warlords and chieftainess will need to discuss it before committing the Thunderlords to your cause." Sidicus paused a moment before continuing. "I am concerned though. I went to assist the Grin against Toshley's Station. I had heard that they discovered your presence and that is why you attacked. But they seemed to have been caught unaware. As much as I dislike the Alliance, and gnomes in particular, I cannot send clansmen into battle for no reason but to fill someone's bloodlust."

## Faquarl

Sidicus had touched on a subject that Faquarl couldn't give an answer to. Was he filled with bloodlust? Was he filled with the one thing he had been trying to lead his people in avoiding?

The tauren looked at Arkonn for an answer, but none would come from the elf.

"I was...misinformed. I had received information...it was faulty. I..."

*"It was a preemptive strike. The station itself is merely for communications. You had to stop the information of your presence from being sent to Khadgar."*

The druid sighed with relief at the voice supplying aid, but then he remembered what had happened when the voice told him to attack the gnome settlement. The excruciating pain that had coursed through him.

*"The moment you question me is the moment your task fails."*

With that ominous reply, Faquarl grimly nodded.

"The attack was a preemptive assault. They knew our location but they are not a military establishment. We had to stop the news of our being here from being transmitted to further Alliance camps. I assure you, it was all tactically sound. No one wants to end this war more than I."

*"And you will, as long as you listen to me..."*

## Sidicus

Sid gave a grunt and a nod, appearing to have accepted the answer. But something wasn't right, the stuttering in Jo's initial response, and then the sureness he replied with after a pause. Also the fact Sid knew that even as a communication station, Toshley's was still prepared for battles and if they had known of the Grin's presence would have had somewhat better defenses. But Sid did not bring any of these concerns to light; he would speak to Zurven over them later in the evening, as well as consult the spirits.

"For now we will protect you and the staff until a more definite decision can be made." At that Sid sat silently, listening to any comments or disagreements Zurven might give on the issue.

## Gorfrunch

Campfires rose up outside the western walls of Shattrath. What was supposed to have been a quick march to reunite with their long-lost Mag'har cousins had turned into an administrative red tape parade as the Aldor and Scryer retinues stood awkwardly and their superiors lagged behind in Shattrath, arguments raging over who would lead the watchdogs. After a few hours, the Scryer command retinue appeared out of Shattrath, with the Aldor trailing behind it.

A tap on the shoulder instantly woke Gorfrunch, who had been taking his first rest in the last two days

under the healthiest tree yet seen in Outland.

“They here?”

Grimnir nodded. “Boss, I think you want to meet with 'em.”

“We move now. I've waited this long for them, and they can damned well wait for me to finish my business in Garadar.” Gorfrunch stood up and began yelling for camp to be packed up and mounts to be saddled. The orders spread quickly, and the camp disappeared in a matter of minutes. The Aldor and Scryer officers met with their respective retainers, then moved purposefully down towards Gorfrunch's collapsing command tent, but the Grin began riding before they reached earshot.

“Halt!” Rork'hal pulled his worg up short, and pointed to the south. The rest of the Mag'har patrol stopped near him, and gazed in the direction he indicated. “Dust cloud. Narrow, but this time of year the grass is thick. Can't tell how large their force is, could spread to either side of the road, but for that much dust from the road, this isn't a Broken raid. It's from the direction of Telaar, too.” Krut nodded. “Inform Hellscream.”

The rest of the Grin remained outside as the Mag'har guards escorted Gorfrunch to the bonfire in the center of Garadar. Two orcs stood waiting for him, one tall and brown in flowing robes, one smaller, green, and covered in plate. A second Mag'har sat on a log beside the fire, eying Gorfrunch warily as he sharpened an axe.

“You've arrived! Thank the spirits, I -” Captain Kroghan stopped himself as his eyes dropped to Gorfrunch's tabard.

“Not your friends from Orgrimmar, then, Captain?” The Mag'har on the log sighed and returned his attention to the axe.

“Who are you?” The Mag'har in robes demanded.

“Scum! Traitors!” Kroghan steamed, but the Mag'har in robes ignored him.

“I am Gorfrunch Smashblade, Chieftain of the Blacktooth Grin. And you?”

“Jorin Deadeye, Chieftain of the Bleeding Hollow.”

“Deadeye? Son of Kilrogg?” The Mag'har in dark robes nodded. “And this is Garrosh Hellscream.” He gestured to the Mag'har beside him, who remained on his log, but looked up and grunted acknowledgment.

“Honor to both bloodlines. I bring my clan here seeking sanctuary.”

“The Grin seek nothing but war, Jorin.” Kroghan had gained his composure, and glared at Gorfrunch as he spoke.

Jorin blinked, and looked past Gorfrunch to the mass of milling Grin outside the gates. “We have...little space to spare. As you can see, we are filled with defenseless refugees from our other villages in Nagrand as it stands. I don't see why your clan need space here, considering the weapons I can see from here...”

“Refugees? I was told the Mag'har had found a peaceful existence here in Nagrand. Is there war, here?” Kroghan looked taken aback.

“Ogres and Broken are a constant threat, and have driven us from two villages, and even dare attack Garadar itself at night. On top of that, around the same time your forces were spotted, a column was spotted from Telaar. That have anything to do with your lot?” Jorin eyed Gorfrunch suspiciously with his uncovered eye.

“Red fist banners?”

“Aye.”

“Stromgarde. We came from Shattrath, fleeing them and hoping to find peace here. It seems Khadgar and the Alliance have broken A'dal's edict. We will help you fight them off.” Gorfrunch turned to Hellscream.

“Will you join us on the battlefield?” The Mag'har fingered one of his axes, and spoke without looking up.

“This orc here claims support from Orgrimmar is due any week. I don't know his bone with you, but I will not turn away warriors.” Hellscream stood with a sigh. “We are doomed to failure, yes, but it is not an orc's way to accept it without dignity and honor. I have learned that.” Jorin opened his mouth to protest, but shut it again with an exasperated sigh. “The Hollow will fight with you,” he said instead.

“Well, well, well. Thought you were trying to pull a fast one, Chieftain. I might have had to sic these elves on you if you hadn't stopped when you did!” The group of orcs turned around to see a laughing blood elf in full Scryer regalia standing with heavily plated retainers armed to the teeth flanking her. A similar group of three Draenei was pushing its way into the gates, with weary Mag'har taking their weapons.

“Agho'Linn!?”

“Ah, we have met before, that's true. All the more reason I was the perfect candidate for the Scryer appointment,” Agho'Linn trilled with a twinkle in her eye. “It seems the Alliance have decided to defy A'dal's peace. Which puts me in the unenviable position of enforcing it. Have we a battle to fight?”

“Dub dub bur novas! O nogoth andovas dub!”

“I have to say, the Aldor performed admirably under pressure. Anchorite Triv'qom fulfills all of the duties of an astute diplomat and tactician admirably. Looks like they forgot an important factor, though.”

The draenei babbled angrily, gesturing to the south as Gorfrunch marched, Hellscream slunk, Jorin trudged, and the blood elves glided out to meet the Alliance before they reached Garadar. Captain Kroghan stared at the draenei in utter bewilderment and despair.

## Itarille

Itarille awoke with a start. Something wasn't right. Surveying the room, she knew instantly what was wrong. Derken was not in his bed. Her breath caught in her throat, as her mind raced. Had he indeed snuck out to join the fight? Itarille's body tensed, her muscles sensing the terror that filled her mind. But the wound wasn't fully healed...

Hearing a commotion coming from the center of Shattrath, Itarille wondered if she would have far to look. Before she could investigate, however, something struck her from behind, and all went black.

Itarille had no idea how she came to the bed she awoke in, nor did she remember why her head throbbed so. Derken stood over her, concern crossing his face. She smiled in spite of herself, happy to see the fighting hadn't taken him. “I thought you were going to join the fray,” she stated, sitting up despite the increased throbbing in the back of her skull.

“I was going to,” Derken replied. “But we have more important matters to attend to.”

Itarille nodded. “Go on, my husband and my captain.”

## Faquarl

Faquarl gathered his most trusted Grin that evening. Felora, Yalim, and Shadiel sat around a fire in the Thunderlord Citadel.

“There is this voice I am hearing...”

Felora immediately grimaced in concern. Yalim laughed it off like it was a joke. Shadiel seemed interested, curiosity peaked.

“This voice...it has been telling me what to do since the battle in Zangarmarsh. I trust it.”

“What could have caused this? Did the explosion addle your brain?” Yalim still thought the whole idea was preposterous. “The war is getting to you. You're overtired!”

“No, listen to me. We must prepare to lead this war to Shadowmoon anyway we can.”

Shadiel looked up at the tauren, trying to select his words carefully.

“Jo...your mental state. You...realize it has been deteriorating since Yagyu's death. I think the staff's healing properties have been fixing some of your mental defects...I just think you are having difficulties readjusting.”

“What?!?” Faquarl roared. “You're telling me I'm clinically *insane*??”

“No...I am saying that you don't know what is going on right now. And I am trying to offer an explanation. Yagyu's death hit you hardest. And the constant assaults on Taugrek's Stand chipped away at you. You were once brilliant, then you became a peacemonger filled with regret.”

Faquarl snarled at the elf and prepared to attack. He was soon held back by Yalim and Felora. Suddenly an orc walked in on them.

“I hear what you say. Voices. Ogre know lots about dose tings. Dee be demons at werk.”

The orc sat in front of them. This one was larger than most and had a look of sheer stupidity about him. His shoulders were very round but his muscles drew attention away from that.

“You're a half-blood, aren't you, orc?”

"Me am Frark and I have note for you. There be uhhhhhh I forgot...oh wait! Fight for Halaa on Toosday at 6PM. Gorfinch wants you there."

"You... you read it?"

"Wut read mean? Orc sed he had note, he attack Frark so I smash him. He told Frark to find you and told me wut to say."

Faquarel looked confused, but if what the Mok'nathal said was true then there was no time to waste. He began running about to prepare everyone. The Thunderlord gryphons could get them there fastest, wherever Halaa was. There was only one more matter to take care of.

"Frark. You're coming with me. You know too much. I want you in my sight at all times."

"Wut?"

With that Faquarel hit the half-blood on the head and slung him over a shoulder. The night's ride would be arduous, but the warchief wouldn't call unless he needed Faquarel and the staff.

## Zarvin

The mood within Shattrath was tense. The guards were out in force. Members of the Alliance armies gathered in pubs to talk of the Grin being on their very doorstep and being unable to do anything about it.

Zarvin had come to Shattrath to go into service to Khadgar. The new general of the Alliance forces had grown furious on the last few days.

"A'dal FREED them?!?! After all I told him? After all of the evidence? The trial was a farce. That naaru has other intentions behind that decision and as benevolent as they may be, he can not trust them."

"Aye sir. Ah agree with ye a hundred persen'. But the fact remains tha' we cannae do anythin' about it."

"No, we must...but what? The recent attack on Toshley has shown the Grin's hand. The force that was missing on our raid, previous to Gorfrunch's arrest, has shown they lie in Blades Edge. The only possible support there would be the Thunderlords. If that is true then they are our enemies as well and most likely the strongest suppliers to the Grin."

"So what're ye suggestin'?"

"The Mag'har are led by the lethargic Hellscream. Gorfrunch is predictable, he will try to ascertain dominance through force. He wouldn't dare attack the Mag'har with the Aldor and Scryer representative, however. We must provide a means for him to attack something."

"Why the bloody hell would ye want that!?"

"It will prove to A'dal that the Grin seeks war and we can use it to our advantage. We must split our army. We will send the bulk into Telaar to scare the Mag'har and allow Gorfrunch to attack in guise of fighting for their interests. For that would be his easiest excuse to fool the Aldor and Scryer representatives. We must send a large enough force for him to call down the contingent in Blades Edge."

"I see!"

"Yes, once we get the entire Grin - and perhaps Thunderlords - in Nagrand, the battle for Halaa will take place. This battle would allow us to sack Thunderlord Stronghold while it is defenseless. If their strongest ally is beaten and the "warchief" ousted in front of A'dal, we will have won."

"When're we plannin' ta do this sah? I will get the men ready."

"Tuesday...we will take Halaa on Tuesday and force his hand."

## Agholinn

If the expression on the Warchief's face was amusing when Agho'Linn arrived at Garadar with a pair of plated retainers in tow, introducing herself as the Scryer representative in charge of the Grin's pilgrimage, the more shocked expression he gave as she readied her cobalt talbuk, Arlen, for the ride into Halaa was priceless. She had purposely brought along her Mag'har tabard, and had unfurled it to use as barding over Arlen's shoulders, assuring the Mag'har that she, at very least, came in peace. The approving nods of Hellscream and Deadeye were all she needed in confirmation that her actions spoke louder than words.

Arlen's tack was laid out carefully on the grass, ready to be soaped and oiled before the ride into Halaa. It was busy work Agho'Linn could have assigned to any page, or even a refugee child looking for a bit of spending coin, but it was work she could lose herself in, and be alone with her thoughts. She needed to focus and

to gather them before the ride to Halaa.

She soaped a clean rag and began to suds the saddle with small circles, working the dirt and dust out of the leather. Never in a million years had she even dreamed that she would know how to clean her own tack...or be riding anything other than a hawkstrider. Yet, here she was, sitting on a patch of grass in magicked and armored robes, cleaning and oiling a saddle meant for a talbuk. She didn't dare remind herself that she was technically in outer space; that harrowing thought still chilled her to the bone.

Yes, here she was, posed as a champion of peace, acting in the name of the mighty Scryers, keeping an eye on a band of murdering Horde as they made a "pilgrimage" to Nagrand. It was such a farce. Gorfrunch was not subtle, and though his words had lured A'dal into complacency, they had not fooled Agho'Linn. The warchief would find war wherever he went, and the Blacktooth Grin would follow him to their deaths. It was needless, wasteful.

The saddle finished, she set it aside for Arlen's bridle, rinsing the bit and then cleaning and oiling the leathers. The sun was warm, and the breeze cool, providing excellent conditions for this type of work. A small piece of her wondered if she would have time to clean her netherdrake's tack. Shaking her head, she rid herself of the thought. Not today; maybe tomorrow if things went well tonight.

Agho'Linn was subtle in spades, but even this charade was exploring her outer limits. She had managed to get through to the warchief, which had saved him and the Grin from indefinite imprisonment, and while doing so she had managed to make them believe her to be an enemy to their cause, having pulled Suncrown's own out of harm's way. Cajoling her way into the appointment as the Grin's nanny from the Scryers was simple, yet elegant at the same time. It kept the appearance that she was no friend to them, while it put her in a position as a buffer between the Grin and Shattrath.

She hadn't bothered to correct the error regarding the draenei as the Aldor representative for that very reason. Triv'qom's complete lack of comprehension of what was going on around him made him useless as testimony against the Grin. She was the only buffer, and in truth she was a friend.

Since the first time Esere had dragged her along to one of the Blacktooth Grin's raids on some poor Alliance village or another, Agho'Linn had been enamored with the colorful collection of orcs, tauren, Forsaken, trolls, and renegade Sin'dorei. They loved each other in a brutal incarnation of brotherhood, bleeding side by side. She was envious of it, to a degree; she had never experienced quite that type of bond before, and traipsing around with the Grin as they terrorized the countryside of Redridge, Westfall, or wherever else, gave her a taste of it.

Putting the final touches on the bridle, Agho'Linn set it aside as well, turning her focus to the saddle-blanket, shaking it out and brushing off the excess hair that Arlen had shed. Fishing a curry comb from her saddle bags, she began to work on Arlen's coat, starting at his neck and working her way down his back and to his belly. Arlen pawed at the ground and snuffled his satisfaction with her ministrations.

In recent months, she had watched their fracture after the devastating loss at Ironforge. She had mourned the passing of a legendary time with unshed tears, and silently held hope for a redawning of those days. When the Blacktooth Grin reformed, she had celebrated in private and became a rallying force for Suncrown when the Grin made the call. Thankfully, no one had ever questioned her motives. She wasn't sure she could explain it if she tried.

Finished with the curry comb and the brush, the leather of her tack dried, Agho'Linn began to retack Arlen, making sure that her Mag'har tabard was carefully situated. She tightened straps, adjusted pieces, and made a final inspection of Arlen, and then herself. They were as ready as they were going to be. She mounted up a moment later.

Now, the Blacktooth Grin were strangers in a strange land, and strangers to themselves. Some wanted peace, an end to the fighting, others still craved war in whatever form it reached them in. There was no agreement between the two sides. Agho'Linn worked to make sure the rest of the world did not interfere too greatly as they licked their wounds and made peace...at least with each other.

She pulled Arlen around and kicked him into a dainty trot, plastering a pretty smile on her face, making sure her eyes twinkled mischievously. Riding towards the warchief, she saw him frown and scowl at her as she approached - exactly the response she sought to illicit from him. Letting Arlen come to a halt an uncomfortably close distance from Gorfrunch, she leaned forward in her saddle, resting her elbows on the horn.

"I'm ready whenever you are."

## Sidicus

A fog lay across the field and all was oddly quiet...the ground devoid of vegetation and life, a dark dust lining the cracked ground in its place. A loud roar cut through the silence and the transparent wolf looked toward it, sniffing the air. Letting out a howl, the wolf started to spring, coming to the crest of a hill and looking over at pure hell. Green balls of flame and rock rained from the sky, obliterating any and all that they hit. Infernals rose from the craters to smash and scatter the forces unlucky enough to be nearby. On the field the wolf's sharpened vision saw that the combatants were both Horde and Alliance and the chaos of the battle held no allegiances.

The wolf transformed into the form of Sidicus, lighting coming down and sparking around his armor and axes. He let out a yell and started to charge through the battlefield. He quickly reached the edge of the battle and raised his axes to strike at the first armored human near him. As his axes came down, the human he targeted and the combatants before him vanished. They were replaced by a giant elemental that consistently switched between the elements.

The voice of the elemental changed as its form did, but its words were continuous, the voices saying different parts.

"Those you trust...are not evil and do not lie...but are not in control of their actions. A puppeteer's strings...pull on them. For the means...of the masters. Beware."

With that, the elemental exploded in a burst of lights, a giant laughing pit fiend taking its place. As it raised its claws, Sid raised his axes to parry the dropping war glaive...all went black.

Sidicus snapped back to reality, his totems around him and sweat pouring down his naked chest. His breathing was heavy as a knock on the door caught his attention.

"Enter," he bellowed to the door and an orc warrior walked in.

"The other clan left, dey take da clan's wyverns. Gronak dunno where they go though." Gronak said, the smell of grog surrounding the orc.

Sid gave a grunt and nodded, rising and taking the time to put his newly-repaired chain mail armor on properly.

"Understood. It seems the Grin have used our hospitality, put the clan in danger, and taken our wyverns." Sid gave an angry growl. "Send scouts to find them, I want some answers."

At that Gronak gave a nod. "Ok'ay boss man will do."

Sid looked out a nearby window at the horizon giving a low growl and contemplating what the spirits had shown him.

## Esere

It was a strange feeling: a pulling of the senses that didn't quite add up. It ripped her from her peaceful dreams, and left her suddenly awake in the early morning gloom. Scanning around her, she found that the room was no different and everything was as it should be. Yet there was something amiss, and she all but knew that she had somewhere to be. She left the warm confines of the bed, careful not to disturb the man still asleep, dressed with quick proficiency, and hurried away from the Fel'Solan offices.

The sensation drew her to the Farstrider Square. As she noticed the unusual absence of Silvermoon guard, the leather soles of her boots crunched on glass. The streetlamps had been shattered, leaving the courtyard bathed in near darkness. The only light radiated from the Blood Knight headquarters. Esere went for the sword at her side, only to realize that in her rush to investigate, she went completely unarmed. Much more cautiously, she walked through the unguarded door, moving toward the light, toward the feeling.

The open hall was likewise empty. All those who might be idling during the early morning hours over alcohol and war stories in good company, or those who might be starting their morning training...they were simply gone. The odd glow was coming from the railed opening to the naaru's chamber below.

Typically, a strange red aura seeped into the Blood Knight's training room, residuals from the Magisters' binding spells. It was now black and gold sworls. She moved onto the balcony and peered over the protective

railing. A moment later, she hurdled it, landing awkwardly but kneeling quickly in the open chamber. "My Prince," she whispered.

He noticed her not at all. His hand was outstretched, and the play of the dual lights was a battle between the captured naaru and the Sin'dorei royal. His withered shadowed form stood amidst fallen magisters, and Lady Liadrin was no more conscious than the others. Ringing the room in the mages' place were instead strangely colored elves in armor she'd never seen before. M'uru chimed, fighting the pull of Kael'thas' will desperately.

A bead of sweat trickled down the Sun Prince's brow, and he began to falter. He brought his second hand to his chest, where a fel-infused gem pierced it, the light within matched a beating heart. The power there grew, intensifying and broadening his power. His darkness invaded the room more fully, and M'uru was gone. Kael'thas smirked and turned to the knight at his feet. "Rise, Greyseer. We have much to do."

Unsteadily, she gained her feet. As she moved to follow him, two elves that stood near the door intercepted her. They were unlike any Sin'dorei or high elf she had ever seen. Their odd-colored skin seared her arms where they grabbed her, and the woman was a full head taller than her while the man was even taller still. Horns protruded from their skulls and there were fangs peeking through their mouths. There was no way to shake either of them off her, and their strength kept her rooted to the spot.

"M-my Prince, what is this?"

"You've done well as my spy all these months, yet you are imperfect, Greyseer. Something that will be rectified."

## Faquarl

Halaa stood smoldering with Horde flags flapping in the wind.

"Halaa is ours! Garadar is safe and the Horde reigns supreme in the lands of Nagrand!" The warchief roared and the loyal Grin cheered with bloodthirsty approval.

Faquarl waited for the warchief to separate from the masses and then took his opportunity to talk with him.

"Greetings, warchief, it is good to see you are well. How did the events in Shattrath play out?"

"Fine, exactly as planned."

"Wonderful. However, I have taken notice of Garadar and must admit, I am impressed. These people respect us, we could live freely here. There is an arena where we could hold our tournaments not too far from Halaa."

The warchief sighed and looked Faquarl straight in the eyes. Faquarl saw the charade dissipate immediately.

*"Kill him."*

"This was never about finding rest, was it? You plan on fighting on. WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?!?"

"Listen ter me, I ain't wastin' my life and that of my clan, the Blacktooth Grin, greatest warriors of the Horde, by restin' in no daisy garden. The time has come fer you to wake up from yer delusions. This clan will never settle down as long as I am chieftain."

"Never say never." The half-orc, half-ogre named Frark had been listening to the two warlords argue. Gorfrunch looked at the stranger.

"Who is he?"

"I picked him up in Blades Edge. He has a knack for eavesdropping. But that is beside the point. You have become a blight to your people and they are blinded by you. We saw where the power lies in this clan. I have as much clout as you, orc, and I will not watch as this clan kills itself."

"This clan can't live without war. We lasted one day in the swamps before we were attacked. What makes you think we could go on anywhere else?"

"The swamps was a set up. Bellmont has already been investigating that."

The warchief smiled at this, a malicious glint in his eye.

"And now yer ready to trust Bell?"

Faquarl began to register everything. All of the points connected in that moment.

*"Kill him."*

"You? You led Stromgarde on us? You were our betrayer?"

"Best get some rest, Jo. Before you start making any more accusations you might regret."

And with that, the warchief began to walk away. Faquarl's anger swelled. The voice was taunting him with what seemed the only rational option.

*"Kill him!"*

Faquarl tightened his hands into fists and he walked away. There was one person who was on his side who had to know the truth.

## Zarvin

"Sah! The Alliance forces cannae handle anymore fighting at Halaa!"

Zarvin and Khadgar sat in a war room in the Aldor tier of Shattrath. Khadgar was sworn to neutrality by A'dal and could not let the naaru know that he was the general of the Alliance.

"That is fine. I have received word from those we sent into Blades Edge. The Thunderlords are left alone and without means of escape. Now that the Grin is celebrating their "victory" in Halaa, we can lay siege to Thunderlord Stronghold. We will force the Thunderlords into submission like the dogs they are."

"Sah, when do I give the order fer the siege ta begin?"

"Immediately."

Khadgar snapped his fingers and conjured a glass of wine. Lifting it he took a sip, poring over tactical maps.

"Danath was out-muscled, Zarvin. The Horde has nearly twice our power. They need a name..."

"What're ya goin' on about, sir?"

"This Horde... Thrall leads the New Horde. Peaceful and ensuring a future for the orcs. Bladefist leads the Fel Horde, easily corrupted and used. I would call them the Old Horde but only one of them is truly from my time. No... Smashblade leads a Dread Horde. They have instilled fear into this chaos-sewn land...but fear can be fought."

Khadgar walked over to a bookshelf and pulled out a dusty tome. The runes were Dwarven and easily readable for Zarvin. The tome was a manifest for all those who went beyond the Dark Portal.

"As I said, this Dread Horde instills fear through muscle. And Danath suffers because of it. We can not fight with our brawn but with our heads. Clarity is the antithesis of fear and we need harbingers to dispel this new blight on the land."

"Aye, but who?"

"We're going to reform the Brotherhood of the Horse. The past has indeed come full circle for Smashblade. For we were his downfall in a previous life, and the new Brotherhood shall be again. I will not fight this war to as a victim of fear. Now all that remains is to find one who can rally the Alliance armies."

"Aye, but what about Blades Edge?"

"Go! Release the order to attack! Thunderlord Stronghold shall fall before the Grin ever catches ear of it."

And with that Zarvin walked out. The squire had much respect for the veteran Danath, but Khadgar's vision and clarity was something to be in awe of. Even with the Horde seemingly unstoppable, it felt as though the Alliance were on the brink of victory.

## Chapter 4

### Jonn

Jonn left the gathering inside, walking out into the cold night air. He thought he would welcome some time to himself, away from the celebrating Grin inside the old stone building. He listened to the song being sung by drunken orcs as he started towards the northern lake and it began to fade away. He was pretty sure it was "Dabu kor Orshak," a song about fighting through a battle no matter what the costs, but the words were garbled to the point where he almost didn't recognise it.

The coast of the lake was blissfully quiet with not a soul in sight. Jonn even found a cozy-looking nook in the dip of terrain to sit back into and relax. For a brief moment he saw the nether energies tint the night sky

and the ground around him darken as his eyes closed, cutting out the ghostlight inside. He tried to enjoy his solitude while he could, for surely Grimface would soon notice that he had snuck out of the celebration and drag him back inside. He felt the back of his mouth with his tongue where his missing tooth was now very noticeable but took in the blessed silence as much as he could. Eventually he did hear footsteps approaching, but they weren't the drunken, plated clomps he had expected, but some much more quiet. Almost to the point where Jonn had to strain to hear them.

His eyes still closed, he kept his attention on the footsteps now lightly splashing against the water of the lake. Gruff voices whispered in the night.

"...keep a lookout..."

"...more than enough...we can hunt for the rest..."

Jonn opened his eyes and focused on what they saw: three green-skinned Blacktooth orcs, loading a small boat with food and traveling supplies. Enough supplies to last for a long trip. As he slowly rose to his feet the orcs finally noticed his presence and froze in their tracks.

"Ah yes," the oldest of the three said, "The magus."

"Looks like you're all going on a long trip," Jonn said, trying to make his voice a bit more cheery. The youngest actually gripped the hilt of his weapon tightly and flashed a dangerous look Jonn's way.

"Yes, my sons and I. And I will tell you now magus, we don't expect to be coming back."

Jonn and the gray-haired orc locked gazes for what felt like a good long while. Deserters. Something that, of course, wasn't looked too fondly on in the clan.

"Didn't care much for the outcome of a winning battle?" Jonn volunteered.

Silence began to stretch on too long the old one spoke again, "My family has shed blood for the Horde for generations. I lost a wife and son to battle, my other son lost a hand..." Jonn noticed the middle orc shift his leather bundle over his left forearm. "...and I can assure you our enemies lost much worse...! We have no regrets that we have fought honorably for our clan.

"A year ago I had assumed to meet my end on that world on the other side of the portal. The possibility that I could return to the green fields of my ancestors...to spend my final days in this place...the opportunity will never come again."

"Gorfrunch may settle the Grin in Nagrand permanently. You know that right?"

"No." the old one said with all his heart, "He will not. Honor through battle..."

The old orc trailed off, looking for the best way to explain himself, but Jonn thought he knew where the conversation was going. For an orc of his age to say a life of eternal warfare was impossible would be...impossible. And in a society where worth was measured through battle, the very concept of being rewarded would definitely be considered a weakness by many.

"Move along then," Jonn said after awhile, to the shock of the youngest orc, who nearly dropped his axe. "Move along, the celebration should be ending soon."

There was no verbal thanks, only a stern nod and all three orcs finished loading the boat and rowed it across the lake into the darkness. Later on that night the magus was back inside with the celebration, being slapped on the back and sharing drinks with other members of the Grin.

"FEAR THE GRIN!"

"A THOUSAND BATTLES MORE!!"

## Agholinn

The Blacktooth Grin tended their wounded and then tucked in for general merry-making, celebrating their victory. Agho'Linn had watched, with a quiet smile, careful not to give herself away. When finally things looked at a close, she called out for Maspeth, her azure netherdrake. She hadn't been summoned back to Shattrath yet, but it was nearly inevitable at this point.

Thankfully the flight from Garadar to Shattrath was a short one, and Maspeth cut through the air with lazy strokes of her wings. Agho'Linn was safely deposited outside of A'dal's chambers in minutes. She sent Maspeth away, straightened herself and, shaking the last of the battle from her mind, assumed a regal posture. Allowing her feet to carry her to A'dal himself, she made sure to employ her particular knack for gliding. It wouldn't impress A'dal or any of the other naaru, but it had a tendency to catch the eye of the rest of the people in the room.

"I want her here to explain this outrage *now*," Khadgar bellowed from a corner of the room, his back to Agho'Linn.

"Ask and ye shall receive," Agho'Linn snapped back, her tone not even feigning pleasantry.

He stalked over to her, a few of his advisors in tow, while Agho'Linn stood her ground defiantly. Khadgar stopped inches from her, nodding his head in the briefest of formality. Agho'Linn didn't even give him that much.

"The Blacktooth Grin were on a pilgrimage to peace in Nagrand with the Mag'har. You were sent to ensure that, and yet I hear tales of battle at Halaa...and of *you* riding in the column," Khadgar accused, pointing a finger in Agho'Linn's face.

"Hrmph," Agho'Linn glowered in return, "They rode in search of peace and found an army marching on Garadar. Halaa happened to be the unfortunate battleground. What did you expect, Khadgar? For them to sit by and watch as the Mag'har defended?"

The faintest of smiles teased at the corner of Khadgar's lips. Agho'Linn blinked in recognition of the expression, her surprise quickly fading into a scowl. Khadgar schooled his expression, but it was already too late.

"That is exactly what you expected, didn't you," Agho'Linn answered for him in a hushed whisper, heard only between the pair of them.

"I request that The Blacktooth Grin be collected and brought back to Shattrath to stand in a new trial," Khadgar projected in a loud voice, keeping his eyes locked with Agho'Linn's.

Anger and illogical rage welled up inside of her, and she fought to maintain control of her words, "The Blacktooth Grin defended, not attacked. They did not push from Halaa to Telaar. They honored the traditions of their blood and fought for what was theirs, but honored your edict, A'dal, for peace."

Silence fell on the room, and Agho'Linn held her breath in anticipation. Khadgar had engineered this, but she had no way to prove it. Her blood boiled at Khadgar and the situation, she wanted nothing more than to reach out and strangle him. Horrible, deceitful man.

<THE BLACKTOOTH GRIN WILL REMAIN ON PILGRIMAGE.>

The melodic voice of A'dal sounded, booming in a head-splitting frequency. The discomfort was nothing to Agho'Linn, whose smile easily went from ear to ear, even as she held Khadgar's glare with a lifted chin. She had won.

Soft noises of the day's business returned to A'dal's chamber, sharply accented by Khadgar's angry footsteps out of the room. He flashed Agho'Linn a toothy, wolfish grin before he had turned on his heel, which set her ill at ease, but she shrugged off the feeling and started to make her way out of the chambers. She made a small nod and curtsy to A'dal as she passed.

A few steps, and she stopped in her tracks. A heavily plated Sin'dorei woman with a curiously familiar ponytail was striding purposefully towards A'dal. She was flanked by two Blood Knights of high rank, if Agho'Linn judged their armor correctly. Blinking, Agho'Linn realized the woman was Liadrin, Matriarch of the blood elves...and she was in Shattrath.

Liadrin didn't even notice Agho'Linn as she brushed past, her single focus seemingly on A'dal. The Matriarch began to speak, and A'dal answered her but Agho'Linn comprehended very little, too shocked to fully understand what she was hearing. Kael'thas had returned to Silvermoon...with fel elves? They had taken M'uru? Kael'thas was ousted as a traitor to the Sin'dorei? The Sunstrider Dynasty...broken?

She reeled and rocked back on her heels, catching herself as the full weight of the situation hit her. A slow smile crept up on her lips as her thoughts turned to Esere. If Liadrin would no longer lend her Blood Knights in support of Kael'thas, Esere would no longer be forced into terms of service at Tempest Keep! Esere's private hell would be closed!

A small frown crept onto her lips. She hadn't seen Esere at Halaa, and she should have been there. Renault had been in attendance, but she hadn't had a chance to speak with him. Perhaps he was still in Shattrath and she could catch him before he returned to Silvermoon. He would know where Esere was.

Jonn

Grand Anchorite Almonen stood silently, making an attempt to bore through Agho'Linn with the same stern gaze he had used to train hundreds of warriors of the Light. The woman simply gave him a playful smirk and strode out of the central chamber.

"I would never question your wisdom A'dal, but even I am shamed to admit it confounds me at times like this."

<PATIENCE. MANY WILL FIND WHAT THEY WERE LOOKING FOR IN NAGRAND. BE THEIR INTENTIONS FALSE OR NOT.>

"WHAT IS THIS??" Gorfrunch bellowed, snapping Jonn to attention. Shocked murmurs and hungover groans arose throughout the inner section of Garadar.

The warchief stomped down the hill to the large everburning bonfire where stood a dozen high ranking officers of the Grin. Jonn had to nearly jump aside to avoid being knocked over a ledge.

"Two dozen... at least TWO DOZEN of my most loyal and valued Grin have DESERTED!"

Suddenly Jonn was regretting his actions the previous night.

"Hundreds and battles over the twenty years I have known most of the lot, never once did they question me, and then the eve after our greatest VICTORY in months they abandon their clan!? Madness!" Gorfrunch almost screamed the last word, and many in the gathering were taken back at their warchief's unusual break in composure. Faquarl found his way to the front of the now-gathering crowd and the orc fixed him with a murderous glare. "How drunk do you fools have to be to miss so many deserters?" Gor swept that same gaze across the Grin in the area. When it passed the clan's brewmaster, Jephon seemed to nearly choke on a piece of fruit he was eating and ducked behind a nearby hut.

"You did this, didn't you, Jo? You somehow convinced them that they would be better living out their lives as gluttonous wretches in a crippled world?"

A sound and sudden movement caught Jonn's attention. A blur like a slip of a watery painter's brush whipped across Gorfrunch's ear for a moment at his last spiteful word, followed by a tiny gust of air that sounded more like an angry worded curse than a gentle breeze. If anyone else had noticed the anomaly they hid it well - Jonn tuned out the harsh accusations and tried to make out the thing's movements with an odd fascination. Just then he spotted something similar slip from out of sight past Faquarl's horn and bob lazily next to his ear. The thing was so quiet, Jonn was shocked backed to awareness when the tauren jerked his head slightly to the side as if he had heard it.

"...around you," Faquarl was saying calmly, "The Grin have seen Nagrand and realised that their fathers and grandfathers lived in lands like this - they are coming to realize that a life of peace is possible *and* desirable."

Gorfrunch paused and took another look around, his face suddenly contorting in disgust as he spotted a green-skinned orc male looking back at him with a Mag'har female from a balcony not too far away. The woman gripped the Grin warrior's arm gently and gave him a look of genuine concern and affection.

"Perhaps these are matters which a better spoken of indoors, Chieftain," the young Hellscream volunteered.

"Flowery lands of perfume and sunshine!" The warchief began quietly, building momentum. "Do you all know why the Horde left Nagrand? It was not by force. It was because they discovered all who stay here are lulled into a false life and cursed to wilt away like the so many flowers these fools worship!" Deadeye and some of the other Mag'har snarled at that and glared back at Gorfrunch, "The only way men and the woman of the Horde can truly be at peace is if they have the fires of war at their heels! When our enemies fall beneath our boots and we feel the rush of battle through our blood - only then can we feel alive!"

"You will never let this clan rest," Faquarl said, containing his rage. "The depths at which you are willing to subdue your own clan borders on *madness!*" Out of the corner of Jonn's perception he heard a whispering echo of the tauren's last word, only said with so much more malice it could never have come from Jo.

"Jo! That's enough!" hissed Shadiel.

"Joo be watching your tongue, Jo," warned Pokes.

"Is this how you treat someone who has invited you into their home...who have fought beside you?" growled Deadeye.

It was like a wildfire, the area exploded into chaos. Some began yelling accusations, others tried to raise

their voices even higher to calm the others down. Jonn saw that same skittering blur of color, somehow still beneath the notice of everyone but himself, slither through the air and disappear with a faint, coarse chuckle.

"ENOOOOUUUUUGHHHH!" Gorfrunch bellowed, putting the assembly to silence and his own plated fist through a blunt fence post, sending splinters everywhere. "I have too much pride in this clan to let them waste away in a honied world without a future! GRIN! Gather your belongings and prepare to move north! NOW!"

A mix of dissatisfied, pleased, or simply frustrated murmurs drifted from the crowd. Faquarl walked over to the Grin who would be the forward air guard and started giving them instructions and flight paths before he was interrupted by the warchief. "Jo, make yourself busy and be sure our provisions are ready before we leave. Shadiel, Jonn - see to it that the air guard are properly prepared for the journey north. Pokes, I need to have a word with you."

Jo stood in shocked silence for a moment before stomping off. Gorfrunch and Pokes went off a ways to discuss something in private, the troll whispering some concerned words before heading out of hearing distance. Jonn took another look around, straining to see that strange blur of color once again, but all that he saw were dozens of Grin hurriedly making preparations to leave. Shadiel lightly put a hand on his shoulder and led him off to tasks that needed to be done.

## Derken

### *Elsewhere in Ashenvale:*

*"Be careful..."*

The lore keeper's voice rang in Derken's head. A beacon reminding him of the utmost secrecy of this mission.

A black flash grabbed his notice. Slowly eyeing a bush, Derken could make out two glowing golden eyes and he instinctively drew and notched an arrow. As he followed the eyes his draw slacked, and he returned his arrow to its sheath.

The form of Itarille's lithe body slowly replaced the hiding panther. Derken's attention turned to the area ahead. Attempting to ignore the foul energies occupying the place he refused to look at the monument above him. He pawed the ground, seeing the discolored dirt he sought. He slowly scooped as much as he could in his right hand and pulled a small glass vial from a pouch with his other. The dirt felt moist and sticky, still saturated by blood. He poured as much as would fit in the container and looked again at his hand.

"How could it be still fresh?" Derken whispered. Itarille's concern grew. Derken had told her nothing of what was to happen and the lore master was just as cryptic, but she refused to let Derken go alone.

"We must go, I know this all seems odd now but soon it will all be clear. If we fail, Azeroth and Durotar will both fall."

Derken sat in the Ashenvale inn eyeing the two vials. One held the mixed blood and dirt from Ashenvale, the other the pure waters of the Auberdine Moonwell. The contrast of the two seemed to almost blend as he stared.

"Elune, make this work...it has to..." Derken separated the two vials and slowly tipped the water vial, pouring its contents into the vial of dirt and blood.

The contents slowly saturated until the vial nearly overflowed. Derken began looking through the glass, slowly putting the empty vial aside. The mixture shifted and moved. Slowly the dirt thinned and the glow of the water infused the blood. The movement in the vial subsided and only the blood remained.

"Is that it? Now what? This is all he said..."

Suddenly a gruff voice began quietly whispering in Derken's mind, *"What would your kind want with me, elf?!"*

Derken's scowl suddenly shifted to a crooked grin.

## Sidicus

Klak muttered to himself, the air rushing past his face as his partner signaled for the wyverns to fly down toward

what appeared to have been a battlefield. Klak hadn't known how Sid expected him or Grut to find the Grin that had stole the wyverns from the stronghold, and felt even more uneasy when he spotted a column of Alliance soldiers marching north toward Blades Edge. But his gut told him he needed to finish this mission and that they had found the Grin when the two scouts saw the lights and flashes on the horizon.

The two scouts landed and tethered the wyverns to nearby trees. As they walked toward the camp in the distance they saw the remains and gore of the previous battle. It had been a bloodbath. Stepping into the middle of the camp, Klak took a deep breath and bellowed.

"Where is Far...Faqu...Faquarl?" The orc said, having a hard time pronouncing the name. He looked around to notice a tauren step out of a nearby tent holding a staff.

"What is it?" Faquarl asked, sounding as though he had just been disturbed from something. Upon seeing the Thunderlord tabards, he grimaced slightly. "I know why you're here, and I am sorry. We recieved orders to get to Halaa as soon as we could and had to take your wyverns to do so. We will be returning them."

At that Klak gave a slight nod. "That's good. I recommend you avoid the common path of the swamp and mountain caves though. Saw us some Alliance moving that way. Dunno why though." It was evident to everyone Klak was not the brightest. At that the other orc, Grut, slapped him over the back of the head. "Ya dolt, those pinkies were marchin' to attack. We gotta get back to the hold as soon as we can. Will the Grin be going with us?"

Faquarl did not answer; it seemed he was in his own world. "Well?" Grut said more forcefully. "Sidicus wants to speak with you anyway." At that Faquarl seemed to have snapped out of his daze. "Yes, we will fight with you."

The screams and noises of battle rang all around him. Sid drew his axe from out of the body of a dwarf's corpse as he let out a bloodcurdling battle cry. Those around him were taken up in his bloodlust, all throwing themselves onto the Alliance forces that dared to attack Thunderlord Stronghold. He suddenly felt a very cold pain in the middle of his chest. He turned to see an Alliance mage preparing to cast another frostbolt at him, his armor being the only thing to absorb the last deadly bolt.

He concentrated briefly and thrust his open palm toward the mage, she flew back slightly as the massive force of the earth shock hit her squarely in her chest. Seeing his prey stunned, Sid started charging toward her, parrying a footman's sword as he ducked under and raised his axe for a killing blow. The mage looked up in terror, raising her hand and spewing forth a cone of pure ice, catching Sidicus in the face but not slowing the axe as it landed onto her shoulder, cutting down through her collar bone and neck, killing her instantly.

Sid staggered back and felt a sharp pain in his midsection as the warrior he had parried shoved a sword into his gut. With a grunt, Sid smashed his fist and axe handle into the side of the warrior's head, throwing him to the side. The ground around where the warrior fell started to shoot up, molding into a fist as it closed around the warrior's midsection. The fist continued to rise with the rest of the body of the earth elemental as it tossed the crushed human to the side like a ragdoll.

Immediately magic bolts and missiles of all kinds bombarded the elemental, but it served its purpose, giving Sid enough time to run his now green glowing hands over his midsection, the power of the Earthmother closing the gaping wound there. He took an instant to look around.

He saw pure chaos, watching as the gate to the stronghold broke to splinters from mages' assaults, and more warriors of all the Alliance races poured through. He saw an orc rider catch an arrow with his throat and fall dead. He saw a troll whom he himself was training as his shaman apprentice explode in a shower of blood bone and gore as another battlemage hurled a huge boulder of molten rock at him. He saw carnage. At that he picked up his axes again, turning to see the elemental crumble to dust as a barrage of arcane missiles hit it. An arrow flew through the crumbling debris, lodging itself in Sid's shoulder. He merely grunted with a grin as he let out a yell and charged his next victim.

**"WELCOME THE THUNDERLORDS OR WELCOME DEATH!!!"**

## Agholinn

Agho'Linn's discussion with Renault had done little to ease the growing worry she had over Esere. Vice-Captain Esere Greyseer had not been seen since the morning of Kael'thas' treachery, and Captain Renault Dawnsinger

was of a similar opinion to Agho'Linn's. Both of them were sure that Kael had taken Esere, recognizing her from her previous terms of service at Tempest Keep. But, they couldn't simply march on the floating space ship. They needed proof...something solid.

She had put in a few discreet, and a few direct, words with various ranking Scryers on the tier, hoping that one of them would be able to turn up and confirm something. Renault was working on it from his end, she would do what she could with one eye, while keeping the other on the Blacktooth Grin. Agho'Linn had been dressed down by Voren'thal for her trade of sharp words with Khadgar, an action on his part that still make her bristle to think of it. She wouldn't be caught and called out for inaction again, she wouldn't play into Khadgar's hands for a second time.

A short ride later, and Agho'Linn found herself back at Garadar, surrounded by the Blacktooth Grin once again. They were packing their bags at a frenzied pace, every tabard-wearing Grin dashing this way and that. Confused, she sought out Gorfrunch, whom she also found gearing up. She scowled and frowned dreadfully at him.

"What do you think you are doing?" she demanded of Smashblade.

"Thunderlord Stronghold is being attacked, we move to defend," he responded, his voice not quavering an inch into questioning.

"You are doing *what*!?" Agho'Linn shrieked. "Do you *know* how closely you came to being shackled and dragged back to Shattrath after Halaa!?"

Gorfrunch didn't acknowledge her questions with even a grunt.

Tossing her hands in the air, Agho'Linn whirled around on her heel and stalked out of the tent, making sure that her talbuk was ready as well. She would send word to the rest of Suncrown, hoping that they weren't too terribly tied up on Quel'Danis, and see if some would ride to aid the Thunderlord Clan. How was she going to explain *this* to A'dal and Khadgar?

The defense of Thunderlord Stronghold was masterful, and not even Agho'Linn could fault the Thunderlord Clan for pushing their way into Sylvanaar. That Gorfrunch was the one barking orders during the push into the – ordinarily - sleepy, forest town could be overlooked and explained away. Already, Agho'Linn began crafting excuses for the Grin and Gorfrunch.

It took the entirety of her airborne ride back to Shattrath to prepare enough in the way of explanations and arguments as to why the Grin shouldn't be recaptured and imprisoned *this* time. After landing in Shattrath, Agho'Linn could be seen entering A'dal's chambers, exiting about an hour later, her expression tired and more worn than usual. She didn't speak to anyone as she stalked her way up to her rooms on Scryer's Tier, and shot scowls and angry glares to all that would have stopped to talk to her.

A'dal had not been pleased, and Khadgar seemed to revel in his apparent victory. Agho'Linn countered that the Grin were duty-bound to aid the Thunderlord Clan; that the Stronghold housed women and children. She painted a picture where the Grin were, once again, heroes to a cause. A'dal had, miraculously, sided with her, but it took every ounce of her energy to arrange it that way.

Gorfrunch owed her. When this was all over, she would explain herself to him, and make sure that he understood what she had done for him...for the Grin. He owed her in spades.

She had forwarded the letter that was left on her desk to Renault as quickly as she could, not even willing to wait long enough to tell Renault in person. Esere had been found. She'd been spotted at Tempest Keep by a Scryer operative, just where Renault and Agho'Linn had thought she was. It was just a matter of getting her out of there. But, with the forces from Shattrath preoccupied with Quel'Danis, there was no army to raise for her extraction.

No formal army, at least.

Spurring her netherdrake faster, Agho'Linn raced her way to Thunderlord Stronghold and Gorfrunch. In a flurry of skirts she slid off of the netherdrake's back and made quick steps towards the hut she knew Gorfrunch had appropriated upon his arrival at the stronghold. Not bothering to knock, she threw open the door to reveal a shocked-looking Gorfrunch and a few other Grin. They were celebrating their victory.

"Smashblade," Agho'Linn roared at him, "Get everyone moving. We're going to Tempest Keep."

"Hrm? What?," Gorfrunch questioned, trying his best to gather his thoughts and wits, "Who are you to

order the warchief?"

"I am your duly-appointed nursemaid, charged with following you around and keeping your noses clean!" she spat back at him, "And now, you are going to listen to me, like good children would listen to their governess. We march for Tempest Keep. Now. There is precious cargo to retrieve from there."

She moved to exit the hut after awarding each of those present an angered glare.

"What are we retrieving?" a faceless voice asked.

Agho'Linn whipped around towards the voice, her face enraged, the rest of her a portrait of barely contained fury.

"Dame Esere Greyseer, that is what."

## Zarvin

The news had just arrived in Zarvin's hand. The battle for Thunderlord Stronghold was a bloody one. Sylvanaar was turned into a war zone. It had not gone according to plan. What was worse, the Dread Horde was marching to Netherstorm for unknown reasons.

Khadgar sat in his study and his face lit upon seeing Zarvin.

"News? What happened?"

"Sah! The Horde pushed the battle into Sylvanaar. The Blacktooth Grin were given information on our flanking. They were able to defend with the Thunderlords."

"Damn! Where is our luck?!?"

"Well sah, I have more news. Ye see, scouts have reported the Dread Horde to be moving North toward Netherstorm."

"Netherstorm? Why would they march to Netherstorm?"

"We dunno sah. The men were hopin you would know why."

"I have a hunch. Gorfrunch is in trouble with the law so to speak. A'dal has given the dog a leash and is preparing to tug on it to send him to war on Illidan. As fitting as it would be to send demon blood against demons, A'dal allowed Smashblade to carry on with his personal agenda first."

"Aye, the trial was one o' tha biggest in Shattrath. Ah watched it."

"Patience, master dwarf. You see, I don't think Smashblade *wants* to fight Illidan. And Netherstorm houses an enemy of both A'dal and Illidan. If Smashblade were to strike a deal with them..."

"With who?!?"

"Kael'thas' blood elves. Either the orc knew of our efforts against Sunstrider or he houses a Sunstrider loyalist in his clan. It is the only reason I can think of for his purpose in that wasteland. And we *cannot* allow him to succeed here. We can guess where he is going. We have ample time to cut him off. I want everyone available to be at Tempest Keep. We stop them there."

"Aye sah! I will spread the word!"

Zarvin left the room, leaving Khadgar alone. The aged man rubbed his temples in concentration. Should the orcs align themselves with Kael's elves, the work in Quel'Danas could be compromised. Not only that, but A'dal was catching on to Khadgar's work. A'dal favored the Scryers' account because he knew that Khadgar was commanding the Alliance. Khadgar was sure the naaru would be stepping in to stop him and there was only one general left to command the Alliance should Khadgar be forced to pull out.

Khadgar stood up and grabbed some ink and a pen. He began his letter clearly...

"Kurdran, my dearest friend, war is to the north and the Alliance needs you and Sky'ree for one last ride against the Horde..."

## Renault

"She's not here?"

The door to the office was left ajar, an aura of dishevelment hanging in the air. One figure stood before the large desk at the center, the surface covered with a scattering of papers and maps, some stained with food and less-identifiable liquids. Of the two figures, the one seated behind the desk seemed to take no notice of its unkempt

state. He stared at a map, ignoring the elf standing.

"Captain," the standing one began, "we've searched the city. From what we can tell, the...Prince's forces took the city in the early hours of morning. By their grace, they infiltrated to the Farstriders' Square, and took control of the...creature." The elf paused at the last, a stern expression on his face. He did not relish informing the commander of the missing.

The seated elf continued to stare at the map, expressionless and seemingly ignoring the words. A moment of silence brought a nod of his head, the spectacles underneath his eyes catching the falling rays of light from the office's window. Heavy eyes, the surrounding flesh creased with age and worry, they now looked upon the visitor. "And Captain Greyseer?"

"I... my Captain, you must understand first. Silvermoon has many...places to hide. We've yet to search..."

"Bastard!" the captain yelled, the word resounding off the walls of the cramped room. "She's out there, and she's not in Silvermoon! I don't want you wasting your time and mine on a search where she's not! And believe me, *my time - and hers* - are more valuable than you can begin to understand." As he spoke, slowly he rose to his feet, his expressionless face melting to an image of fury, his eyes smouldering behind the lenses. "She's out there, and you'll find her. And if you don't, or if you've brought her to harm... *Get out.*"

The attendant paled slightly, giving a curt nod. "At once, Captain," he stated formally, turning abruptly and left the room. The door stayed ajar.

Slowly the captain sank back into the chair, his map focused on a split of Azeroth and the other world. Shaking his head, he growled under his breath, tapping his finger against the edge of the map.

"Esere... where are you?"

"Now I guarantee you this is the best stuff you'll ever test!"

The clang of metal sung in the air, a bright morning taking Shattrath's soaring spire in stride. The air chilled Renault slightly, a shiver running up his spine to settle between his shoulderblades. Forcing his thoughts away from the cold and the early hour of the day, he turned his attention to the miniscule inventor's voice.

"Now then," the gnome said, "you'll be asking yourself, 'Self, where can I get good spectrographic analysis recording equipment?' And you'll be telling yourself, 'Nowhere other than from Whirligig Wafflefry, Esq.!' And that's the truth, my good elf!"

The elf did his best to hold back a groan, holding his hand before his face. "No, no," he replied, shaking his head. "I don't want spectrographic equipment, I just need to know if you've seen a missing woman. About...this tall, with, um...this hair, wearing this badge, answers to 'Esere' or 'Captain Greyseer'."

The gnome wore a confused expression - or was it the goggles distorting his face? - while being asked, a quick glance given to the strange ray-gun with the overlarge targeting scope. A squat hand scratched his chin underneath the green beard, then waved his hand in the air before walking toward a series of crates at the side.

"Nah, doesn't ring a bell," Wafflefry replied, shaking his head. "Though I've some colleagues around here and there who can keep an eye or ear out for her."

"Thank you, friend," Renault admitted, allowing a weary sigh to escape. Glancing toward the crates, he idly padded the small satchel hanging from his belt. "Actually, if you've still a pair of those goggles to sell, I wouldn't mind picking them up. I've wanted to do some inspecting..."

"You... you want to *buy*... really!? I mean..." The gnome stifled himself, coughing repeatedly into his hand as the excitement in his voice died. "I mean, of course you'd want to buy them. A businessman and inventor of my caliber, everyone flocks to see what I have to sell. Now, letting the others in the guild know won't exactly be free."

Renault clutched his hand first to the satchel, then to the temples at his forehead, proceeding to rub. "If it's coin you want..."

"No, no! Nothing so base and uncouth! We're both reasonable gentlemen. No, what I had in mind was your fantastic organization becoming a sponsor. The famous Fel'Solan being the official user of my Ultra-Kinetic Waffle Irons..."

Renault gave a weary sigh, kicking at the crates piled against the door. Three of the infernal devices in his office, and perhaps more on their way. After delivering another savage kick to the wood he paid them no mind, the

goggles in hand as he stepped into the hallway, then out into Silvermoon proper.

A short time later led him to the Blood Knights' offices, down the stairwell to the chambers below. The hallway was as before, silent and as imposing as the first day he walked to see the captive. And yet...there would be no captive after what happened. A team of magisters were still investigating the scene from the attack as he walked in, taking in the view. Shaking his head, he glanced once to the goggles in his hand, taking a breath before he slipped them over his head.

The world swam in a sea of crimson before his vision, ghostly streaks of energy breaking the monotony. Frowning, he glanced toward the corridor, then back to the room, the spot where the creature was imprisoned. The streaks began to coalesce into defined shapes, taking the form of the naaru once held in the room. Then a blur, half-formed faces passing in front of the sight of the goggles. Nameless drones, assaulting the magisters as they stood vigil in the morning. A beloved figure come to bring death and pain. The naaru's theft. And...

"Esere."

"I know, we haven't always seen eye to eye. The knights, you and I have kept different views on how they should be handled. I...no, I take that back. We're night and day, and we always have been. You've called me a lumbering, senile old fool who should be bouncing a grandchild on my knee. I've called... no, let's not bring that up. I guess I can only say... I need your help."

Shattrath in the afternoon took on a different light than early morning, doubly for the Scryers' plush accommodations. The table set upon the balcony was stirred by a light breeze, nothing like the bone-chill. For that simple fact, at least, Renault was grateful. Of his companion's presence, that remained to be seen.

The woman's auburn hair was moved slightly by the breeze, though her heavy dress fabrics were untouched, providing an extra layer of warmth. Her face was likewise still as the pond's surface at midnight, though she allowed a corner of her mouth to lift almost imperceptibly. Picking up the teacup, she glanced idly down at the liquid, stirring in the cube of sugar.

"I suppose that's always been the trouble between us, Dawnsinger," she stated, her expression suddenly unreadable. "You've always liked giving orders, not following them. But there's time for new beginnings, yes? Never a need for us to stay so... adversarial."

"My Lady..."

"Please, let's dispense with the formalities. I think those went away when our lovely Prince came again to visit, and then to toss us out to the wolves. After all we did for him, putting our trust and faith in him... never again. Allowing him into Silvermoon again is one time too many."

"That makes two of us," Renault agreed, grimacing as he nodded. Picking up his own teacup, he leaned back in the chair, glancing toward the woman. "My La... Liadrin. You know I didn't bring you up here to reminisce of before the troubles. Esere Greyseer is missing...and from what I can interpret, she may be taken by Kael'thas. I know there's no love lost between you and her, but...I need her back. I need your help."

Liadrin paused with the teacup just before her mouth, her eyes looking over the rim to focus on the captain. Slowly she set the teacup back onto the saucer in her free hand, giving him a curt nod. "Go on."

"I've agents combing Quel'Danas, and they say the island and the...the Sunwell are quiet. If Kael was planning something on the island, we'd know of it. Now, I'm asking for more than just your shoulder to cry on. I'll need a brigade of knights to help support my own forces. I don't know where she is, but I'm ready to crack enough skulls to find out. The manaforges and the Sunfury regiments running them are too tempting to pass up. Someone there has to know more."

"Mmm, I see," Liadrin replied, leaning forward on her chair, her elbows braced against the table. A predatory gleam took her eyes as she studied him, the lift in the corner of her mouth allowed to spread across her face to a wolfish grin. "You want a brigade of my men - some of the last taken from Silvermoon after our Prince's appearance - to accompany you as you see fit. No heading, no charge, no leave. Following your command, on what is most likely a suicide mission to capture back someone who is most likely already dead, so you and they can end up being cau..."

"She is not... DEAD!" the captain shouted, smashing his fist against the table. Grimacing with a fury, Renault took a deep breath, shutting his eyes. "I mean...she's not. She's alive, Liadrin. I know...I'd know if she were not. Just believe me."

Her expression passive, the knight simply watched Renault, and nodded her head. "Of course, she's not

dead. I've faith in how well you can run a campaign. Mmm...you've my troop to command in your little search for the good Captain, Renault...for four days. After that time, you can stay looking for all you want, but you're to order them to return to me. And *believe* me, Captain, you'll see that you do order them to return."

Bowing his head, Renault merely nodded, lifting his hand from the table, rubbing the underside of his fist with a quiet groan. "Thank you," he managed to eke out, glancing at the half-empty teacup. "And please forgive my outburst. I'm sure you may have felt...emotional...were there someone you care for in danger. Now...the thought has been in my mind for some time. I've come into possession of a remarkable cooking tool, some kinetic ultroid-hyper dough-steaming oven. I can't remember what the gnome called it, but I was wondering if you were ever curious of learning to operate..."

Lightning crackled in the sky overhead, the indigo clouds drifting in a chaotic pattern unknown to any but the most unsettled savants. An astral wind buffeted the feathers of the hippogryff as Renault soared above the rocky terrain, his goal the metallic-seeming cluster of pods fixed in the sky above the floating hunk of earth. Deep inside, he felt a howling screech echoing from within the craft-fortress, bringing a grimace to his face.

"Easy girl," he intoned to the beast he straddled, gripping the bridle to steer the hippogryff toward the open deck used for landing. Sighing, his hand strayed to a sliver of paper tucked against his belt, Agho'Linn's flowing script barely legible from continuous rereadings. Those contacts the gnome held paid off in the end - though not before word reached him of what Agho'Linn discovered.

At the least Wafflefry's colleagues were able to confirm what final defenses were still between himself and Esere - and how they could be circumvented. Panthaleon had a defense grid override installed in the Mechanar's bridge, if only he could access it. That would be the simple task, following the sheet of directions the gnome had given concerning the device - actually reaching the bridge and accessing the device would be somewhat more difficult.

The others were slow to arrive, though all Renault had was time. He could afford to be patient, with the small troop he had hired to help him breach the satellite's defenses. He only wished Esere had as much time as he did.

The blade almost began to sing when it was drawn from its sheath, the hilt's alien metal screaming with the heat's intensity. Like liquid magma, it seemed to flow and eddy, slowly reforming to continue the unending river. Jagged lightning coursed along the blade's edge, barely contained by the weapon's strength. Its tip was aimed at the prone elf's throat.

"You think all-mighty Kael would have left someone confident in charge of his pet project, yes?" Renault enquired, his gaze dancing along the ethereal blade's frame. "I'm surprised that person was you. You should have considered taking orders from someone different...or going into a different career."

The prone elf was lying on his belly, blood covering his pale form and the floor surrounding him. His chest rose in a ragged cough, spitting up crimson phlegm. "Don't... no, patronize," Panthaleon managed to eke out, gasping for shaky breaths. "The Master did what he...needed. Don't grow overconfident in...setback. Was just a minor..."

A disgusted grimace took Renault's face, swinging the blade in a strong downward arc, slicing along the Calculator's spine. With a flick of his wrist, he tore the point from the flesh, shaking off the blood.

"What a whiner," he said, shaking his head and hunting around the bridge. Sheathing the blade, he tore the note away from his belt, looking over the gnome's cramped scrawl. "Now, how to disable this grid..."

Some time later the grid controls were located, to which an unforeseen red light began to strobe. A press of the button rendered the satellite complex's defenses inert, yet produced a strong electrical surge through the control grid and shocking the user - namely Renault. Gasping for air as he collapsed onto the floor of the bridge, he instinctively reached for his shield, the aura of force palpable around him as he groaned. A moment's pause caused the Mechanar's bridge to fade from view, replaced with the airy inn's common room, the skyline overlooking the City of Light.

Collapsing onto the inn's floor, Renault's last thoughts were of the Calculator's final taunts, and the face

of the woman he failed to personally bring back to safety.

## Faqualr

The march north was an unpleasant one. Faqualr's hooves made loud clangs on the rickety metal bridge to Netherstorm. The Grin followed their warchief unquestioningly. Gorfrunch led the procession with Agho'Linn. He was not pleased that the elves actually called him out on his debt to them. This mattered little to Faqualr. The warchief had proven to be a traitor to his clan.

Faqualr looked around the ranks. Finally he spotted the elf he was looking for, marching with a grin on his face and seemingly without a care in the world. Faqualr moved towards Arkonn and spoke softly.

"Whatever I am about to say, you must remain calm and resist acting rashly." Arkonn looked up at Faqualr and nodded. "Gorfrunch betrayed us. He started this entire mess on purpose. We were not attacked in the swamp. We were the unwitting defense of a counter attack. The warchief threw the first stone and it has spiraled into what we see today."

Arkonns muscles tightened and his brow furrowed. He began to feel for some bullets in his ammo bag. Faqualr steadied his hand.

"Not yet. We will dethrone the warmonger. But now is not the time. We will aid Suncrown in the search for Esere, because it is the right thing to do."

"When will we attack?"

*"Shadowmoon, bring him to the Black Temple."*

"Soon, Arkonn. Soon."

## Arkonns

His stomach began to churn as they entered the Netherstorm, same as always. He could never understand it, why he began to get sick here. Fiora assured him it was all the magic in the air, and he could accept that but he still didn't like. They marched on quietly, their small warband unusually subdued. His mind wandered back to the past week, to his wedding and the time spent away after. If there was one thing he could count on to take his worries away, it was her. Despite it all she brought a smile to his face, and he marched on oblivious to everything else.

Arkonns didn't notice the large tauren come to his side until Faqualr spoke, even in quiet tones his voice rumbling.

"Whatever I am about to say, you must remain calm and resist acting rashly." He nodded, glancing up at his friend. He didn't think he was going to like what he was about to hear.

"Gorfrunch betrayed us. He started this entire mess on purpose. We were not attacked in the swamp. We were the unwitting defense of a counter attack. The warchief threw the first stone and it has spiraled into what we see today."

There it was, all his suspicions and fears confirmed. He tensed up as he fought the anger quickly building inside him, absent mindedly sliding his hand into the ammo pouch on his belt. Faqualr's hand enveloped his wrists, tugging his hand back to his side.

"Not yet. We will dethrone the warmonger. But now is not the time. We will aid Suncrown in the search for Esere, because it is the right thing to do."

Arkonns anger abated slightly, he knew Jo was right. Esere would be the key to finding his friends someplace safe, and he knew she had to be found. He had brought the Suncrown into this, and he'd be damned if he didn't bring them all out. But this war had to end, and so long as Smashblade was in control of the Grin, they would follow his every word, and war would continue on. He sighed heavily, and shook his head lightly from side to side.

"When will we attack?" The druid paused a moment, seemingly lost in thought. The answer was simple, and frustratingly so.

"Soon, Arkonn. Soon."

Faqualr drifted away, and the march continued on. He was no longer smiling.

## Zarvin

The Alliance stood ready in the entryway to the Eye. This was their last chance to stop the seemingly unbeatable Horde. Khadgar had told them that this was their only hope left. Nothing could go wrong here. The message stuck with them as the first Horde forces were spotted in the sky.

Oakblade and Sillen led the Alliance against the Dread Horde as soon as the first landed. Something was different about this battle. The Horde seemed to be caught off guard. The Alliance was winning. A few Horde had made it into the Eye but for some reason they left just as quickly. As soon as the elves left the satellite station an orcish rally was heard. The Horde was retreating. The Alliance was victorious!

Zarvin was stationed in the Stormspire when a night elf scout had told him of the battle. The dwarf cheered and quickly ran through the consortium portal Khadgar had payed for. Khadgar payed the consortium to tune to portal to allow him into Shattrath. As the dwarf entered Shattrath he saw Khadgar in an argument with A'dal.

<YOUR HATE FOR THE HORDE MAY HAVE ALLOWED KAEI'THAS' FORCES TO FURTHER ENTRENCH THEMSELVES IN NETHERSTORM. THE GRIN HAD SCRYER AND ALDOR KEEPERS, YOU HAD NO REASON TO ASSUME THEY WOULD DO ANYTHING ELSE BUT ATTACK THE EYE. YOU MUST CEASE YOUR INVOLVEMENT WITHIN THIS PETTY SQUABBLE, KHADGAR. YOU ONLY PROVE SMASHBLADE'S TESTIMONY CORRECT.>

"They can not be trusted, A'dal! How many battles have they been involved in since you released them? They have no intention of serving the Shattered Sun Offensive."

<IT IS NOT YOUR DUTY TO SELECT WHOM I TRUST AND WHOM I DO NOT. AS I SAID YOU WILL CEASE YOUR INVOLVEMENT OR CONSEQUENCES WILL BECOME INEVITABLE. I AGREE THAT IT IS TIME THEY SERVE THE SHATTERED SUN, WHICH THEY MAY ALREADY BE DOING AGAINST KAEI'THAS. I WILL SPEAK WITH THE CONSORTIUM TO OPEN A PORTAL TO SHADOWMOON VALLEY. THE BLACKTOOTH GRIN WILL TRY THEIR HAND AGAINST ILLIDAN UNDER FULL SURVEILLANCE.>

"As you say, A'dal."

Khadgar bowed to the naaru and spotted Zarvin outside. He quickly rushed to the dwarf with an eager glint in his eye.

"News?"

"The Alliance succeeded in drivin' the demons back. They retreated towards Biodome Mid-Realm. They await further orders."

"Tell them to attack immediately. If A'dal manages to bring them into Shadowmoon, Kurdran will be in grave danger. I can't lead our troops past this point. If this does not end the war, Kurdran knows he will have to lead the Alliance."

"Aye sah. It was a pleasure servin' under you."

"You are a loyal man. And your time is not done. Go quickly!"

The dwarf saluted and ran back toward the Consortium portal. He found the night elf scout waiting for him and told him to have the Alliance attack at once. The dwarf hitched a ride on a gryphon and watched the battle unfold. The Horde and Alliance fought each other until they were below the Stormspire itself. The Alliance easily cut them down until the unfortunate happened.

The consortium portal outside the Stormspire opened and a voice rang clearly.

<IT IS TIME FOR THE GRIN TO SERVE THE SHATTERED SUN OFFENSIVE. ENTER THE PORTAL, IT WILL BRING YOU TO SHADOWMOON. YOU ARE TO FACE ILLIDAN THERE. COME QUICKLY TO AVOID MORE SENSELESS VIOLENCE.>

The Horde seemd to be at an impasse. Did they obey the bodiless voice or die to the Alliance armies? The generals seemed to side with the voice. Smashblade ran through first and many followed him. Faquarl stood outside the portal roaring loudly, staff in hand. He seemed to be yelling to the stragglers, because some of them stopped their fighting and rushed into the portal.

The night elf scout flying next to Zarvin grunted.

"Now's my last chance."

What happened next surprised Zarvin, who couldn't believe the events unfolding. The scout fired an arrow at Faquarl. The tauren looked surprised. He was soon shot by another, this one making the cow fall over himself. The tauren roared loudly but it was cut off by another arrow piercing through. The night elf picked up the staff on the ground. The events transpiring left Zarvin in shock.

But there was no time to reflect. The dwarf had orders. He was to find Kurdran and support him. Whatever just happened would be a secret to all but the two combatants.

## Esere

When had the failsafe...failed? The technician stared agape at the console; no buttons flashed to reassure him that everything was working accordingly. It was completely unresponsive.

The communications were offline, so there was no way to contact the Mechanaar to have them respond to the problem. There was a squad already dispatched to move for the Mechnaar to assist in restoring the power grid and its components. Until everything was repowered, there were runners everywhere, keeping them updated on the containment fields that were powering down, the doors that refused to open despite the overrides, and other things. The ships were also beginning to show signs of being unable to keep hovering in netherspace.

He steepled his hands, rocking and waiting for this crisis to pass. If only the Sun King hadn't left such a skeleton crew to man the ships and mana forges. If only the technician had found out about the blackout before the systems started shutting down. If only. If only.

Below decks, the lack of power only rushed things. The warlocks worked double time to keep the demons in check, passive, and generally under control. The captives hadn't been faring well with the rushed processes. Two had died earlier that morning, the felfire rushing out of their eyes and engulfed the entire body as the demons broke through the mortal flesh and ran renegade around the chamber until they were both put down. One was feverish and unresponsive to the most basic commands. But others were coping well, and there were still others left to metamorph into their fel selves.

Esere blinked blearily at the thousands of candles lighting the room, trying to get a gauge on the room around her. Her brain was muddled, making it hard to remember the details. They'd had to keep her doped to make her more manageable. The bindings around her wrists had cut into her flesh during her first few days of capture. They'd had to replace one of the cuffs around her ankle from her trying to break it on the edge of the table.

The warlock that had been hovering at just a few steps away from the table finally took up the ritual knife and dipped the blade edge into the foul smelling black inkstuff. He pressed it down onto her skin. The gag split the edges of mouth as she tried to scream. The searing pain where the cut began and the liquid dribbled into the open had her jerk against the restraints again. Her tormentor nodded to another robed figure at the edge of the room, and the second prepared another syringe of distilled deathweed, their most potent narcotic.

Within moments, her struggling had quieted. The warlock returned to its fel scrollwork, preparing another vessel for demonic possession.

Agho'Linn slid off the side of her netherdrake and stalked her way to Gorfrunch's side. The warchief couldn't help but notice the murderous, wicked glare in her eye...so much unlike the Agho'Linn he knew...and the complete lack of her Scryers' tabard. The hot whispers of her shadowform licked at the hem of her skirts in swirls and mist, her posture completely rigid. Smashblade couldn't help but smile gruesomely at the sight of her so twisted by her rage.

"Here is your army Agho'Linn," he said, gesturing to the collection of Grin around him.

"Good," she bit back, "Suncrown's own will duck into the keep and extract Esere..."

"So...you brought us here for show," the warchief asked, interrupting and annoyed.

"Yes, I brought you here for your good looks," the Sin'dorei woman barked back, her eyes narrowed.

There was a decided silence between the two as they surveyed the warriors milling around the platform of the Mechanar.

Renault joined the silent duo moments later, still stiff from his escapades against Panthaleon the Calculator. Agho'Linn nodded to the captain, noting that the grim set of his jaw matched her own. This was their one shot, and forces of Alliance were gathering on the platform of Tempest Keep itself. There were many of them...almost too many of them. This wasn't shaping up well at all.

"We're going to have to move quickly, Analeia would move faster than you, Renault," Agho'Linn

observed in a murmur, speaking to Suncrown's Captain.

"There isn't a damned thing that you can do keep me from going in there, 'Linn," he replied, a dangerous edge to his voice that warned Agho'Linn from saying anything more, simply nodding in response.

"Let's get going, then," Agho'Linn motioned, stepping up to her netherdrake's neck, Renault stepping up to his hippogryph's back.

Making a simple gesture, the rest of the Fel'Solan swarmed around Renault and headed towards a side entrance of Tempest Keep. Each of the Fel'Solan, Suncrown's guard, looked anxious to have their Vice-Captain back. Renault and Agho'Linn felt Esere's absence the most, but their grief was shared all around.

Agho'Linn turned and headed toward Gorfrunch again.

"Now, Warchief...before we're too late..."

The large outer doors of Tempest Keep exploded in on themselves, revealing a smirking Analeia to the few remaining guards of the Keep. She picked her way through the remains of the doorway, a swarm of Fel'Solan at her back. Quickly, the group of them moved in and spread out in the entrance foyer of the Keep itself.

The captain of Suncrown's House Guard said nothing, a grim and set expression on his face, the sound of plated footsteps against the floor of the aethership made more menacing with each echo. A pair of Tempest Keep's guards formed up, reading their shields and swords, preparing for a frontal assault. Behind them, Kallise singled out a guard and, melting from the shadows, slid her sword between his rib cage, piercing his heart. The guard fell to the ground, lifeless. The surprised look on the second guard's face was frozen into place as Analeia bound him in chains of ice.

Renault never slowed.

He approached the ice-encased warrior, grabbing ahold of him as Analeia allowed the ice around him to melt away. Renault's plated fist ripped the helm from the trapped guard's head, savagely tossing it aside before roughly grabbing the guard's chin, forcing the guard to meet his glare. "Where is she?"

"Who?!" the guard gasped, his eyes bulging from his head.

"Greyseer," Renault growled in response, tightening his grip on the guard's face.

The guard made a motion down a hallway to the left and Renault nodded his understanding, releasing the guard as he did so. Analeia gave the guard a smirking salute and with a gentle shrug re-encased him in ice, making sure the ice was solid this time. The frost mage turned to Kallise with a nod and the pair made silent signals to the Fel'Solan guard present. They silently spread out and followed their Captain, flanking him without question.

Outside of Tempest Keep was different. Agho'Linn and the others were outnumbered...the best they could hope for would be to act as a distraction long enough to allow Renault and the Fel'Solan to do their job and get Esere out of there. Agho'Linn had been forced out of her shadowform and resigned herself to calling on her limited healing magics to keep the Grin's warriors upright. There was no way they could hold out for much longer.

Get her out *now*, Renault, Agho'Linn screamed in her own mind, as if the captain could hear her.

The hallway down was long, with many rooms branching off of it. With an eerie kind of quiet precision, small groups of the Fel'Solan entered each room in search of Esere and cleared the rooms of the horrors therein as they did so. Murmurs from the men and women began to reach Renault's ears, causing him to shudder violently.

Kael'thas had been spending his final days at Tempest Keep engineering fel elves...demons embedded into a Sin'dorei host. Renault and the others could only assume that Esere had been taken for just that reason. Pushing the thought from his head, Renault's step refused to falter. He refused to believe that Esere had been...altered...yet.

Suncrown's House Guard reached the largest and final room of the hallway, and streamed their way inside. Practiced efficiency made short work of the warlocks and their demon prisoners. The walls were lined with captives, all of them drugged and slumped into balls, all of them barely aware of their surroundings and the terrifying procedure they were about to be sacrificed for.

Despite the sheer number of them, Renault knew which one was Esere in a moment. He raced to her, pushing anything anyone in his path out of his way and stepping over the bloodied and charred remains of the

two that had been seeing over the rituals. As he approached her, she desperately fought him, fearing his presence as another warlock come to add further torment. He touched her neck, an insignificant if intimate gesture to most. That simple move drove realization into the captive Vice-Captain's muddled and terrified mind. He had come to save her. Renault clawed at her bonds, freeing her as quickly as he could, trying not to focus on the condition she was in, but on the fact that she was alive. He could fix the rest, and he would, she was alive...that was all that mattered.

Lifting her, Renault jerked his head at Analeia and Kallise.

"Get who you can out, but move it," he snarled at the two women. They nodded their grim understanding and passed the word to the rest. There would not be many others that could be saved that day.

The Fel'Solan regrouped and made a swift exit from Tempest Keep, their Vice-Captain successfully extracted.

Agho'Linn caught sight of red and gold tabards streaming out of the keep and her heart nearly jumped out of her chest. Renault was carrying something...no...someone. It had to be Esere. Relief washed over her, and she nearly forgot the chaos around her.

"SMASHBLADE," she screamed across the platform, "WE'RE DONE HERE!"

Gorfrunch finished off his opponent with a definitive crunch of the skull and nodded his understanding, gesturing for his party leaders to round up their men and get the hell off of the platform. In a bizarre dance of organized chaos the Blacktooth Grin made their way away from Tempest Keep and to one of Netherstorm's bio-domes. Agho'Linn lost track of them, though - her thoughts intent on finding where Renault and the rest had brought Esere.

The Etherium outpost had no idea that the tide of war was soon to wash over them. The bulk of the Suncrown forces were the first to reach the neo-jungle in the center of the netherstorm. Flyers of all kinds touched down in a tiny clearing just north of the lake, trying to make the best use of the massive amounts of greenery for cover. They spread out to secure the area from the fauna as the rest of the war band caught up.

As soon as he landed, Gorfrunch started barking out orders to his lot, directing them to take the overgrown ridge, letting them use the advantage of higher ground to help stop the eminent arrival of the Alliance forces. Agholinn separated herself from her charges, sweeping over to where the war ready hippogryph stood near the captains of the House Guard.

Esere's words were little more than a roughened whisper, but she was speaking. She was alive. The din of readying a defensive force made the conversation all but impossible to understand until she stood within arms reach of the two Blood Knights.

"But where in the Netherstorm are we?" Esere's color was pale and her eyes kept darting to the scurrying around the three.

"The center most Bio-Dome," Kallise answered as she joined them, appearing from the crowds like a phantom. One of her swords was still drawn and bloodied from their initial assault and quick departure from the Tempest Keep. The other blade rested at her hip with her fingers resting lightly on the pommel.

Esere nodded once in understanding, attempting to draw on her extensive knowledge of the area to try to find a location to hide the entire Grin and allied forces. For more than half a year, she'd spent enough time in the Netherstorm to commit the entire landscape to memory. The sedatives still in her system muddled her thoughts, and the frustration showed plain on her face as she grasped for directions that would not come to her.

Analeia sped over, glancing at the dour expressions on the sindorei, causing a frown of her own to form. "The Consortium want nothing to do with this. Traders profit from selling war, not joining it."

"The merchant class," Agho'linn scoffed.

Analeia rolled her shoulders, the tension of escape still strung them tight. "Gorfrunch wants us to move to join them on the ridge. He and a few others will bait them down below."

Esere twitched, gripping Renault's arm more tightly. "To the north, near the bridge, there's a series of caves. We can split up the forces to take cover there and try to move to -"

"TAKE COVER!" The cry rang up. Analeia stood her ground as those closest to her scattered. With years' worth of battle efficiency, a barrier coalesced under her will, shielding them from the rain of arrows and fire. As Kallise crept into the overgrowth, Analeia nodded to Renault, and he brought both the addled Vice-Captain and the inexperienced priestess with him toward the tenuous safety of the cliff face.

## Derken

"Now's my last chance."

*Your demon will feel what Mannoroth felt before him...*

Derken closed the gap as quickly as possible trying to get within range of the hulking figure holding the relic staff. Time seemed to slow for the night elf. Quickly his mind paced through the possibility of failure. The staff reaching Azeroth would be disastrous, and with no further defenses even with the depleted strength of the Horde, this one lone tauren could cause the same sundering that ended Draenor.

Derken was finally within range. Derken pulled the arrow from the sheath and drew it on the bow. A small haze of red seemed to polish the head of the arrow.

Derken fired at the wielder of the staff. The hissing of the arrow made a sound of a war cry. The cry echoed off of the rocks and into the depths of the Twisting Nether, amplifying its roar. The will of Grom Hellscream guided the arrow to its mark in the shoulder of the target. The tauren looked surprised. He was soon hit by a second this time in the exposed side, he crumpled. The tauren roared loudly but it was cut off by another arrow piercing through his chest.

The image of the orc left Derken's mind. A peaceful smile rose from the toothy grin before it faded completely.

*Never once did I believe I would help an elf...*

The night elf walked to the tauren and closed his dying eyes.

"Be at peace, Faquarl. The Earthmother awaits you."

Derken retrieved the staff from the wielder's grasp, and disappeared into the throng of Horde and Alliance.

## Faquarl

<IT IS TIME FOR THE GRIN TO SERVE THE SHATTERED SUN OFFENSIVE. ENTER THE PORTAL, IT WILL BRING YOU TO SHADOWMOON. YOU ARE TO FACE ILLIDAN THERE. COME QUICKLY TO AVOID MORE SENSELESS VIOLENCE.>

Faquarl turned awestruck at the luck. Salvation.

*"Salvation lies in Shadowmoon."*

Everything was falling into place. Gorfrunch ran through the portal and those happy to find an escape quickly followed. Faquarl turned to enter the portal as well but upon seeing other Grin still fighting, Faquarl swore.

"GET IN THE PORTAL NOW!"

*"Leave them, we must go to Shadowmoon!"*

Faquarl couldn't heed the voice's words.

"IN THE PORT-"

From nowhere an arrow pierced Faquarl's armor, embedding itself in his chest.

***"ARRRRGH GO NOW WRETCH!"***

Faquarl clenched his teeth through the immense pain. His guardian seemed to be turning against him and whatever poison was on the arrow burned his insides. He pulled the arrow out from his chest and searched for his assailant.

Another arrow hit Faquarl right below his left arm and the tauren toppled with the blow. The pain was enormous and breathing had become a monolithic task in itself.

***"Pathetic slime. You let arrows stop you? I AM MAGTHERIDON! OBEY ME AND ENTER THE PORTAL!"***

The tauren didn't know who this Magtheridon was and everything seemed to be in a haze. He was still searching for his assailant and finally he saw him. An elf. The tauren let out a threatening roar of defiance as the elf pulled back the string of his bow.

The roar echoed across the bio-dome only to be cut off unnaturally. The final arrow pierced Faquarl's heart and the tauren knew it was over. As the world seemed to slow down, Faquarl thought back to the beginning. He had planned on leading the Grin to salvation and it was fitting that he should die. For the Grin was

an entity that would never know peace and like every foe they seemed to face, the idealist was meant to fall before the might of the Grin.

## Felora

The scream died in Felora's throat.

Everything around her seemed to slow and she stood perfectly still, watching as an arrow, then another, pierced Faquarl's chest. Her warlord let out a deafening roar, which was suddenly choked back by a final missile as he stumbled and fell heavily to the ground. Her legs felt numb, as though she were wading through muddy water, but somehow she managed to come to where Faquarl lay still, eyes closed. Yalim was there next to him, somehow, and even her friend's presence did not calm her. Felora suddenly whimpered, her eyes wide with growing panic.

Therazane, please, she thought, I can't heal this. Yalim can't heal this...no one can heal this.

She glanced at Ashenrock, who had landed behind them and was looking about for another attack.

Thankfully, none came.

"He's not breathing," she said, unable to manage anything more than a whisper.

Rock looked at Faquarl a moment.

"Take him through," he ordered. "We will not leave him behind."

As Rock shouldered the older tauren onto his back to carry him through the portal, Felora kept her eyes trained on the ground. A high, keening wail was threatening to come pouring from her mouth, and it took everything she had to hold it back.

## Chapter 5

### Arkonn

Arkonn lay against his pillow, staring up at the ceiling. Fiora lay sprawled against his chest, her breathing slow and steady. He tried to let it lull him to sleep, but he doubted he would find any rest this night. Was love enough? Could it really carry him to do the impossible? He glanced down at her, trying not to move to quick for fear of waking her. A small smile curled her lips as she slept, a far cry from the worry he found on her face earlier. She was afraid for him, and he didn't blame her. He was frightened himself. It kept coming back to him in flashes.

He heard Faquarl's defiant roar, heard it cut out as he watched the arrow slam into his chest. Arkonn jerked instinctively, as if the arrow had pierced his own heart when his friend died. Fiora stirred softly against him, and he gently brushed away a loose strand of hair that had fallen across her forehead.

He was running, running towards his fallen friend, his brother. But others had already gathered around his still body, the other Bhurkas. He came to stop stop beside the druid, rage and grief at war inside him. How had it come to this? It wasn't supposed to me this way. Ashenrock had given the order to collect Faquarl's body, and other were closing in quickly. Arkonn reached down and pulled the arrows from his friend, the one who had seen him married, who had given him the gift of being able to look at his wife with both eyes. The tauren had trained him, wizened him, and now he was gone. No one else but them knew for sure of Gorfrunch's betrayal, and now it was all left to the elven hunter.

Arkonn spoke in a low voice, so the others could not hear. "Find your peace brother, I swear I'll bring some back to this world, or give my life trying." The other were around them now, and they lifted the great tauren's body from the ground, holding the fallen warlord with respect. He climbed to his feet and nodded briskly to all of the Bhurkas.

"We all know what we had come here for, but not how it has come to this. This war needs to end, I only hope you all can forgive me for what I need to do next." He walked away quickly, not giving them the chance to answer and quickly mounted his nether way.

Back against his pillow, he found it hard to breathe. Fear, grief and rage all melded to in potent brew, coursing through his veins. Visions of vengeance danced through his mind as he finally fell into a restless sleep.

### Agholinn

Tired. There was no other way to describe it. She was just so tired.

Over the last week, Agho'Linn had spent nearly all of her time in meetings. At first they were meetings berating her for her actions at Tempest Keep. All of her superiors were enraged that she had taken matters into her own hands and pointed the Grin towards Tempest Keep. She had stood firm, however, insistent that Esere needed extraction from Tempest Keep not two seconds later than it actually happened.

Esere had her own pull within the Scryers, and waving that fact around like a colorful banner only aided Agho'Linn's cause. By the end of the first round of dawn-til-dusk tribunals Agho'Linn had squeaked her way out of any kind of disciplinary action, but it cost her much. She was losing friends within the Scryers, losing allies, and the stress was taking its toll on her already worn nerves.

"And for what," she thought bitterly to herself on more than one occasion, "For a green-skinned warchief and his faithful followers...who don't give a damn what I do for them."

Now, she sat privy to meetings regarding the offensive being organized against the Black Temple. It was expected that she would continue to play nursemaid to the Grin until A'dal was done with them, a prospect that Agho'Linn now cringed to think of, and A'dal wanted the Grin at the Black Temple on the front lines. Strategically, it was sound, but Agho'Linn's thoughts darkened as A'dal's plan was further unfurled.

Gorfrunch was a loose cannon. She saw the look on Arkonn's face each time they mustered. Agho'Linn knew that Arkonn felt responsible for getting Suncrown involved in what had turned into the Blacktooth Grin's razing tour of Outland, but that was only partly true. If Faquarl had come to her with the same request he had of Arkonn, she would have done just what Arkonn had.

In outward reaction to her inward thought, her fingernails dug into the wood of the arms of the chair she sat in. Faquarl. He had been lost at the bio-dome as the retreat was being made, and she knew that his loss was felt deeply by all of the Grin. Ridiculous. Wasteful. Useless. They shouldn't have lost anyone in this entire ramshackle campaign, and they lost Faquarl.

A pointed look from a high-ranking Scryer Official brought Agho'Linn from her personal thoughts and back to the public matter at hand. Her deepened frown and scowl warned off any kind of a verbal reprimand. She paid attention, she nodded where she needed to agree, and shook her head where she needed to disagree.

Finally, they were done, and Agho'Linn wasted no time in sweeping her way out of the council room. The City of Light was dimmed with evening, and she was, once again, exhausted. Stepping her way carefully to her rooms on Scryer's Tier, she barely bothered to disrobe before falling into bed.

Tired. There was no other way to describe it. She was just so tired.

## Sillen (M2M)

Sillen guided her nether ray in a slow circle around Wildhammer Stronghold, patrolling its high stone walls. It was increasingly difficult to maintain appearances lately. She was outwardly kind to Kudran Wildhammer and his clan of stout dwarves at their keep, and to be sure was genuinely glad of their hospitality. But inside, her fury with Khadgar burned. *How could he have been so blind to A'dal's plan?* She scoffed. *Some great and all-seeing magus you've become. You are as vengeful and short-sighted as the mere mortals you send to fight your battles.* She wished only that she had the strength to shout these words at the old codger rather than contain them.

And Voren'thal, the fool, trusting unwaveringly in that treacherous elf Agho'Linn. Sillen's own high standing within the Scryers had warranted barely a minute of debate on the topic of selecting an alternate representative to accompany the Grin into Shadowmoon. She had no proof of Agho'Linn's true loyalties apart from her word, and the aging seer was far more apt to believe his charming Sin'dorei kin than a brash gnome mercenary, especially one who had been aligned to Khadgar's interests. *On orders from Stormwind itself!* She wanted to scream.

Sillen was usually able to separate her own feelings from her assignments, but it was increasingly difficult of late to deny her personal involvement in fighting the Dread Horde. She had held the staff - she knew even then that it was not meant for her to wield, but she knew now that there were evils in this world more powerful than she could have imagined before. It was seeping with magic, oh yes...but while it was great, it was terrible and foul. She felt changed by it already. *I need a vacation,* she muttered. *I hear Feralas is lovely this time of year...*

On the horizon, a gryphon approached. As it neared, Sillen recognized its rider to be her eager lieutenant,

Kaylee. The red-plated armor of the great beast took on a greenish glow in the heavy atmosphere of Shadowmoon as Kaylee stopped nearby.

"Ma'am, I've flown as near to Shadowmoon Village as I dare. Their riders patrol a wide perimeter," Kaylee began. Sillen nodded in acknowledgment.

"Go on," she prompted.

"Their forces are definitely there; the bustle and activity is much increased from previously reported levels."

"I see. What of the Altar of Sha'tar?" Kaylee was a highly regarded among the Aldor, and had been a key ally in assuring at least one neutral escort for the Dread Horde.

"No one there has seen them yet," the young human shook her head as she spoke. Sillen frowned.

"Have you been to the temple to see Xi'ri?"

"Yes ma'am. Only an emissary has been sent so far, each day since they've arrived, to give updates on their readiness."

"Good. I'm sure the naaru have them on a short leash," Sillen said, mildly relieved. "Report your findings to our Shattrath outpost. I'll send for you if need be." With a brusque nod, Kaylee was off to the west.

### Bobwhite (TGC)

*Bobwhite sat on an island, a little island out in the nether somewhere between Shadowmoon and Hellfire. A bird landed next to him, and spoke...*

"Faquarl has been killed, Bob."

The gnome warrior gasped. Faquarl...killed? It came as a shock for certain. "I see. That could make the upcoming battle go in one of two directions..."

The stormcrow nodded. "Either the death of Faquarl has thrown the Horde into chaos and they'll be disorganized, or..."

"Or they'll be fighting in his memory, twice as strong. Though I have heard that a number of the Horde didn't think well of the druid."

"Yeah...well, that's all the info I've got for you, sad to say." The bird flapped its wings and gained some air. "Unfortunately we won't be able to reinforce you tonight, Freelance has business elsewhere."

Bob stood up and saluted. Shrader flapped his wings and quickly disappeared into the nether.

Bobwhite Fritzsprocket mounted his nether ray and gazed towards Shadowmoon Valley, the green glow quite clear in the sky.

"Tonight's the night! My hands are shaking." He smirked and raced off towards Wildhammer Stronghold...

### Gorfrunch

Vindicator Aluumen wasn't sure which prospect worried him more - working with Scryers, or with this new "Dread Horde." Of course, that wasn't the official name sent down by the naaru, but the lingo around the campfires, Aluumen had found, was usually the most accurate. He finished checking the supply wagons for the beginning of what he hoped was the decisive stroke in this never-ending campaign, and stopped to admire the felfire raining down in the distant sky. If you let yourself forget what those green meteors were, they truly were beautiful. Sometimes he did.

Aluumen surveyed the ruins of the draenei temple now dubbed the Warden's Cage. Scryers lined the ramparts, and bodies of Ashtongue Deathsworn lay piled up outside the walls, some half-charred, others left for the magma beasts as the Scryer disposal parties scurried back inside at the sight of the Aldor force.

"Hail, Aldor!" One of the Scryers on the ramparts cried down. Aluumen stepped forward, one of his soldiers with him. "Where are these orcs we've heard so much about, Scryer?"

“We might ask you the same! Until this Dread Horde is produced, we will hold here and secure the rendezvous.”

Aluumen frowned. What if the Dread Horde were already inside, held by this Scryer until he gave up and went home, when they would proceed with the assault without the Aldor?

“We have not seen them. Their Consortium portals were supposed to open near here, were they not?”

“Yes.”

“We will enter and wait with you, and if they do not appear, send to Shattrath for further orders.”

A fireball chose that moment to fly down from the ramparts and thud into the trooper next to him in a shower of sparks, scarred metal, and gore.

“TO ARMS! TREACHERY!”

Dergs grinned as spells started flying and the Aldor began charging into the ruins far below his post on a ridge of the Hand of Gul'dan. A few minutes later, a nether drake soared up and settled on the ridge next to him. Its rider grinned down at him, and Dergs saluted. “I could see it from here, Sythegar. Very well done.”

“I try.” Shadiel removed the Scryer tabard he had been wearing. “Let's meet up with the rest of the Grin. The Chief will want to hear of our success.”

“This is our one shot, Grin. We have only a few hours until the Aldor and Scryer recover from their battle, and we have three hostile forces to deal with. If we can get into Wildhammer Stronghold, slay Kurdran, and slaughter his dwarves, the Alliance in Outland will be crippled. Their only remaining leader will be Khadgar, and we will slay him, too. We will have revenge for Jo.” A cheer broke from the surrounding mass of Grin. Felora and Yalim sat off to one side of the camp, the cheering not seeming to reach them.

“Where is Arkonn? I've seen him following you two around like a pup for most of this campaign, when that new wife of his hasn't had her claws in him.” Grimmir sat down beside them and began sharpening a dagger.

“No idea. I haven't seen him since... since...” Felora trailed off, and Yalim patted her.

“His death weighs upon us all. I'll leave you two be.” Grimmir stood up and returned to the center of the camp, where final preparations for the assault were being made. He looked up across the burning plain at the hulking walls, and let out a sigh. Could it end here? Would this truly break the back of the Alliance? He readjusted his armor and then sat down to assist with the planning.

Could it end here?

## Whispclaw

Whispclaw flew over the battleground as infernals rained down outside the Wildhammer Keep. He flew, scouting the position of the Horde. Because of the Reveries' alliance with the Wildhammer dwarves, he felt it was his duty to protect this stronghold of theirs. Besides, he still had a score to settle with the Grin, and one druid in particular...

The Grin and their allies marched. One troll warrior got a late start, and Whispclaw grinned. He dove to the ground and twenty feet above his form shifted. He kept his feathers, but became substantially heavier, falling quicker. He landed with squack and quickly summoned roots from the ground to trap the warrior, and quickly dispatched him.

He followed the Horde army from behind, trailing them by staying close to the ground and sticking to shadows. He scanned the rolling masses with sharp eyes. He noted several druids, but not the one he was looking for, not the one who was most commonly found standing next to Gorfrunch, casting spells in the form of the moonkin. *Perhaps he is hiding*, Whispclaw thought, though feeling that something was wrong.

## Jonn

Stoutfist felt like he was dragging his feet through thick mud, not over the hardened molten rock of Shadowmoon Valley. War cries of the Blacktooth Grin pierced through the air among a wave of sound from the seemingly endless battle. He parted through the ash clouds, most of it sticking to the sweat in his beard and skin

and suddenly spotted two Blacktooth orcs charging at himself and his companions.

One ugly green brute with a mouthful of drool came at him low then jabbed upwards with a heavy serrated blade, the other simply abandoning all subtlety and swung a heavy flail madly around, and made an attempt to put it into the dwarf's side. Unfortunately, the flail found itself tangled around Oakblade's greatsword, appearing in a flash to put itself between Stoutfist's attacker. The warrior wasted no second cutting through the chain links and following up with a savage cut that sliced open the orc's belly and quickly put him out of the fight.

The other orc funneled his rage and grief into his next attacks, but the paladin parried them both. Before the third attack came halfway to his exposed neck, he invoked a word of faith to the light and the sound of the sword's edge clanging against thin air was reflected back onto the orc tenfold, stunning it for enough time for Stoutfist to crack his mace against the side of the orc's skull.

The party kept moving through the mountains above Wildhammer Stronghold, shielding deep breaths from the burning ash in the air. "Good work so far," he heard Oakblade say by his side, "Their initial wave was broken against the gates. They took such a beating that we should be able to make a path straight to their warchief."

"Aye," Stoutfist said eagerly, picturing the victory feast that finally marked the end of this war. "To put an end to this and get away from this hell hole...?" He grinned and put some added effort into scouting the shadows for any prominent-looking Horde. Before they could entertain another thought at a better life they came upon a large detachment of Grin warriors, pinned between them and another group of Alliance soldiers that only looked somewhat worse off. He thanked the light for their fortune.

"For me BACON!" he cried, slamming into a green-skinned troll and knocking another orc senseless with the butt of his mace. "To the fall of these shadow-sworn...!"

He rounded on the orc woman who was preoccupied by the encroaching Alliance forces from the opposite end of the field and took a swing at her oddly overarmored back, hoping to crush through the spikey shell-like plating in one blow and end her life quickly. His momentum suddenly left him when he spotted a pair of young eyes staring back at him through the crack in the armored orcish baby harness. The child giggled despite the carnage around him and Stoutfist froze - feeling his blood leave his face and his arms tense up.

He saw it coming at him from his left side, but he could not shock his brain back into focus no matter how much he wanted to. A stocky male orc made of an overabundance of muscle and a face scarred into a permanent grin struck him at the end of a charge with an outraged roar and a gauntleted fist. The world around him exploded in sound and color and he found the ground slip out from under him, He was aware of another Keeper calling out his name, and the orc's weight pressing down on him. He tried to find his footing multiple times, but the ground seemed to constantly avoid him. Then he was falling.

"Jonn!" An orc called out to him.

"Grimface!" Jonn glanced over his shoulder just in time to spot the crazed orc tackle a dwarf away from his wife and child and tumble down the loose gravel of the hill into a dark cloud of ash.

Signe had readied her bow in an instant and moved towards them, but was still too late to stop the two from tumbling out of sight. One arrow struck a human in the chest who was joining the combat from the opposite side of the field. The soldier cried out in pain before falling dead to the ground. The orc woman tried to keep her back - and her baby - pointed away from any potential foes, but with this appearance of a second band of Alliance, their fate seemed to be spiraling out of control.

As soon as the first human of the new group fell, a night elf warrior sprang forward from over the corpse to take his place in the charge, pointing his greatsword towards Signe while she began to load her bow with a new arrow.

Jonn diverted his attention to this new combatant, leaving Renault to watch his back and another Grinner to hold off the soldiers advancing from the other side. Before the night elf could strike at his friend, he mentally called out to the nether energies around him and hurled a ball of writhing blue energy towards him. As always, the primal magics he worked with lashed out in rage, trying to overwhelm him, hoping that he was so eager to call upon their power that he had let his defenses down. Blue flames began to lick Jonn's robes, but he maintained his cool head and his will over his magicks and forced them back. The energy hit the warrior's feet and began to creep up his legs, attempting to cut through his armor and bite through his flesh. The warrior

reacted as one should when fighting the magical arts with the mundane and danced back out of their reach. Jonn could feel the warrior's own will seep through the area, trying to sense where the next attack would come from.

There was a moment that lasted a few seconds but felt like an eternity when the two acknowledged each other then closed in to meet. Jonn was vaguely aware of Signe and Renault engaging opponents of their own before he snapped his wrists and forced the nether magicks in the valley to obey him. Two distorted, gleaming blades of ice pieced up through the ground and sliced through the air with a sharp hiss before somehow being parried with two unnaturally quick swoops of the night elf's weapon. Before the warrior could recover, Jonn crushed the ice blades with invisible force and sent them back into motion as a volley of piercing shrapnel. The tiny blades bit harshly into the warrior's flesh and managed to force him back.

A couple steps, but not enough reason to relax at all, which the magus did and cursed himself for it. The warrior made a surprising recovery and charged him, crushing through the barrier of ice that was conjured in his path.

"Die, monster!!" The elf cried in two of the words Jonn knew in Common and suddenly closed the distance between the two.

There was too little time before Jonn could enact his next spell, so he fell back to using his claws, elongated with sharp points of ice. One sword slash clipped its point across Jonn's collarbone and bicep, but he ignored the problematic wound and made for the elf's eyes to disable them.

"Oakblade!" a female night elf called out from nearby, "The gryphon riders have started their bombing too soon...LOOK OUT!!"

An explosion tore the rock out from under the feet of both Jonn and his opponent and hurtled the mage through the air. When he eventually regained his senses he saw the warrior getting to his feet not far off and looking eager to resume the fight. When he shifted his full weight back onto his feet however, the now weakened ledge he found himself standing on cracked and broke away. With an astonished look he plummeted a dozen feet down with a loud crash.

Jonn's body felt somehow weak as he slowly rose to his feet and surveyed the area. He saw fresh dead, both Horde and Alliance, but none he knew. He began to limp off when he heard the dazed murmuring of the night elf warrior below, "...leaf...I'm down here. Is it alive? ...don't stay there...keep moving!"

A roar snapped Jonn to attention and he barely spotted the black shape of a panther lunging at him from the ashes.

Blades of ice. More. He brought fourth a whirling kalidescope of them. Enough to cut through anything. He had to keep moving!

## Arkonn

The red nether ray buzzed high above the chaos below, the Horde forces having already engaged the Alliance at the Wildhammer Stronghold. The fight seemed natural here, in this hellish plane of a broken world. Arkonn scanned the ground below, searching out his target. His eyes first found Fiora, her fiery red hair visible at even this distance. His heart swelled, but then quickly sunk. He couldn't bear to think of what would happen if he failed. He banished the thought from his mind and moved on, circling quickly. And there he was. The warchief had taken on three opponents, but it was painfully clear to the hunter that the lives of those three dwarves were quickly drawing to an end. Gorfrunch swung his axe in a wide arc, dropping two and coming to face the last. His opponent quickly back pedaled, but the warchief charged with his axe high above his head, bringing it down and separating the dwarf from his.

He kicked at the side of the ray, and it quickly dropped. Fifteen feet from the air Arkonn leapt, landing gracefully and letting his knees take the shock of the landing. He stood slowly, Gorfrunch's back to him. He raised his head and roared into the night.

"SMASHBLADE!"

Gorfrunch spun, coming to face the elven hunter holding his great battle axe at his side. A look of confusion leapt onto his face. Arkonn glared at him, malevolence etched across his features.

"You betrayed us. You killed him. And all for what. Are you afraid?"

The warchief took a threatening step forward, raising his axe slightly. "Watch yer tongue, boy."

Arkonn held his ground, and continued on. "This was never about finding safety and peace for the people who trusted you. This was all about you, wasn't it? You failed to kill them then, just as I swear you'll fail

now. You gave away our positions, sparked a war, all to relive your past glories. And you dragged into it my friends, my family, all of them. You brought them with you."

Gorfrunch brought his axe up, tightening his grip with both hands. "So tonight it ends. For Faquarl, for Fiora, and for my child. I'll see peace brought to this broken world, and I'll damned well make sure my child knows a safe world to grow in. You're an old fool, and your time is over." He brought his own axe up and shifted his weight, watching as Gorfrunch began to walk slow circles around him. The warchief's lips had curled into a sneer as he sized up his opponent.

"What makes you think you're so entitled to your vengeance, while I cannot have mine." The orc feigned a step forward, while the hunter didn't so much as flinch.

"This isn't about vengeance. You fight for yesterday. I fight for tomorrow." Arkonn spun slowly, so the orc was no longer at his back.

"So be it, whelp."

Gorfrunch charged forward suddenly, catching the elf off guard. Arkonn barely managed to parry the blow, their axes meeting with such force it sent shockwaves through his arms. Nearby Horde and Alliance forces had noticed the scuffle, stopping to watch as the former friends and allies did battle. It was clear who was on the defensive and who wasn't as Gorfrunch continued to rain blows down on the hunter, Arkonn doing his best to parry and dodge as they came. Gorfrunch pressed his attack, forcing the hunter back across the broken ground of the valley, all eyes on them now. The world had become deathly silent, save for the sound of distant explosions and sharp clash of metal. The warchief slammed his axe against Arkonn's with such force that it pushed the hunter back and raised it again for another strike. Seizing the opportunity, the elf waited until the last second and leapt nimbly out of the way, his own axe flashing through the night. But Gorfrunch was prepared, and stepped the side. Arkonn was caught off balance and stumbled forward as Gorfrunch brought his weapon back, the handle slamming into the back of the hunter's skull.

Arkon fell forward in slow motion, the hard ground rushing up to meet him. He rolled off of his stomach onto his back only to have the warchief stomp on his chest with his plated boot, pressing down with all his weight as he came down to a crouch. Gorfrunch peered closely at him, a look of cruel curiosity coming across his face.

"I thought you only had one eye. I think I liked you better that way, and if I remember correctly, you lost it over your loyalties to me." The warchief frowned thoughtfully as his hand snaked towards his boot, pulling out a wicked looking dagger. "For that, I'll let you live. But I want you to never forget who I am, and what your place is to me." Before Arkonn could react, the orc drove the tip of the dagger into the elf's right eye. Arkonn screamed as the blade was wrenched free, bringing the eye with it. The fel green emanation slowly faded, revealing the pale blue iris. Arkonn clutched at his face, screaming as he writhed in agony. Gorfrunch stood slowly watching the elf roll across the ground. He sighed heavily before his boot savagely caught Arkonn under the chin, snapping his head back against the hard ground. For Arkonn, the world faded to black.

A cool breeze rolled in off the ocean, gently blowing the golden strands of wheat, they seemed to almost glow as the sun filtered through them. From off to his right he heard giggling, and slowly turned towards the sound. Fiora knelt on the ground, and Ofearah lay sprawled on her back in front of her, purring contently. As his wife shifted, he could see why. A little girl lay against that cat's belly, sliding her face and hands against the soft fur as she laughed. Arkonn felt his heart miss several beats. He knew what this was, what this could be. A voice intruded into his thoughts, different from that last time, yet still hauntingly familiar.

"You can still have this, all of it. All you have to do is get back up, Ark." He shook his head against it, he didn't want to leave. The voice came again, louder and more insistent, but still friendly.

"Get."

"Back."

"Up."

His eye snapped open, and he let out the breath he had been holding, kicking up dust from the ground. He reached out and grabbed his axe as he pulled himself to his knees. Black ash had begun to rain from the sky, left over from the activity at the Hand of Guldán. Gorfrunch had begun to walk away from him, but all eyes were now on the hunter. Slamming the head of his axe into the dirt, he used it to push himself to his feet. Gorfrunch

followed the eyes of the gathered, and turned to face the hunter, a sneer across his face.

"I won't let you live this time, whelp." Arkonn simply widened his stance, bringing his axe to a battle position in front of his chest. Gorfrunch grinned savagely and charged, but this time Ark was ready. He stepped out of the way and swung his axe, catching the chief in the back. Gorfrunch roared in rage as he tumbled forward. It was now Arkonn on the attack, his renewed inspiration driving him forward. He swung time and time again, forcing the warchief to parry each blow, stepping back words with each strike, until they came to a sheer drop. Gorfrunch lashed out desperately, trying to gain some ground on the elf but Arkonn simply rolled to the side and connected with a kick to the warchief's chest. Gorfrunch lost his balance and fell, dropping his axe as he held steadfast to Arkonn's boot. The hunter fell to his knees and desperately tried to hold onto something, but there wasn't anything to grasp. Both men toppled over the side, lost from view.

They traded blows as they fell, Gorfrunch's plated fist crashing into his face. The warchief drove his thumb into the hunter's maimed eye socket, and Arkonn cried out as he continued to rain punches onto the warchief, his other hand firmly around the orc's neck. It all came to an abrupt end when Arkonn slammed into a small rocky shelf sticking out of the cliff face. He landed on his side and felt all the air rush out of his body. Only Gorfrunch's torso landed on the shelf, the rest of his body hung below them and he tried to claw his way to safety. He looked up in time to see the elf foot connect with his face, the orc's nose exploding outwards in a shower of blood as it broke. He lost his grip and slipped further off the shelf. Arkonn rolled onto his back and pulled both his knees to his chest.

"For Faquarl. May the dead find their peace."

Gorfrunch roared defiantly at him.

"Al diel shala, Gorfrunch." Arkonn thrust out violently, catching Gorfrunch in the face with both feet. The warchief fell, howling his rage to the world as he plummeted to the fel magma far below. Arkonn glanced down at his hand, and noticed the necklace of teeth clutched in his fist. He sighed heavily and pulled himself to his feet, beginning the slow climb to the top.

Expending nearly all his energy, he finally climbed over the ledge, gasping for breath. Nearly everyone had gathered around and the Grin were near the front. Arkonn opened his hand and let the necklace slip out and hit the ground. He loosened his grip on his axe and let it to slide forward, easy to slip and swing should he find any new challengers. There were none. He pushed his way through the crowd and walked away. There was no triumph, only sadness in his soul.

## Kaylee (M2M)

Kaylee was nervous. Oh, she'd never let anyone see this, of course, but she was. It took a lot of her energy just to stay stone-faced. General Sillen was counting on her and Kaylee had worked very hard to secure this position. She wanted to make her general proud.

The various ranks sat haphazardly as they listened rapt to the general's briefing, her voice competing with the winds of Shadowmoon howling through the wide open door of Wildhammer. Kaylee hunched down, stuffing her hands into the feathers around Regal's neck, giving him a squeeze. The old gryphon was a dear friend; he smelled of musk and soil and sulfur. She was worried about how he'd fair during this battle; he'd been through a lot, and the last one was...

"LIEUTENANT!" She sat up straight.

"Ma'am, yes, ma'am!"

"Get to your post; you have your assignment. What are you waiting for?!"

Kaylee beckoned her superior over with one finger. "I don't think Regal...I mean, this gryphon may be too wary for this battle, ma'am. I need a stand-in."

"Very well, but make it quick. We cannot wait for ill-prepared soldiers."

Whoops. She was fumbling already! She was lucky she had just gained the trust of the Netherwing enough for them to lend her a steed, even if it was just for a while. Kaylee breathed a quiet sigh of relief as she led her mount to the stables to sit out the battle. *You must keep your head about you, Kay. You've done this before! Nothing new but the battlefield.*

The young mage gasped as the stronghold fell beneath her feet, the grandeur of Shadowmoon spreading out in

front of her from her perch on the back her new companion, Rivulette. She'd have to get used to her size...she was enormous. She gasped again as trivial distractions were smothered by the realization that they were here. The Dread Horde were as numerous as her own troops and approaching fast. Lieutenant Kaylee had a crystallizing moment, then; this was her time to excel. She had her post, her target, her friends and colleagues at her back. There was no room for fear. A sly grin spread across her face as she spiraled down to report to General Sillen, who was already moving everyone out. Gryphons and Netherwing littered the sky as Kaylee landed. She couldn't wait to prove her worth!

### Bobwhite

"Another day, another battle. Eh brother?" A blonde-haired female gnome asked, looking through a spyglass towards an island in the distance.

Bobwhite Fritzsprocket scratched his head and threw his arms into the air. "No rest for the weary!" He pulled out his own spyglass and peered at Quel'danas. The island was a frenzy with fighting.

It had been weeks since the battle at Wildhammer Stronghold in Shadowmoon Valley, where Gorfrunch Smashblade had fallen, and the battle in Netherstorm where Faquarl had lost his life. Faquarl and Gorfrunch had been the gnome's longtime enemies, and it was odd and uncomfortable to think that they were gone. He had become accustomed to them, no matter what kind of men they were, and what they had done.

Bob had been fighting the Grin since he first decided to abandon the pirate life, put on a set of mail, and follow the warrior's path. They were worthy adversaries, and facing them in battle was one of his greatest pleasures. With their leaders gone...would that be the end of the Blacktooth Grin?

Being but a soldier and mercenary, the gnome was none too sure about Faquarl and Gorfrunch's motives. He knew them to be beasts in battle, and that they fought with honor and great ferocity. In them he had sensed kindred spirits.

"I wonder..." Bob put down his spyglass. "I wonder what they found? Gorfrunch, Faquarl...are you two still fighting somewhere?"

### Agholinn

Her shoulders felt heavy, causing her to sway a bit on her feet as it neared the third hour of her having to stand in A'dal's chambers and explain, in detail, the actions of the Blacktooth Grin and their allies over the last two months. It wouldn't have taken nearly as long as this, except that Khadgar and others seemed to revel in the idea that each sentence of hers needed to be translated to the Common tongue, and then to Draenei, so all could understand. It was a jab back at her from her flagrant abuse of Anchorite Triv'qom before and after the battle at Halaa. She had also been forced to speak in the Orcish language, which she still didn't have much command over, or at least not the kind of command she did over Thalassian.

Agho'Linn glanced over her shoulder and was comforted to see Renault there, the stalwart captain of Suncrown's Fel'Solan, the house guard. He stood in support of her, from the Aldor angle, but also as a friend. He made the smallest of nods to her, but it made a world of difference, bolstering her for the next phase.

"And so, the warchief of the Blacktooth Grin is dead and they sit, leaderless, in Garadar?" an arcanist questioned from one side of the room.

"That is the current state of affairs, yes, milord," Agho'Linn chimed out in response.

"And we are to understand that Gorfrunch's death is a blessing? That an entire band of murdering 'Dread Horde' without a leader is a good thing?" another arcanist questioned, his tone mocking.

"The Blacktooth Grin will choose their new leader in their own way! Until then, their Sythegar are more than capable of leading. Gorfrunch Smashblade's death was a blessing! He was an old warrior; brave and full of pride! I believe that his spirit sought peace...but that his warrior's soul got the better of him, with so many ghosts of his past taunting his ire!" she shook her head to herself, "With Smashblade gone, the Grin mourn and cry for more blood. But, with Smashblade gone, they won't have a driving force to warmonger for them."

There was silence in the chambers, and Agho'Linn held her breath as her eyes wandered over to the celestial creature in the center of the room. A'dal hung there, like a wind chime, and softly hummed to himself. Her words tasted of spin-doctoring in her mouth, but not an outright lie. She knew that Gorfrunch had never sought peace, and that she had fooled herself into believing that she would be a help in shielding, perhaps

containing, him. Still, a small part of her wanted to believe that he wanted peace. He simply wanted the peace found at the other end of war.

<THE BLACKTOOTH GRIN WILL REMAIN IN GARADAR. WHEN THEIR NEW LEADER IS CHOSEN, HAVE HIM COME TO ME. AGHO'LINN WILL REMAIN THEIR GUIDING HAND IN THIS NEW WORLD. MAY PEACE AND THE LIGHT REIGN.>

Agho'Linn dropped into a deep curtsy, ostensibly out of respect and gratefulness for A'dal's lenient decision. Perhaps Renault would have been the only one to note that it was A'dal's voice, the sheer pressing force of it, that knocked her off balance and set her into turning what would have been a faint into a curtsy. The captain looked around and noted that no one else had been so affected by the Naaru's words. He kept his curiosity from showing on his face, filing the scene in his mind for later review.

Quietly, the spectators and officials exited A'dal's chambers. Agho'Linn recovered herself and walked towards an exit with a cloak of false confidence around her. She felt wobbly on her feet and needed to concentrate on putting one foot in front of the other. She needed to get out of there, and rest. This entire ordeal was taking far too much from her.

She was stopped by Voren'thal, standing in her way with a murderous glare on his face.

"You may have wormed your way into A'dal's good graces, but don't think yourself as lucky with mine, Miss Nere'l'thos," he growled at her through his teeth, "You are not finished with this."

Brushing past him with a dismissive nod, she knew that Voren'thal was right. This wasn't over. She had all but completely ruined her credibility with the Scryers, and the Grin were still hunting Arkonn. But, she had successfully kept Suncrown's name and reputation from official proceedings, and that was a small success.

Her head felt light, and her step faltered. Agho'Linn whistled for her netherdrake to meet her, and the faithful creature landed neatly at on the Terrace of Light a moment later. She motioned for the drake to take her to what had become home, the Scryer's Tier. Only...how much longer would she be welcome there?

## Frark

"What you see, Kort Stoopgut?"

The hulking Mok'Nathal sat on a ridge outside Wildhammer Stronghold, surveying the scene where the Grin had so recently fought their last battle, and where their chieftain had so recently perished. A swirling totem of air sprouted out of the ground next to him. His eyes glazed white as his fleeting spirit squirmed into every nook and crevice of the battlefield, searching.

"Not in moufs, you git. Onna string."

A shimmer of a one-eyed, fleshy face growled across his own face, then disappeared. The ogre's spirit turned away from the corpse of a tauren and focused on a small outcropping above the cliff Gorfrunch's corpse lay at the bottom of.

"Dis'n, shaman?"

Frark's own projection slipped across the ground to the ogre's vestige and examined the outcropping. From it dangled a huge, iron necklace with scores of teeth hanging from it.

"Yeh. Aka'magosh, spirit. Blessings."

"Tanks, shaman. Gud see world, doe deir more purdy green rain dan Kort 'member."

Frark blinked the glaze away from his eyes, and bowed slightly to the air totem as it disappeared into the ground, the slight breeze around it following. Kort Stoopgut's vestige drained from his body, and flowed into the ground where the totem had disappeared. Frark scanned the sky quickly, then began trudging towards the outcropping the vestige had found, the clan's most prized possession soon to be in his hands.

## Chapter 6

### Esere

*"The Blacktooth Grin are making their return to Azeroth."*

The rumor had spread throughout Shattrath even before the audience chamber had emptied. The Scryer arcanists were like nannies gathered around a well, trading stories and conjecture on their fate. The words drifted to her ear, and she quickly, sloppily made her apologies to Voren'thal and left his council. He made a deep sigh

and nodded. Not that she stayed to accept his dismissal.

Once she was outside of the library, she called to the talbuk outside. The grey creature hurried to her side, and she took to the saddle without stopping or hesitation.

She raced down the paths, riding past the entrance to the audience chamber. "They're on the move," a voice just inside the door way was commenting. It was that Alliance bastard, Khadgar. He was *still* on the warpath. "See that they do not return to Azeroth." Her eyes narrowed further as she grit her teeth and raced past, headed for the lower portion of Shattrath to where her drake had been perching on the World's End Tavern.

"I will not let you interfere with their journey home."

## Jonn

The charm looked a bundle of long glass needles each longer than a grown man's hand. Within each was a single misty blue thread running from each end and it twisted weakly as if moved by a slight breeze. Each needle exuded a 'presence' - a feeling one would experience when another warm blooded humanoid was nearby. Jonn knew that having the charm out in the open was foolish, but he had to have another look at the newest addition to the bundle - what had been added to it at nearly the cost of his own life. He gently touched the gash in his cheekbone, remembering the battle in Shadowmoon Valley and then thought at what might have come from it. He quickly pocketed the charm before any of the citizenry took interest to it, giving one last thought to its possibilities in the future.

Shattrath's lower ward was larger than what a typical traveler might expect. The outer ring of the magnificent city dipped around terecone trees, and walls yet to be restored by the Aldor managed to hide various sub-wards quite well. One such was Browbetton Loan, a medium sized alley and cluster of buildings 'on loan' to Lordaeron. All races were welcome in Shattrath - even the cursed humans of the northlands - yet even the city's benevolent caretakers took special care with this particular group of guests. For one, this section of the lower ward was conveniently removed from the higher populated areas of the city. Second, the Aldor always seemed to have some sort of training or patrol nearby, which heavily restricted the movement of Forsaken visitors to the city. It was common knowledge why, though it was never spoken aloud, that however much they preached acceptance, the Sha'tar were still wary of outbreaks of sickness in the densely packed city. If the undead plague were ever to return to the Forsaken, the infected could spread the disease fast enough that the healers of the city would have to keep a hard pace to keep it contained.

Browbetton Loan itself was a shaded, more muted version of Shattrath. Even though it was a Forsaken settlement, the feel of nature and life was strong yet subdued, not crushed under a boot. Draenei stonework seemed worn and the color faded more by the elements than the other sections of the city. The ground here was unpaved and the earth smelled fresh - Jonn even spotted a fat beetle nuzzling through the earth and under a rock. The area was kept clean and would be acceptable to still living and conservative-minded folk. Typically the area was quiet, as many who came here did so with a strong purpose and were too busy to cause any disturbance. One example being the massive twenty-foot-long banner slung over the sub-ward's central building. Sewn with patches bearing house and militia crests of the old Alliance and weighted down by bulbs of iron, it was easily the most visible decor of the area. Its creator gave Jonn a surly look.

He wondered if Rhiddus was an old man before death or if his appearance was brought on by the Scourge's curse. His muscle tone was very weak - that compared to the fact that he had a squat, round head without any teeth made him look like a melted wax mannequin. He took out a wad of some sort of chewing tobacco and slurped it up noisily.

"Fancy jewelry now, do you, Gribbs?" Rhiddus asked.

"Not really, no," Jonn said. "You finished the banner?"

The old man slurped up a spec of drool and eyed the banner lazily. "You have company."

"Company? Who?"

"Fat fellow with a tall friend. The friend didn't say much."

Louseou, he might have guessed but the likelihood of the man being here was slim at best. At the thought of the name and their last meeting, Jonn felt that familiar mote of anger welling up in the back of his mind. Their last meeting...what had confined him to his current predicament. He hurried along to his residence in Outland, a smaller abode in the shadow of the large center building. As he opened his door and walked into his small den he halted immediately. Louseou was indeed there, sitting in one of Jonn's own chairs and reading one

of his own books ("Dissecting Methods of Charity and Malevolence"). His death knight bodyguard O stood nearby in black and red armor, her face hidden by a solid red veil. They both turned their heads in Jonn's direction as he entered the room.

"Aside from the books I touched nothing," the fat Forsaken said with a chuckle and his hands up in the air, mockingly begging for surrender, "I had an idea when you'd be returning but not a time specifically. Honestly, I'm suprised. You don't seem to be as angry as I thought you'd be."

"You ruined my work in Kalimdor." Jonn said flatly, not sure of what to make of this event.

"The council," Louseou corrected, "Gave you yet another important task - that of securing relations between Lordaeron and the Dread Horde."

"At the cost of an alliance between the Kalimdor Horde?"

"The Kalimdor Horde is in Kalimdor and does not have the supporters that the Blacktooth Grin has in the mountains above our nation."

"What is this?" Jonn asked, now almost sick to his stomach, "Why do you keep up this farce? There is only you and I here. No supporters...no politics. Why?" He intentionally avoided including O in on the conversation. He knew her from long ago but that was ages past. The memory of what lay behind that veil made Jonn feel weak, but he managed to keep his composure.

"No farce, Jonn. I and other members of the council needed you with the Dread Horde. But not so much as we need you now."

Jonn laughed... a sound he had not made in quite some time. It was actually very refreshing. "The Grin tried to kill the Queen's family..."

"And you took some small part in that battle. But mistakes happen and the crown is willing to forgive." By the crown he must have meant the Lordaeron Council, not the Queen herself, as Sylvanas was well known for her short temper and long memory. If Jonn returned to the Undercity...he knew he'd be put to death on the spot. Something he had little doubt that Louseou had planned out months ahead.

"The queen has decided to side with the council on this matter. You are return to the capital at once, by order of the crown, to accept a new assignment to be completed along with your current one. Since you are adept at using your magicks to travel and avoid incidents I doubt managing two tasks at once should be a problem for you?"

Such confidence. The fact that his fellow councilman could look him in the eyes and order him around spoke well of a spike in his power back in the northlands. He wasn't concerned at all with an end to Jonn's 'exile' or his continued survival from it for these past years. Perhaps that was why he was sitting there in Jonn's chair. He wanted to meet with him personally instead of sending a lackey, and to let him know where he stood now in the grand order of things. So little said, but Jonn understood. At least what was 'thought' to be conveyed.

"The Blacktooth Grin is going to depart from Draenor soon." Jonn said, "The matter requires my attention so it will have to wait."

"A seasoned war clan doesn't need you to hold their hands, Master Gribbs. The council requires your immediate attention. It is a matter of security over the Eastern Kingdoms."

## Crunch

As the Grin put Garadar behind them, Crunch readied himself for battle. As he saw the Alliance on their gryphons, his rage grew.

"Pokes! Over there! Crunch see the human peoples!"

"Don't cha worrie 'bout dem, Crunch, just keep moving. We kill dem if they stop us."

As they rode through Zangarmarsh, Crunch started to lose hope of any action at all on there way back to Azeroth untill they got to the pass to Hellfire Peninsula.

"INCOMING!" someone yelled, as a fireball was launched into the crowd of Grin members.

Looking up, Crunch saw a mage on one of the mushroom trees just as Reaper stepped out of the shadows behind him and slit his throat, yelling back, "More from da rear! Crunch nuda mage behind joo!"

Crunch's eyes went red at the excitement of battle.

"CRUNCK SMASH FOR THE GRIN!!! CRUNCK SMASH FOR -" His arm started to shake as he heard a familiar voice in his head.

*"Crunch, control yourself, don't get carried away yet. Your healers aren't all focusing on you."*

He ignored the warning and gave into his bloodfury as he shook more and more violently. Looking at the gnome rogue running to kill him, Crunck lifted his mace and made a low swoop, pinning the gnome against the wall. Struggling, the gnome began speaking angrily in Common. Before it could finish, Crunck had punched the gnome in the head with an armored fist, making a loud crunch. Crunck turned around in time to see more Alliance advancing, and he started to foam at the mouth as his blood fury grew. He ran to the first one he saw and punched him in the throat, coming around with a swipe at his head. The voice rang in his head again.

*"What the hell did I just tell you?! Calm down and get back to your healers before you get yourself killed!"*

Crunck was hit in the back of the head and passed out.

"Where is Crunck, it dark here...Crunck dead?"

*"No...wake up..."*

"But Crunck is up, how wake up if up?"

*"That was a demand, not a question! Now, GET UP!"*

"But Crunck not know who you are, you sound fam... famil... familiar."

*"Your trainer - now wake the #\*\*% up!"*

Crunck sat up from his mat in the Stonard inn and yelled, "TWOBEARS!!!"

The innkeeper walked up to him and said, "You're awake. Good. I have a note for you from a druid."

He held out a slip of parchment which read, *You owe me - Tree*. Crunck took the note and sat there looking at it for a while before heading outside to find out what had become of the Grin.

## Grimnir

Grimnir sank to his knees, heavily. With almost curious disinterest, he ran a gnarled hand down the shaft of the arrow lodged in his heart.

He looked around, smiling. Grin and Suncrown alike clustered around him, shouting, attempting to cure him where no cure was possible. Faces blurred together, and began to wink out, one by one, as darkness clouded his vision.

With the greatest of effort, the old orc turned his glance slightly, gazing levelly at his fellow Sythegars. He nodded, just once. They would remember what they swore, and they would make the Grin acknowledge their blood debt with Arkonn fulfilled. The elf had presented himself with absolute honor in seeking to redress his debt, and Grimnir's blood - now seeping gently into the hard Stonard ground - was payment of that debt in full.

They would remember, and they would make the clan remember. It was his final wish, and they would honor it. He was owed that much.

He smiled again, and now his vision had collapsed to but a single point. He saw Arkonn, kneeling before him, his face distorted with grief. Arkonn...once a friend, then a hated enemy, and finally, here in the end, a friend and comrade once again. He needed to understand that all had been made well...that things had ended as they should, and could not have ended any other way.

With the last of his willpower, the old shaman spoke.

"Nice shot, Ark."

Arkonns tear-stained face split into a smile.

"Would've had ya thirty years ago, though..."

He was so tired. Everything was so heavy. He sank to the ground, his senses departing him one by one. His sight closed to darkness, all sounds faded gently to silence. The last thing he felt was the hard stone ground of Stonard. The Grin's home. They had found their way...and now he could rest.

So he did.

**"FIGHT DAMNIT, FIGHT, YOU AREN'T ALLOWED THE LUXURY OF DYING WHEN THERE IS SO MUCH MORE WORK TO BE DONE!"**

Shadiel knelt by the fading shaman. The mage's face tense and strained. While he shouted the words to his dying friend, comrade, and fellow Sythegar, Shadiel knew that his words were for naught. Grimnir was too old and had taken a blow that would have felled even a much younger Grinner. That the ancient Shaman was still breathing and able to speak said much for his strength. Upon gazing in Grimnir's eyes Shadiel nodded with the

unspoken agreement that they had made. They would see the agreement through, the blood debt had been paid.

Shadiel knew that Grimmir understood he wouldn't win. The orc had a wisdom that above all else Shadiel respected. Grimmir understood that the conflict with Arkonn and Suncrown were those that were tearing apart the officers. That the fire within the leading Grin would soon come to a boil and may even split things asunder. Grimmir had gotten the Grin home and now he had reunified them together. Understanding that the world was changing towards a vision that he might not be able to clearly see, his last breath had made the journey to that vision possible.

The Blood Mage watched Grimmir's eyes meet Arkonn's and in them they reflected a friend, not an enemy. Shadiel's own then met Belmont's and with a nod he knew that they would fulfill the agreement that they made to Grimmir with the full force of their powers to do so, the blood debt was over and caution to any that would oppose their combined might. Another glance was given to Suncrown. He nodded at Agholinn and was given one in return. This, at least, would start the mending process with allies of such quality that it would be impossible to replace. Looking down, Shadiel noticed the ground wet; wiping his face he stood and put a hand forth to Arkonn. It was grasped and then shaken.

"That peace that you were fighting for, Ranger...make sure you see it through. Don't allow these losses of my companions...of our companions, to have been in vain."

Steel eyes were met with steel eyes and an understanding made between ranger and mage. Shadiel walked off to the edge of town. Magical wards must be placed to help defend their home. Mourning must wait until they have a time that is secure for him to do so in a way that he wishes. He worked with a focus that defied fatigue and hunger in order to bar the demons of his emotions from afflicting him with poisons no healer could cure.

He wondered what now will become of the Grin.

## Jonn

The warrior mage noticed his guards glaring at an open door upon his return, grumbling angrily, but their weapons had not been drawn.

"What are you doing!?" The mage fumed, "I leave you alone for ten minutes, telling you keep an eye on the chamber and you leave the door wide open for just anyone to..." The words froze in his mouth when indeed he did see strangers standing in the vault used to contain the staff. Three dwarves, one dressed in statesman's vestments, the other two in holy garb stood around the raised dais that supported the cursed staff.

"What are you doing in here?" The mage demanded, "This area is off limits! It isn't safe!"

"Do you know what this is?" The statesman said calmly, his back towards the captain of the guards.

"A demon artifact. Now you'll each have to..." The mage seized the dwarf's shoulder, giving serious thought to hurling the intruder outside onto his thick head.

"Get yer hands off me!" The old dwarf roared, slapping the warrior mage's hand away as he spun about. It was then the mage knew who he was dealing with, as he instantly recognized the crest of the Bronzebeard clan on his tabard and the insignia of the crown of Ironforge on his ring finger.

"This staff..." the statesman said, twisting his lips in distaste, "Is a shard from Orodur...the staff wielded by Aman'thul...lord of the Titans and father of our world!" The dwarf's nose twitched violently as he glared the mage backwards until he bumped into a wall. "Aye, there is a dark force corrupting this artifact but it is nae something that cannot be expunged by the power of the Light! To think, you were all intending to destroy a Sliver of Orodur. Had we not gotten wind of this when we did, the greatest piece of our world's history would be lost forever. The taint in this...treasure..." The statesman made a movement to touch the staff with his finger, but the priest next to him cleared his throat loudly and he retracted his hand, "...will be cleansed by a high priest of Ironforge."

The mage's eyes seemed to almost pop out of their sockets, "You are...bringing this artifact to Azeroth? Khadgar and the Sons of Lothar will have to be made aware... preparations will have to be made."

"They will be. And preparations *have* already been made." Heavy plated boots could be heard outside. "I thank the Light that we made it in time. This artifact.. this piece of history could be a key to an age of prosperity in our world."

As the wretched creatures chattered mindlessly on, the staff itself mused on recent events. With luck, it had found itself in the hands of the Horde, as easy to corrupt and as willing to do battle as ever. And now, when it seemed like its fate had been sealed, fortune had smiled on it once again. These men of the Light were wary of the staff's tricks, but their overconfidence would be their downfall. It felt more confident in its future with them than another meeting with Khadgar and his archmages. But it did not try to reach out and sooth its new 'owners' with words like "well said," or the like. For once in its long life, Magtheridon would be meek and would give way to any questions or demands...at least until the time would be right.

It was amused at that last thought. That a pit lord would forgo brute strength and use words to bend mortals to its will...it was something it never would have considered had it still been flesh and bone. Perhaps the lingering powers the great Titan's staff were merging somehow with its own corrupted soul...making it something more than it once was. How might it change in the years to come?

The Sliver of Orodur cackled darkly to itself.