

Nightmare in Arathi

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The battle had been long and difficult, but nothing out of the ordinary in the Arathi Highlands. As usual, little ground had been gained for either side, the Keepers of Stromgarde left for what remained of Stromgarde Keep, and the Blacktooth Grin had departed for Hammerfall. Not long afterwards, scouts from each side returned to the site and tallied the dead. Though the Keepers found all their missing soldiers, the Grin was missing one - a Tauren, a healer.

Felora woke to the feeling of something trickling down the back of her head; it might have been sweat or blood, for all she knew. Her eyes fluttered open to find a group of human men standing over her, all wearing various grim expressions - save for perhaps the warrior and warlock, who looked more eager and excited. Each wore a red and white tabard blazoned with the banner of Stromgarde. Felora's eyes grew wide and she craned her neck to look beyond the group of men to a faint source of light. A hard slap to the side of her face brought her attention back to the warrior in front of her.

Aeldon had seen this one before, if only briefly. She rarely left the Chieftain's side but to heal the wounded. With her in the Keepers' custody, the Blacktooth Grin was short a healer. Aeldon thought of the situation, wondering what the capture of such an important person would do to the zeal of the Grin.

The druid cried out in pain as Hifazat attacked her with a Curse of Agony. As pain washed through her body, he sighed suddenly.

"Even Faquarl was a smarter one than this. She should be easy to crack."

Felora's ears perked at Faquarl's name. She proceeded to scowl at Hifazat as though she had understood what he'd said.

"Ah, you may have struck a nerve there, Hifazat. See how she looks at you," Jerome remarked.

Hifazat scoffed. "The Grin are little more than animals. This one is no different."

"Animals or not, they need to pay for their assault on Danath."

"Ah, but I this one is different. This one," Rexor spoke up, out of breath from the beating he was giving, "is very close to their leader. She has information that we need, she must."

Hifazat sighed at Rexor. "Of course, but how are we going to get it out of her?"

Aeldon let out a large cloud of smoke from his pipe as he watched on. "Carefully. She can't talk if she's dead."

Rexor gave Felora another punch to the side of her head, "Carefully? That doesn't have to mean gently..."

Aeldon approached Felora, stopping Rexor from delivering another hit, and leaning down to face her.

"Talk," he said in broken Orcish, "Talk...we stop. Talk...no...end life."

Felora blinked to hear the guttural sounds coming from the throat of a human, then bit back with an angry and distressed stream of Orcish. Aeldon could make out very little, save for something asking 'why'.

He stood and whispered something to Rexor, avoiding Hifazat, and stepping back into the darkness of the room. Keeping his eyes locked on Felora, he made a slight grin.

"At least we know that she can say something other than 'moo'."
Everyone in the room let out a bark of laughter, and continued with the interrogation.

The rope worried at her bare wrists as she twisted in an effort to relieve some of the pressure on her shoulders. She'd been tied for days now, while the humans moved her around the Keep in attempts to ward off the threat of the Grin finding her before they were ready to mount a defense. She wasn't sure what they wanted - they never said anything specific. Felora sighed. Hopefully the clan would be looking for her. If anyone came searching, it would be the rogues - the Grin had rogues coming out their ears. All she had to do was endure.

Mortael crept along the grounds of Stromgarde, carefully avoiding the multitude of humans wearing the colors of the Grin's long and favored enemy. They had been combing Arathi for weeks and there was still no sign of the chieftain's Seer. He was beginning to worry that when they did find her, she wouldn't be breathing. Arahin stalked behind him a few yards away, and Mortael watched as the fellow rogue quickly and silently incapacitated one of the guards. The two Dreadstalkers made their way toward the hall where Galen Trollbane held audience with his ilk. Arahin glanced at him.

"You think they'd be stupid enough to hide her in plain sight like that?" he whispered.

Mortael shook his head. "Of course not. Still, I'm going to check the crypt. Take the other side - leave Trollbane be."

The blood elf nodded an affirmative and moved away. Mortael slipped past another patrol of guards and down into the crypt where Thoras Trollbane lay.

There were no guards, just a few old humans in robes. Certainly no tauren here, he thought. He turned to go, but something in a corner caught his eye. Moving toward it for a closer look, he was rewarded with a dust-covered purple hat, splotted here and there with the dark stains of what could only be blood. Mortael frowned and made his way quickly back to the surface, where he found Arahin waiting beneath the arbor. The elf's face was grim as he saw what Mortael held. The two rogues quickly made their way back to the road outside the Keep. A small contingent of Grin met them.

"Deady Mort, you find anything?" Crunck asked.

"Well, no Keeper presence. That, however, isn't the exact answer. I have found something. Warlord," Mortael said, turning to Yagyu. "I need your ear when you get a moment. And I suggest that you get that moment fast."

Yagyu's brow furrowed.

"Wut is it, Mort?"

"I've found what is likely a trace of Felora, sir. I didn't see her there. But her hat was wedged in a corner of the crypt."

He held up the slightly misshapen hat to show Yagyu. "Looks like we know where she went..."

"Damn Keepers!" Yagyu bellowed. "I knew they had somethin' ta do with her disappearance."

"Get in there! Find Fefel! We smash them!" Crunck burst out.

Mortael sighed. "She's not here, Crunck. At least, not now. Arahin - with me, if you don't mind. Let's leave the Keepers a message."

Arahin grinned at him. "No problem."

As the rogues moved back toward Stromgarde Keep, Yagyu clenched his jaw and turned to the rest of the Grin standing behind him.

"Move it, Grin! Form up! I want this place full searched out!" he yelled. "Everyone look for clues to Felora!"

As the grots scrambled to obey, Yagyu stood at the edge of the road and stared at the great Keep. The Chieftain would not be pleased.

Ashenrock sat quietly on his bed, the worry on his face seemed permanently etched there. Too many bad things had happened to him and his family as of late...and now this. Felora was missing and presumed to be captured by the Keepers. Some in the Grin had worried that she might be dead, but Ashenrock was positive that she was alive...and he was going to find her. His fondness for the tauren female was always evident. She was the first one in the clan that he had really connected with. She seemed to understand him, and she was his pillar to lean on when he couldn't stand on his own two hooves - she was grounded. Any time that he would overreact, she was there to bring him back down and put things in their proper perspective. Someone started knocking on his door. Without even looking away from his window, the Warchief said, "Enter."

The door slowly opened and Mortael appeared. "You wanted to see me, sir?"

Ashenrock didn't move. He didn't look at Mortael or even bother to stand up and return Mortael's crisp salute. He simply floated the words across the room to the door.

"Find Felora, Mortael."

Like a good soldier, Mortael didn't question the order. "Yes, sir, I will not fail."

Suddenly Ashenrock rose upon hearing those words, seeming to snap out of whatever daydream he was in. He turned and faced Mortael, his brow furrowing.

"I know," he said firmly, and saluted the rogue.

Mortael returned the salute. "Sir, should I do this alone?"

Ashenrock looked back out the window, searching for something that he would never find. "No one should be alone, Mort."

Mortael wasn't sure if that was directed at him or if it were a simple statement, but then Ashenrock added, "Take anyone, and anything that you need. But Mortael...don't try to free her yourselves, it's far too dangerous. Just get her a message."

Ashenrock turned away from the window, gazing back at Mortael with an angry determination and seemingly renewed self-awareness. "You tell her that we're coming for her." Mortael conceded a wry smile and nodded to the Warchief informally.

"Yes, sir," he said. He then turned away and shut the door behind him.

Ashenrock then grabbed his pack and headed for the door. Just as he was pulling it open, the ceremonial dagger that Gorfrunch had given him caught his eye. He walked over to it, picked it up, and sheathed it by his side. Perhaps it was time to ask Yagyu to show him how a warrior wielded it.

Aeldon was sure to follow the prisoner wherever she was taken. He was one of the few Keepers who could understand Orcish, and one of a smaller minority willing to speak to the tauren. He disliked being present at the interrogation, it reminded him of what happened to him years before, but he knew it had to be done; at least, that was what he kept telling himself. Being present was only aggravated by the fact he held little hatred for tauren, they were one of the few species he felt he could get along with, despite their alliance with the orcs.

Through the dim light of the chamber, he could see Felora bleeding from both magically and physically inflicted wounds, strung to the ceiling like a cow ready for slaughter. He smoked his pipe and paced around the prisoner, watching each blow that was landed upon her by the

'interrogators.' It had gone on for hours, the punishment stopping only long enough for a new interrogator to replace the old one. At a point, he grew tired of the noises.

"Enough," he said, raising his hand to the chosen torturer, "Leave us. It's time to ask her some questions."

"With all due respect, sir," he began, "I don't think she's had enough yet."

Aeldon grabbed the man's fist before he could land another hit and pulled him away, saying, "And with all due respect, what thought in that pathetic head of yours thinks your disobedience won't be repaid with a dagger in your back? Now, leave."

The interrogator grumbled, but left. With a wave of his hand, the guards left as well, leaving Aeldon alone with the prisoner. He placed his pipe down on a nearby table and grabbed the key to the chains. He dragged a chair from the table to Felora, and, oddly, unlocked the chains holding her to the ceiling, allowing her to fall onto the chair behind her. He locked the chains to a loop on the floor and went back to the table, returning to Felora with a large bowl filled with cool water. She looked up at him angrily, but he sighed.

"You haven't had anything to drink in days, and the loss of blood is not helping much..."

He realized he had been speaking in Common, but could not figure how to easily translate it. He took a drink from the bowl, smiled, and then placed the bowl before Felora. A smile crossed his face. She sniffed at the water, then began drinking it greedily. When the bowl was emptied, he returned to the table and went back to the prisoner with his pipe.

"Now..." he began in Common, but switched to Orcish, "...you will talk."

She looked up and returned his order with a glare.

"Me don't...want...to hurt you. Me stop them, you must talk, or they hurt more you."

Something seemed to cross her face, fear, or terror perhaps, or it could have been the flickering shadows from the torch light. Aeldon too his pipe and began smoking again, thinking of what to start asking her, and how to say it.

"Let...we.....start...."

And so, the true interrogation began.

The fire crackled and hissed as burning logs spit out blobs of sap with sharp popping noises. The Warlord peered intently at the map illuminated by the fire. The outlines of the Eastern Kingdoms were clear to the Warchief who stood looking over his shoulder. Yagyu pointed at marks on the map in the section marked 'Arathi.'

"Here Chief. Yew can see it better if'n ya look at it as a whole picture. The Keepers hit us here," he pointed to the location of Hammerfall then continued, "Felora comes up missin'...then they hit us again at Stonard. We find evidence of supplies at Menethil and Mortael finds evidence of Felora in the Keep." He paused as he scratched his topknot in thought. "I can't make heads ner tails of it, Boss. All I know is they needed war supplies for movement and taking Felora indicates they need information. But fer whut?"

It was clear to Yagyu that Ashenrock was similarly befuddled as he said nothing but simply peered at the map. He looked at the Warchief's belt and saw the glinting ceremonial dagger affixed there. It was the first time he had seen the Warchief wearing a blade and although the dagger hung loosely from its leather strap, the gesture spoke volumes to the orc. He could see the seriousness on the tauren's face and he knew that the time for action was drawing near. Ashenrock must have felt Yagyu's eyes on the blade as he looked down at the dagger and smiled thinly.

"First things first Chief...ifn' yer gunna wear that in battle, better make sure it won't come off." With that he tugged at the leather strap and adjusted the blade's position, edge up so that the Warchief could draw and cut in one smooth motion. With a smile, he looked approvingly at the now secured blade and the determined druid who wore it.

Stonemug paced the floor for the umpteenth time, pausing only a moment to wonder if the groove in the floor was only his imagination, or truly the work of his boot's constant wandering. A pained half-grin crossed his face; how easy it was to take the hunter, who could sit unflinching hours in the tall grass, waiting for the perfect shot, and reduce him to this twitching, just by telling him to wait in a stone building. The nervous edge had started at the moment this operation had begun, and hadn't ceased even here, within the walls of Honor Hold.

Breathing deeply, as he did to steady his nerves before the hunt, the dwarf strode the length of the floor purposefully, seeking the boot flask of Sweet Amber on the desk in his barracks. The burning liquid brought its own sharp focus, forced his mind to quicken enough to pull disparate memories together into a single flowing picture.

The Prince's instructions had been simple, if somewhat lacking in concrete details - gather a contingent of Keepers and deliver them to reinforce Danath Trollbane's forces at Honor Hold. See to the defenses, and await further instructions. Only one small problem - such a regiment would need supplies, as the storehouses of Honor Hold were already at subsistence level, thanks to years of fighting the Burning Legion. Similarly, the intense fighting in the Arathi Basin meant that supplies were equally scarce at Stromgarde. The force would need to secure its own food and ammunition on the trip.

A solution had quickly presented itself to the hunter. The city of Hammerfall would have its own supplies for the Horde operating in the Basin. Might not the Keepers gain the necessary sundries and strike a blow at their enemy simultaneously? The scouts were certain Hammerfall was hard pressed and a determined attack would meet little resistance. A large force attacking forward, and perhaps a smaller group sneaking in the rear, could steal the supplies and get out handily, with little threat of retaliation.

Stonemug's brow wrinkled in frustration - it should have been that easy. The contingent sent to attack Hammerfall was smaller than the hunter would have liked, but the opposition should have been equally small. He remembered the numbing ache when the advanced scouts returned, bearing news that an unexpected standard had been sighted on the palisades as the Keepers approached.

The cursed banner of the Blacktooth Grin.

Every report had placed the band in Stonard, still grieving for their lost leader or something. By the time the report had been received, the second raiding party had already approached the city, and Stonemug had pushed the attack, without knowing the number or disposition of the new enemy. The crushing wave that met the valiant warriors of Stromgarde as they approached the city was far larger than any of the commanders had expected.

A tear welled up in the dwarf's eye at the memory. Fine young lads, new to the tabard of the Keep, struck down by the arrows and swords of the Grin - hewn to pieces by vicious Yagyu's fury and Ashenrock's mighty spells. The banners of Stromgarde had rushed, then stumbled, and then faltered before the onslaught, until they were forced back into the rocks of Arathi. Barely a cartload of supplies had been pilfered before the retreat was sounded, not nearly enough for the Prince's command.

Stonemug pressed the flask to his lips, drinking in another mouthful of the fiery brew, and his thoughts turned to the prisoner. A flash of true pain assailed his senses - the tauren would be with Rexus and Hifazat now, a thought that sent a shudder up the hunter's spine. He had no great love for any of the Horde, but that demon Hifazat....no, the thought was too much to bear. Better a single clean axe stroke - if the situations were reversed, that would be all the hunter would ask.

The decision to attack Stonard was, like Hammerfall, merely a matter of convenience. Situated on the road to Nethergarde, the Keepers would have to subdue it, or risk any later supply trains on the way to the Dark Portal. Attacking the camp of the Grin would mean heavy casualties, even more than at Hammerfall, and the dwarf had no illusions of a lucky strike or surprise attack. The swamp would give clues the enemy could easily read - a frightened bird, or the splashing of the water as the river was crossed. Scouts from the fort would be back to Stonard well before the front lines could be drawn up.

The Keepers had covered a great distance in relative stealth - having abandoned the long road across Thandol Span after the failed raid on Hammerfall, Stonemug devised a plan with the help of his Draenei wife, Aurhia. The shaman amongst the newcomers worked magic on the waters south of Stromgarde, allowing the Keepers and their supply train to literally run across its surface, moving the entire detachment atop the waves to Menethil Harbor without a single track to mark them. From the Harbor, the group had used the gryphons to haul their soldiers and equipment to the forests of Darkshire. Some supplies had to be left behind at Menethil, with promises by the local lords to move them along as soon as the gryphons could again be spared. The hunter had acquiesced only when it was obvious that further delay would mean missing the gathering of allies in time for the assault to go forward as planned.

In Darkshire, the news was grim indeed. The Knights of the Light, who had given oaths to join the Keepers in the attack, failed to arrive. No news came of their approach, and whispers amongst the soldiers indicated that they had, perhaps, been ambushed en route. Thankfully, many members of the Brethren had also answered the call, along with other scattered folk, mostly stout warriors whom individual Keepers had battled with side by side on earlier sorties. Such was the troop that rode forth through Deadwind Pass and into the Swamp of Sorrows.

The battle at Stonard seemed a terrifying memory of earlier Hammerfall. The Grin, secure in their superior numbers, poured out of the front gates of the fort, forsaking the easier defense of the walls. Even Stonemug had to appreciate their tactics - the group had sent out a team of assassins and rogues, lying in wait to attack the healers behind the Keepers' lines after the main force went forward. Trapped between the powerful force at the gate and the highly efficient killers to the rear, the Keepers' line quickly fell into disorder and faltered. Axes and swords fell upon heavy armor, men screamed their death wails, and the fetid swamp drank deep of blood. Seeing little hope of salvaging the attack, the order was given to retreat to Nethergarde, but as the Keepers placed volunteers at the rear of the column to fight a desperate rear guard, the Brethren rallied their wounded and turned instead back to the west, racing full speed towards the gap of Deadwind. Seeing their alliance broken and the strength separated, the survivors of Stromgarde routed, racing by individual paths into the dusty wasteland beyond the swamp, seeking refuge behind the stone wall of Nethergarde.

What happened after Stonard, Stonemug could scarce remember. There was a battle, or at least the start of one - of that he was certain. The Grin had been gathered below the hill, ready to charge up. Their vanguard had pushed even to the gates. But then there was darkness and a fog. Stonemug looked to the boot flask in his hand. Perhaps even a dwarf could drink too much.

But when the new day had dawned, the Grin had departed the field. The Keepers stayed a few days in Nethergarde, healing those who could be healed, and sending back the bodies to Stromgarde who could not be healed, to be placed in the crypt as honored heroes. Some small excess of goods were garnered at great price from the defenders of Nethergarde to supply the troop as it traversed the last steps to the Dark Portal. And from there to Honor Hold, to await the Prince's next command.

So Stonemug waited, and wondered, and prepared....

A stream of profanities in a mixture of languages rolled softly through the hallway outside the room that Felora was in. The voice was soft, mellifluous, belying the crudeness of the cursing. The door opened with a sibilant creak, torchlight splitting the darkness like a hangover. A tall figure crept in, her horns casting dagger-like shadows on the wall behind her in the light of the brand as Aurhia looked around. Settling the torch in a sconce, she turned back to the door, blowing on and shaking her hand and still quietly cursing.

A few seconds later she returned, and closed the door behind her. She carried a bag, both shoulder straps in one hand, and had two small cushions tucked under her arm. She crossed quickly to where the Felora was chained to the floor, shaking her head and muttering darkly in Draenei. She stopped about a foot short of the farthest that the other woman could reach and set down both pillows and the backpack. She stood there, waiting for a moment, to get Felora's attention. She stared back at her with something approaching pity, then held out both arms to show that there were no weapons for Felora to lunge for, nothing she could take from the shaman that would help her escape.

"Healer," she said in Common, pointing to herself. "Healer," she said clearly, pointing at Felora.

"No one," Aurhia whispered in Draenei, mostly to herself, "ordered me not to feed you or see to it your wounds aren't infected." She picked up both cushions and advanced cautiously, still keeping up a litany of soothing speech but ready for any attempt to harm her. "I am not disobeying anyone above me by offering you a moment of the dignity inherent in all creatures and spirits." She towered over Felora. "I have lost much respect for many I trusted, because of you." She dropped the cushions on the floor and turned back to snag her bag.

"I would kill you if they would let me," she continued, "a clean death. This lingering poisons the spirit. Not," she dropped onto one of the cushions and pointed from Felora to the other one, "that I give a damn about your soul. But you poison the spirits of my friends. No." She sighed and pulled out some cheese and a small haunch of deer or talbuk, wincing as her hand barked against something in the bag. "No, it is not you, as you, but what you represent. The longer this goes on, the harder they become. What they are doing to you, is killing what makes them the men I trusted." She looked frankly at Felora as she unwrapped the food and set it on the ground, not waiting to see if Felora responded or not. "And I hate you for it."

Aurhia pulled out a small corked bottle and opened it; a smell that Felora was familiar with quickly filled the room. When she held out the jar to demonstrate the contents, Felora could see a fresh burn across her left hand, welted with ugly blue blisters. Aurhia ignored it and dipped her fingers into the bottle. "I cannot heal you. They will just start over and it will be worse." She reached out and began putting the salve on the worst of the scratches and abrasions that she can see, especially around Felora's wrists. "This won't help the pain. It might even sting. But you won't get gangrene and suffer from within. I can at least give you that. As long as you are under my care you will only suffer from without." She grimaced. "Even this will be a problem. But they can't get any information from you if you die of infection or starvation, I will say. I will be hard as earth to them, as they are to themselves."

Finished, she climbed to her feet, only then applying some of the mixture to her own burned hand. Both cushions disappeared into the bag, along with the bottle. Whatever was left of the food remained. She stared blankly down at Felora for a moment and then turned away.

"I have been fighting too long. I care about the monsters that are tormenting you. And I do not care about you at all."

Rexor sat at his desk in his chamber at the Keep, staring blankly at his bloodstained hands. For the last several hours he had aided in the interrogation of the captured Druid. He had delivered crushing blows to complement Hifazat's magical torture and Aeldon's mental manipulation. But now, as he sat there, staring at his reddened hands, he felt....unsettled.

He couldn't understand why. He hated the Horde, and he had always relished violence. However, while he knew logically that the interrogation was necessary, something was appealing to his sense of honor that this was wrong. Maybe because he wasn't on equal footing with the prisoner....whatever it was, Rexor was a little unnerved. The Warrior shook his head and took a swig from his flask, letting the fiery drink wash through him. He had to rid himself of these doubts. They would do the same to one of us, perhaps worse, Rexor reminded himself silently. Lighting up one of his Goblin Cigars, he decided to read through the reports again. Nur had been kind enough to give him a record of what had happened to the Keepers during his absence.

He felt the anger build up inside him again as he read the reports. Allies abandoning the Keepers in their time of need, numerically superior enemies ambushing the Stromgarde fighters and picking them off at Stonard and Hammerfall....what had happened to the army? He felt guilt join his anger, silently cursing himself for being away long enough for things to come to this.

There was a time when we would destroy outposts effortlessly...now we need to capture and interrogate prisoners to win? What have we come to? he thought sadly.

His eye flickered over the report about the retreating force of Squires and young soldiers being butchered as they tried to escape the massacre at Stonard. Reading Nur's description of what had been done to the young recruits brought his anger back anew. And he was having reservations about torturing one of them? Bah! A mere temporary lapse!

Rexor realized he had been away for far too long. He was needed, and had not been there...but no more. He had returned, and he would fight to his last breath to defend the Keepers and their goals. He knew the Grin would come to rescue their Seer. But he would be ready. He glanced over to his weapons hanging on their wall racks. He would be waiting. The Keepers would have their vengeance.

A scream that was quickly cut off grabbed his attention. Looking from his quarters, he could see the road leading to the gates, and he saw a small group of orcs making their way to the gate, trodding on the corpse of the lone guard they had just killed. Judging by their armor and weapons, as well as their ragged messy formation, he could tell easily that they were mere grunts from Hammerfall, and not the disciplined soldiers of the Grin. Rexor knew a few Keepers were still present within the walls, including the interrogators, but the massive Warrior knew he could handle this himself. After strapping on his armor, Rexor swept out of the room, buckling on his weapons....he would certainly enjoy this.

The six Hammerfall orcs made their way to the bridge leading towards the Crypt, when their leader stopped them suddenly.

Before them, midway across the bridge, stood a black-armored human of alarming size, with only one eye, a massive mace strapped to his back, and a pair of axes hanging from his belt. He stood with his arms crossed and a slight sneer on his face. He wore no helmet.

The leader shouted a challenge in Orcish at the Warrior, who responded by drawing his twin axes and crouching into a fighting stance.

The grunt yelled, rushing at the human. A split second and splash of blood later, his body crashed to the ground, followed by his head a second after.

His five stricken comrades barely had time to realize he was dead before the human was suddenly among them, now swinging his mace and roaring a battle cry, his eye glowing a deep blood red.

Rexor stood on the bridge, panting as he let the bloodlust course through him, the

bodies of the Hammerfall patrol at his feet. Still consumed by his rage, he bellowed a challenge to the heavens. "COME AND GET YOUR SEER GRIN!!! JUST TRY!!! HONOR AND VENGEANCE!!!!!!!!!!!"

Hifazat walked into the small chamber where the druid was being held. A smile came to his face as he saw Aurhia kneeling beside the enemy, tending Felora's wounds and speaking to her. "That indeed is a good idea. Keep her healthy and fit."

Aurhia startled a bit, looks up to Hifazat with a perplexed expression on her face, "You condone aiding her, after what you just did to her?"

Hifazat's response drew a nasty reaction from Aurhia; he stated simply, "Of course. As long as she is fit and alive, she can be tortured and interrogated some more."

The reaction brought a smile to Hifazat's face. "However I have good news for you, my dear little soft-hearted Keeper. She will suffer no more physical discomfort. No one will lay a hand on her. She has shown that she can withstand a beating and any interrogation methods thrown her way. Now the fun begins."

Aurhia looked at Hifazat, wondering how in the world this man became a Keeper, and one holding influence at that.

"What do you mean, fun?" Aurhia questioned as she moved back from Hifazat towards the door.

"You see, her people will come for her. And in all likelihood we will let them have her or they shall take her. Either way, when they do take her, she will be an empty shell. You see, physical discomfort can be overcome. But destroying her mind, her spirit, her soul and whatever else that these animals possess will be far more damning on them. The effect of seeing the trusted confidante of the warchief such a broken being will have a negative effect on the morale of their clan.

"So you see, now the fun begins. We will not torture her any more. We will simply crush her spirit; make her unable to do the simplest of things. We shall make her a liability to the Grin instead of an asset. She commands great respect among her people, we must destroy that image. Seeing her broken - unable to even speak - will shake the clan. That is what we want.

"Don't bother speaking to the Guardians or the Royal family. They will not help you. These people do not wish to torture her like I do, or even as Rexor does. They do not wish to hurt her. They are weak. That is why I am here.

"I do what is necessary, regardless of what it means. If this leads to even one man of Stromgarde living a day longer, it is worth it. This is war. There are no moral values or good or bad. There is only survival. And we will be the ones to survive."

Turning his back on Aurhia, Hifazat commanded, "Now leave us. Me and this wench have a rendezvous with damnation."

Aurhia's expression was frozen in shock.

"I would expect nothing less from someone who consorts with demons. You are already lost. Are you already so corrupt that you have to take the rest of us down with you?" she demanded.

She had stopped short of actually accusing him of colluding with the Legion, but the thought hung there silently between them, each facing away from the other.

Aurhia turned and slammed the door behind herself, not waiting for the answer she knew wasn't coming. Swearing in Draenei, she hurried off in search of Rexor or Jerome, perhaps Cass or Aeldon. This had happened before. She wasn't there to stop it among her own people, but now she was going to put her last breath, her last drop of blood, between the Keepers and this demonic corruption.

She was falling.

Falling, even though the logical part of her mind knew that she lay quite safe on the stone floor of their Keep. There was nowhere safe anymore. Felora brought one broad hand to her face, stiff with dried blood. Her tears had long since stopped; there was nothing now but pain. Pain, and a growing ball of hatred deep within the pit of her stomach.

It wasn't like her to feel such menace toward others. It was often joked that given the chance, the gentle druid would just heal her enemies to death. Even now, Felora knew that she could not muster the energy to heal herself, let alone anyone else.

Alone for now in the darkness of her prison, Felora cringed inwardly as she realized that Faquarl had been right. This war would not stop, and it was going to drag her with it. Her mentor had wanted peace, and he had gotten it in the end at the cost of his life. It seemed now that sharing his outlook was going to destroy her, as well.

A stinging in her wrists ceased her movements. They were crossed with deep gashes which she could already tell would leave lasting scars. Even the Nightmare had not marked her so profoundly.

Even the Nightmare would be better than this, she thought wryly.

These humans had continued to tell her that if she talked, if she told them what they wanted to know, that they would stop hurting her. The human called Aeldon had at least treated her with the smallest amount of respect. Still, his questions had confused her. He'd pressed her about Thrall, who was the last person on her mind at any given time. He'd been dissatisfied with her answers, although there had been none to give. Despite Gorfrunch's death, the Grin were on no pleasant terms with the ruler of the New Horde.

Aeldon, in his broken and halting Orcish, had done his best to pull from her something - anything - about the Grin's plans. The interrogation had mostly consisted of others beating her senseless prior to asking the questions, and she couldn't remember now whether she'd said anything intelligible. Her mind kept drifting back to Ashenrock, and she worried.

She could hardly focus on the Draenei female who had entered and started to tend to her wounds. The woman was speaking to her in what she thought was Common, but her ears had been hit so many times that it might as well have been gibberish. Her nose caught the biting scent of Golden Sansam as a cooling salve found its way to her wrists. The door creaked, and Felora's violet eyes met the darkened countenance of the warlock Hifazat. He spoke to the Draenei, who seemed angry and perhaps a bit afraid of him.

Felora's eyes fluttered closed into her own personal darkness, the last refuge left to her. Her mind felt muddled and she tried her best to still it. Therazane, she thought. Earthmother, stonemother. Your great size and strength belies your kindness...I ask that you might bestow some of that kindness on me now.

She opened her eyes to see that the warlock had suddenly turned his back on the Draenei and focused all of his attention on her.

Her prayers remained unanswered.

Mortael walked slowly out of the Chieftain's chambers with his head bowed slightly in concentration. He had expected to be tasked with finding Felora but until now the sheer challenge of it had not set in. It was a slight comfort that he wouldn't have to devise a plan to find the Sythegar that included only himself; the entirety of the Grin was at his disposal. He wouldn't need quite that much, but he was going to need help.

The rogue idly studied his surroundings as he paced around Stonard. Not that he needed to, not anymore. After the first day of living in this swamp he knew it like the back of his hand; it was what he did. Today, however, the mental work calmed his mind and allowed him to focus his thoughts. The only thing he knew at this point was that what was to come would require the utmost subtlety. Any sign of Grin presence would likely mark the death of Felora. Mortael already had enough death on his conscience, he couldn't abide another.

He stopped off at the door to Arahin's chambers and knocked loudly enough to clearly alert him. A good rogue would often be twitchy and he had no desire to have a dagger stuck in him because he was too quiet. The door opened and the elf's face appeared. It was late and it was likely he had been sleeping but his quiet readiness didn't show it.

"Yes, Mort? There a problem?" Arahin asked while looking around behind him.

"Nothing new...I need your help to gather the rest of the rogues. We have work to do and I don't think we have much time to do it in."

"Felora?" he questioned.

"Aye...I want the rogues in Arathi. We know they had her in the Keep and I don't think they would risk moving her too far from their base of operations. If the forces we've seen lately are any indication they lack the numbers to attempt anything too overt. If were gonna find her, it's going to be there."

"What did you have in mind? Scouring the entire blasted place would take too long and they could just keep her moving about. It's a huge area to cover and there aren't enough of us."

"The thought occurred to me. We need the Dreadstalkers prepped for a long stay. I want you all in the Keep at all times until you find reason to leave. You've battled the Keepers a long while and you know their ranks. Find those likely to be in contact with Felora and follow them. Shadow them until you find her. You get seen and you're dead...and so is Felora. We should get moving as fast as possible. I plan on doing a quick look through the rest of Arathi and then joining you all in the Keep." Mortael sighed deeply and looked at Arahin as he nodded in understanding.

"We'll find her" Arahin replied, "and the Keepers will pay tenfold for every hurt they've inflicted."

Mortael nodded slowly. "See to it, Arahin. And if you do find her, get her a message and do nothing else. Tell her that the Grin is coming; tell her to hold onto hope and to stay strong. Tell her that we'll see her soon."

Mortael strode away from the building, confident that all was taken care of. This was their best shot. If he failed, there were no second chances.

The sun seemed eerily soothing, outside the cellar where the Druid was hidden. Aeldon sat nearby, having a drink and enjoying a smoke. He had grown ill from having to question the prisoner, and needed the fresh air and warm sun to keep himself relaxed. His hands somehow didn't feel clean, knowing what he was doing. He was sick with it, but knew it had to keep going.

"I've done worse," he kept telling himself, "At least this has some use...it's not meaningless..."

Hearing noises coming from the door to the cellar, he looked and saw Aurhia walking in. He thought about getting up and stopping her, thinking she might do something drastic.

"She's not a murderer....she won't kill an unarmed prisoner..."

He was able to enjoy another pipe-worth of smoke, and a fairly relaxing drink. He was trying to avoid having to go back into that cold room. He didn't want to admit it, but every time he looked at Felora, he would see the face of one of his past victims, any one of several dozens. It was not something he enjoyed. The leaf he was smoking was helping to counter that problem.

He could hear the distant sounds of a fight, orcs shouting and metal clashing together. He was about to go and assist, until he heard the voice of Rexor overpowering all other voices and noises, and then quiet.

"Guess I won't need to help after all...."

He looked onto the cellar door, and watched as Hifazat walked back in, carrying his usual cloud of evil after him.

"Guess it's that time again," Aeldon said as he stood up and emptied his pipe upon the ground. He slowly walked towards the doors and went down into the dark, cold caverns, a chill running down his spine at the thought of what was about to happen. He stepped into a side room, lighting a spare torch and getting another bucket of fresh water and an empty basin for it. Upon leaving the room, he felt a swift force push him off his feet, spilling the water, shattering the bowl, and putting out the torch. All he could see when looking up was Aurhia, leaning against the wall, stunned and surprised to have run into him.

"You should be more careful, Aurhia, these dark passages are dangerous if you're not paying attention."

The look she returned him said far more than anything she could have said with words, a look of fear, mixed with hatred.

"Hifazat..." she began, out of breath, "He's going to do something terrible to that tauren. He said he was going to destroy her soul and spirit, make her unable to do anything. He wants to make her a weapon against the Grin."

Aeldon was horrified at her words. What Hifazat was doing...it was a mistake, in far too many ways to imagine.

"I'll try to get him to stop," he started, "But if he had his way, I'd be dead myself. I don't know how long I can keep that monster on a leash."

"Do what you can," she replied, helping him up and starting for the door, "I'll go and get some others to help."

And so Aurhia was gone, and he was left alone in the dark hallway. With little light, and an overwhelming sense of fear, he ran into the room with Hifazat and Felora. The scene was terrible; purple light surrounded Felora, and one could feel the Fel energy in that room. Hifazat stood there, hand outstretched, a smile upon his face.

"Why are you back, Aurhia?" he asked, "I told you to leave me alone with this creature."

"It's me, demon-lover," Aeldon said, "And I can't let you do this."

The atmosphere changed suddenly in the room, filling with overwhelming hatred and rage. Aeldon could barely stand the room, the air seemed heavy and hot, making it difficult to breathe.

"The Syndicate trash, telling me what I can and can't do? I would be insulted, if I cared at all about your opinion. Your use as a translator will no longer be required. Run along now, before I do with you what I do with all the other Syndicates that cross my path."

Aeldon, undeterred, ran into the room and grabbed hold of Hifazat's robes. Immediately, he felt the searing pain of Hifazat's hate course into his arm, burning like a terrible fire.

"You really think you can stop me, little murderer? I am doing what no one has the ability to do. I am making a weapon against the Grin unlike any other. They will see their Seer reduced to nothingness, and they themselves will be reduced to nothingness. Now....if you value your soul intact, you should remove your hand..."

Aeldon, perhaps absorbed in stupidity, instead pulled Hifazat away and turned him, so they faced each other.

"You think breaking their Seer will hurt them? They will see this as a sin unlike any other! They will break Stromgarde for this crime. They will do to us far more than you can ever do to this tauren. Pull your head out of the hind end of whatever demon you get your power from, and think about something more than your own amusement! She knows what

we are willing to do to her, let her recover from these wounds and we'll try to interrogate her again. Until then, we have to keep her alive and functional!"

Aeldon, having realized his mistake, froze nearly completely still. Azaleth had been listening through the door. He walked into the room and said, "He is right."

His words became the harsh and guttural tones of Demonic. "We need her. Breaking her spirit won't do us any good, it will only feed the fire. I suggest you leave and let Aeldon do the interrogation."

Hifazat answered in Common. "Or what? What would you do to stop me, Azaleth? What can you do to stop me? I will have you -"

"Look," Azaleth interrupted him in the same language. "I'm not gonna stand here and threaten you or fight you. There is no point to it. Aurhia and Rexor are on their way here with other Keepers. Do you really think that they will approve of this? Do you really think they will let you keep going?"

Switching back to the Demonic tongue he continued, "I know what it takes to be a warlock and what we have to go through. I know what a war is and what can it do to you. Another time I would have let you keep going, I might have helped you. But now is not the time. It's not the right thing to do."

Everyone was silent for a moment. Azaleth was starting to sweat. Hifazat's face showed anger. It wasn't clear if it was toward Azaleth or the tauren.

Still speaking in Demonic, Azaleth continued.

"This is not about being honorable or being weak at heart. It's about the consequences. Think about what this will lead to and if you really want to start a new war."

A translucent wolf barreled towards the bridge. She'd heard Rexor's voice, she knew he was there somewhere.

Skidding to a stop at his feet, she howled to get his attention. The transformation back to Draenei was swift, but in her agitation she had trouble putting the Common together.

"Tauren, demons, Aeldon, Hifazat, come, hurry!" She shook herself. "He is being too corrupted! He is...is spreading to rest of you, to tauren! Like plague!" She grabbed at Rexor's arm.

"I knowing you are doing what think you must. World is hard. Doing is hard. But you are not monster. Not like him."

Without letting go of his arm, she took a step backward, trying to pull him along. "Aeldon is trying him stopping! Must be him stopping from attacking Aeldon, at least!"

Rexor looked at Aurhia blankly at first, as the bloodlust drained from his face. As the frantic shaman spoke, realization dawned on his face, followed by alarm at her words.

Rexor smacked himself in the forehead with a plate-covered hand. "What in blazes is Aeldon thinking?! He is going to get himself killed!"

Motioning for Aurhia to follow him, the warrior sprinted off towards the dungeons, hoping that he wasn't already too late.

Rexor skidded to a halt at the door to the interrogation chamber, motioning for Aurhia to wait outside, fearing the wild, unchecked rage of the volatile Warlock. Aurhia, however, shook her head.

"I am not afraid of that monster, nor his magic," she said.

Rexor couldn't help but feel a bit of admiration for the young shaman, and though he wanted to point out that it wasn't a matter of bravery, he knew every second could cost Aeldon his life. So he nodded and flung the door open with a mighty heave of his shoulder, bursting into the chamber. He could only stare at the scene before him.

Aeldon was gripping Hifazat's shoulders, shouting at him, while Azaleth stood off to the side, speaking loudly to Hifazat in Demonic. The crazed Warlock however, seemed ready to burn them both straight to hell.

Acting quickly, Rexor ran forward, shouldering past Azaleth and yanking Aeldon away from the insane Vindicator. Knowing that Hifazat was unlikely to curse him, he placed himself between the two, looking first at the Warlock. "What is going on here, Hifazat? Why do I get the feeling you were about to kill Aeldon?"

"That little cowardly traitor was trying to protect this animal!" Hifazat roared.

"Ha! Don't listen to his lies, Rexor! This lunatic was about to destroy our source of information!" Aeldon shouted from behind the Warrior.

Hifazat growled and raised his hand palm outward at the Rogue, clearly about to cast some kind of deadly magic. Rexor clamped an armored fist around the Warlock's wrist and slowly lowered his arm.

"Don't," he said to Hifazat. "Let me handle this. Aeldon has already proven that he is not a traitor and is worthy of our colors. We don't need to shed blood amongst ourselves!"

The Warlock looked furious, but inclined his head to Rexor, obviously sure that the Warrior would see things his way. Rexor mentally sighed with relief as he turned to Aeldon. "What happened?"

"Aurhia found me and told me he was planning to break the mind of the seer!" Aeldon exclaimed, pointing at Hifazat. "I told him we haven't gotten enough information from her yet! He won't listen! He's out of his demonic mind!"

Rexor stood silently for a moment, his mind churning. He wasn't surprised by Hifazat's plans nor did they really bother him...but he knew he has to do something. If the Warlock had his way, who knew what the Grin would resort to. Retribution aside, the rest of the Keepers certainly wouldn't take kindly to Hifazat's actions, and internal conflict was not something Rexor wished to see among them. He turned back to the Warlock.

"Listen to me, Hif. You know as well as I do what will happen if you go through with this! Who knows what size force the Grin will bring down upon us in retaliation? Breaking their seer will not demoralize them, but galvanize them!"

He stared Hifazat in the eye. "We need the information she has. This is not a matter of honor or morality; you know those don't apply to the Horde. This is a matter of survival for the Keepers!"

Rexor's eye suddenly gained a dull red glint, and a slight grin crosses his face.

"Besides," he muttered to the Warlock, "They will want her alive and whole. They won't come to rescue a broken shell. So we'll get our information....and then we wait for them to come to us. And when they do, we'll be waiting. Won't we, old friend?"

As if to emphasize his point, Rexor drew his serrated throwing dagger and lightly ran it along the jagged scar on his neck.

"Come, let Aeldon continue his work. We need her information. Besides, I doubt the scouting party I just destroyed will be the only one...."

Hifazat looked around the room. So many of these weaklings dared to stand up to him. They shall all suffer, he thought. But before they do, there are matters that I must attend to.

He feigned defeat, looking at Rexor with brittle rage. "Very well. But if we are to continue on this path of pathetic weakness and absolute stupidity, I require my imp to be here. Don't not question why, Rexor, if you value your life."

As Hifazat called his imp from the nether, he looked directly at Aeldon. "Your time will come soon, traitor. But remember one thing - what I wish always happens. It is not because of

luck, but because those who stand in my way die. They die rather horribly and suffer a great deal. You are lucky, Syndicate scum, that you now wear our colors. If I had my way, you would be dead."

As the imp came through the portal, Hifazat knelt down, handed him a bottle and whispers something into his pointed ears.

Straightening up, he looked around the room and smiled sadistically. "Keepers, I always get my way. Remember that."

Letting loose a blood-curdling howl with the intent of pitching the entire room into a frenzy of terror, Hifazat aimed straight at Aeldon's head, pitching curse after curse.

From the corner, the imp scampered over to the captive tauren and forced the contents of the bottle down her throat. As the bottle emptied, Felora fell into a dreamless sleep.

The room had become so suddenly filled with commotion that the tauren female could no longer tell what was going on. The warlock seemed to hold everyone's focus; the act of interrogating her had been - for now - forgotten. The Keepers were shouting in Common now, their voices echoing off of the walls to mix with the blood already in her ears. It was a welcome distraction. If Aeldon hadn't stepped in...Felora swore that Hifazat had intended to rip her soul from her body.

The human's ire was now focused on Aeldon, a malicious grin fixed on his face as the rogue began to bleed. The air was thick with fear and curses, and Felora clenched her eyes in an effort to block them from her senses. A scraping on the stone floor in front of her caught her attention, and she opened her eyes to find an imp staring back at her. Its skin rippled with felfire, and Felora shuddered to look at the creature. It wasn't natural, this being. It grinned at her, baring a mouth full of sharp incisors and a tongue that was jet black. She shrank back as she saw the vial of red liquid the imp held in its claws; she would have known that concoction anywhere. The imp pounced toward her face, muffling her screams and uncapping the vial to pour its bittersweet contents straight down her throat.

Felora's head started to swim. She could hear her heart beating slower and slower, until she could hear nothing at all save for the roar in her ears. Her breathing came shallow and fast, aggravating her bruised ribs. Her whole body was alight with a burning pain, and she gasped.

No, she thought. No! I promised him...

Her eyes closed and rolled into her head. The Nightmare had her within its grasp once again.

Aurhia distinctly turned her back, putting herself between Hifazat and Aeldon. She wanted to be sure he was not already hurt. Being unable to tell what kind of sapping curse may have been cast on the rogue, she closed her eyes and laid a hand on his shoulder. A sigil appeared in front of her, radiating its own light. When she opened her eyes, they were glowing more strongly than usual. Warmth washed over Aeldon slowly, becoming stronger with time and dissipating in a few seconds.

She cursed to herself in Draenei and added dryly to Aeldon in Common, "Now she is seeing us broken. Wonderful."

Everyone bursting into the room seemed to have passed right by Aeldon's attention. Grabbing at the warlock was one of the stupidest things he had ever done. He had been told by Hifazat himself, the next chance he got, he would destroy him.

Azaeth's and Rector's voices were good to hear indeed - though much of their words had been blurred - and Aeldon couldn't tell if they were helping or condemning him, but it had seemed to stop Hifazat's rage, for the time. As Aurhia healed him and gave him strength, Aeldon seemed to return to some form of normalcy. He could not understand Aurhia's Draenei, but he could make out the Common.

"You're right," he said with effort. "We'll just have to make sure we don't lose her now...."

He smiled at Aurhia, and turned his head to Hifazat, listening to his ranting. His traitor and Syndicate comments were as unwelcome as ever, and a sword would have been more welcomed in the conversation. When Hifazat let loose his terrible howl, Aeldon rolled his eyes, unaffected by such fear-causing trickery.

"How is this guy still a Keeper?" he asked, half sarcastically, and half seriously.

Turning back to Hifazat, he saw a terror unlike any other. Waves of fel energy began washing through his head like legions of maces and swords all at once. The first curse was nullified by Aurhia's healing spell; the remaining dozen hit with such force that Aeldon didn't even have time to have his life flash before his eyes. His eyes, nose, mouth, ears, and many scars begin to bleed. His head felt as though it was ready to explode, and his mind could feel the strain of the terrible power, saved only by years of a terrible lifestyle and mental defenses. His eyes saw nothing but green fire, and faint shadows that might have been the other Keepers.

When it was finished - he knew not how - he remained standing, wobbling for a moment, with his vision getting blurry. He looked around, feeling blood dripping down his face, and a headache unlike any imaginable, and grinned.

"I've had worse....demon....lover...."

His wit was cut short when the pain overwhelmed even his thresholds, and the mental barriers he was able to build started to crumble. He fell to his knees, hitting the ground with a great thud. He was far from death, but also far from the health he had but a moment before.

Yagyu's thoughts drifted as he studied the map. It had been hours since he had gone over it with Ashenrock and he was tired. The flames of the fire were dying down and he could hear the innkeeper shuffling across the room to prod the burning logs with a poker. The spitting of the embers sounded clearly in his ears as the map seemed to morph into a snake that hissed at him. He looked quizzically but unafraid at the face of the snake. It had an almost human face, pink, ugly and thin. Suddenly the snake lunged at the Warlord and as his head jerked back his eyes flashed open and he realized that he had fallen asleep studying the battle-map.

A voice called to him from the corner. "Why don't you get some sleep, Yagyu?"

It was Yalim. The Sin'dorei priest had been his friend almost as long as Felora had and Yagyu shook his head as he tried to rub the sleep from his eyes.

"Just a few more minutes an' then I will, Yalim. I gotta figger sumthin' out....but I jus' can't see it." He stretched and rose from the table and walked to the bar, where a small basin half-full of water rested. He felt somewhat rejuvenated as he splashed the cold water on his face.

"Well, don't tire yourself out...the rest of the Clan needs you sharp too, you know."

Yagyu nodded as Yalim retreated to his quarters.

Yalim was right, of course. Yagyu was not thinking like a Warlord. He was thinking like a Raider. Felora was his friend and the longer she was missing the heavier the cloud that hung in the air became. Everyone in the Clan felt that something was wrong but no one wanted to voice it, lest their superstitions make truth come of the fear. Yagyu was answerable to the Warchief for the custody of the Grin. He had to worry about battle planning, officer training, grots, and all the other duties that he had to complete. He could not devote all his time and energy to one Sythegar, no matter who it was.

He sat down in front of the map again and stared at it, willing the paper to speak to him and tell him where the Keepers had taken Felora. He could feel the rage rising up again inside him but he had to control himself. The Warchief needed a Warlord who would think, not a crazed animal that cared only for bloodshed and slaughter. That was for the Grunts and Raiders. Yagyu shut his eyes tightly and tried to measure his breathing. Opening them he saw the map on the table, mocking him, laughing at his stupidity, snickering at his incompetence. "You will never find your Sythegar...your friend is gone," it seemed to sneer at him. He could take it no longer. With a roar he smashed his massive hands into the map, splintering the table top, sending bits of wood and parchment spinning into the fire.

He stared dumbly at the ruined table and cursed himself for his lack of discipline. He could not give in to despair or hopelessness. That was for the weak soldiers of Thrall, not for the Blacktooth Grin. They would find Felora. They would find her and bring her home. He believed they would. He knew they would. They would bring her home and they would care for her just as they had cared for him and all the other Grin who had suffered in these wars. And when they found her....the spirits should have mercy on any Keepers they found with her, for the Grin most assuredly would not. They would dismantle their Keep brick by brick and the pieces of Keepers that they pulled from their blades would be posted on pikes around the corners of Arathi and the Wetlands. But the heads....the heads they would save. Their gaping mouths would scream a silent warning to any others who dared to confront the Blacktooth Grin.

Ashenrock bolted upright in bed. The vision of Felora screaming was still sitting in his mind's eye. He felt his wrists burn and his face was exploding with pain. He jumped to his feet and quickly calmed his mind, shaking off feelings borne of empathy. The druid had long held an empathic closeness to nature and often felt the pain of the wild. Never before, though, had he felt the pain of another...not even his brother, whom he had been very close to before his disappearance. Once his meditation cleared the confusion, he walked outside into the cool night air of Hammerfall. Felora was alive, close, and in a great deal of pain.

Ashenrock noticed Grimnir sitting in a chair, puffing on his pipe.

"You seem troubled, Warchief," the old shaman stated.

Ashenrock looked at the Warlord and nodded. "None of this sits well with me, Grim. You've been at war with the Keepers for far longer than I. Why would they take a prisoner? I always figured them as honorable...holding a prisoner, especially a non-violent healer, is bad form."

Grimnir looked up at the tauren. "So now there are rules to our war?"

The old orc sighed heavily. "This war has gone on for so long. Frustration is mounting for everyone on all sides. Desperate times cause desperate men to take desperate measures."

Ashenrock peered over the walls onto the landscape. "I felt her, Grimnir. I felt her pain, and her sorrow. She feels very alone. We need to get her back her out of there, and soon."

Grimnir knew that there was nothing he could say that would make the Warchief feel any better about the situation. All he could do was offer his compassion. "Trust in your troops, Chief. They will find her."

What day was it? What time was it? Faquarl didn't even know anymore. Things were happening far too quickly these days. What began as a simple mission had turned into a war. Well, not so much as turned into a war, but melded into the one already being waged.

Faquarl's time in the Emerald Dream had been brutal. Being technically dead himself did nothing to ease the strain of trying to complete his now monumental task. By all rights he did not know why he was walking away from it all now.

Faquarl had been traveling for what seemed like days southwest toward what was known as Arathi in the normal world. He did not necessarily know why he was making this journey but something within him told him it had to be done. Perhaps it was his intuition, whatever it was Faquarl was hoping it would be something worth the trek.

He felt that he was getting close to where he was meant to be now and decided to rest by one of the nearby apple trees. The tauren removed his headdress and placed it beside him as he sat down to rest his back on the trunk of the tree. When he finally rested his back onto the trunk he held his hands out. As expected several apples fell from the tree almost as he raised his awaiting hands.

Taking a bite from an apple Faquarl looked up into the limbs of the tree and noticed half of the leaves were turning brown before his eyes. Taking another bite he grumpily awaited whatever it was that his gut told him would be coming.

Felora remembered this all too vividly. She grit her teeth as she felt the Dream coalesce into place, and she curled herself into a ball as she waited for the world to stop spinning, for the Nightmare to take her. She was alone, and a paralyzing fear was starting to edge up on her.

But the Nightmare did not come. Opening her eyes, the druid saw that the Dream appeared just as she remembered it from her first sojourn - cloaked in a pale green and strung through with a misty haze that seemed to cling to everything it touched. The Dream felt different here, in Arathi, than it had in Kalimdor. There were fewer trees, and the air seemed thicker. What little clothing she had been wearing had vanished; here she wore nothing but her true self.

She sat up, and a sharp pain in her shoulders brought her back to herself. Her pain would not dissipate here - that was a talent that only druids with much more experience could manage, she was sure. The gashes on her wrists were still visible, although she did not bleed. Fear kept gnawing at her mind, her eyes darting back and forth at shadows as she stumbled through the haze.

A dark blur rode the horizon before her - what had started as a faint shadow was taking form as she got closer. It was a tree, thick with apples so dark and red they might as well have been purple. Beneath it set the form of a tauren, coal black with one horn snapped in half. Felora could hear him muttering to himself even from her distance, and she suppressed a smile. He was, certainly, the last person she expected to find here.

He turned suddenly to face her, familiar golden eyes fixing on her face. A habit snapped into place after years of long practice, and Felora fell to her knees before the dreamform of her mentor, her gaze fixed firmly on the ground.

Faquarl sighed gruffly. "Get up, Felora. There's no reason for that here. The only ones here to be shown reverence are the dragons, and even they are no longer worthy."

She stood slowly, wincing at the pain in her ribs. A flicker of concern crossed Faquarl's eyes, or perhaps she imagined it.

Faquarl's dark face wrinkled into a frown. "I thought I told you never to enter the Dream again, Felora. Why are you here?"

She looked up into his face, suddenly confused and pained. "It wasn't my fault, sir. I didn't do it on purpose, I swear. They forced me here."

His frown deepened. "Who forced you here? Wait, I don't want to know. It doesn't matter."

"Sir," she asked when she had her breath again, "what are you doing here?"

"I am here because of you," he replied, pushing himself into a standing position and bending to retrieve his headdress from its place on the ground. "By burying me on Azeroth, Felora, you sentenced me to fight an endless war."

Felora's face fell. "That was not my intention, sir."

"Of course it wasn't. Good intentions or not, here I am," he said, replacing his headdress. "Perhaps it's better this way."

She studied him - it was Faquarl, certainly, but at the same time, it was not. He looked different, had clothed his dreamform in garments of a wilder, more tribal essence. His headdress held the shape of a hawk's face, its hooked beak curving down over his forehead. He reached across one shoulder and unclasped a dark blue cloak trimmed with feathers, holding it out to her with one hand. She took it gratefully and wrapped it around herself.

"Still, you know that you're not safe here," he continued. "The Nightmare has marked you and before long, it will find you."

Felora nodded dumbly, an ache beginning in the palm of her hand, just over a broad, dark scar.

"I am not safe here, and I am not safe on Azeroth. I don't think that there is anywhere safe anymore, sir."

"That will all depend on what happens to your body," Faquarl answered.

Felora shuddered. For all she knew, she was still in the bowels of Stromgarde Keep with that monster, Hifazat. Worry wracked her and she held the feathered cloak tighter. She could only hope that the Grin would find her soon.

The moon hung wetly in the sky as Grimnir puffed his pipe and studied the old, battered map of the Arathi Highlands. He'd spoken with the Warchief earlier.

"I felt her, Grimnir," the tauren had said. "I felt her pain, and her sorrow. She feels very alone."

Grimnir knew. He knew only too well.

"We need to get her out of there...and soon."

Grimnir heard the raw desperation in Ashenrock's voice. It matched the bloodlust in Yagyu's eyes. The Grin would move to reclaim Felora...and the Keepers knew it. By design, or by sheer dumb luck...the Keepers of Stromgarde had landed upon one of their most potent weapons yet found over the course of the long war.

And so, several hours later, the old shaman remained hunched in his easy chair, scowling at the map. He knew the Keepers weren't savaging Felora simply out of some sadistic pleasure. They understood the tactical implications, same as himself. Felora was their ace in the hole. With her in their possession, they would dictate the battle.

He knew there wasn't much time. The Warchief would make his move soon enough - and with damned good reason. Strategic dilemma or no, Felora was suffering, and in mortal peril. The Grin would move soon, and they would move with rage in their eyes and bloodlust in their hearts.

When that happened, Grimnir needed to be ready. Needed to retain his focus and his composure. Needed to see how many ways the Keepers could be trapping them, and devise countermeasures. Needed to, in short, do his job.

He sat and studied the map. From time to time, a smoke cloud rose.

In less than a space of a single breath, four pulsing totems appeared in a circle around the shaman and she spun, pointing at the warlock, whispering one word over and over. Every few

seconds came something else, a short Draenei phrase that disrupted the spell the warlock was casting at that moment. Three balls of crackling electricity arced around her.

One of the totems grew to a height even taller than the Draenei, fire with a face which began gliding toward the warlock.

As Aeldon fell to the ground, Hifazat grinned to himself. The traitor was not dead, he knew. But he would take a great deal of time to recover and, Hifazat thought that he should have learnt his lesson this time.

The sound of spell casting brought Hifazat away from his prideful musings to see Aurhia ready for battle. Sighing out loud, Hifazat looked pitifully at the Draenei. He calmly took each spell cast at him, stepping back every few moments as her powerful shocks ripped through him. As the barrage ended for a few moments, Hifazat looked at Aurhia.

"So lass, you attack a man who has done you no wrong? How very honorable. Do continue; I would like to see how far your hatred and anger takes you. You do realize that there is more to being an Eredar than just being corrupted by the Burning Legion. That is the final step."

He grinned viciously at Aurhia. "What do you think the first step is?"

Rexor rolled his eye at Hifazat. Being a warrior meant that Rexor had long ago learned to shield his mind from such magic. His slightly amused expression darkened however, as the Warlock launched his barrage at Aeldon. Rexor knew a fair bit about magic, but being unable to wield it meant there was nothing he could do for the rogue.

He leaned back against the wall, arms crossed, watching Aurhia counter Hifazat's spells, noting with interest that the Warlock's imp minion had forced a vial of something down the prisoner's throat.

Rexor realized then that with so many Keepers in the room, the wall militia was outside unassisted. I'll be damned if I'll let them catch us like this, he thought to himself. Figuring Azaleth and Aurhia could contain the situation, he turned to the door.

"Somebody has to watch the entrance, Hifazat. I will not leave our gates open to attack so that we can stand here and have this petty squabble."

Yanking the doors open with a heave, the veteran swept from the dungeon back outside, stopping at his quarters to grab his helmet and an extra blade to strap onto his left gauntlet.

On the bridge to the Sanctum, he was met with a sight that brought the red tint into his eye; the three bridge sentries sat slumped against the wall, snoring loudly. With a growl he backhanded two of them across their helmets, roaring, "FOOLS! YOU DARE SLEEP WHILE ON GUARD DUTY OUTSIDE HIS HIGHNESS'S CHAMBER!? YOU ARE NOT WORTHY TO GUARD HIM!!!"

The two cowered in the face of the mad warrior's rage. Heaving one off the ground by his tunic, he sent him stumbling off toward the barracks. "Go! Have someone sent to relieve you! I'll have you dealt with later!"

Turning, he saw that the third sentry had not even stood. Beside himself with fury, Rexor reached down to drag him to his feet, but soon noticed that the man's neck had been broken.

Shouting a few curt orders to the remaining militia, Rexor drew his mace and donned his helmet, swiftly beginning to comb the area as he looked wildly for the intruder.

Mortael studied the scene happening below him with a clinical detachment. He cared nothing for the life of the man, but the fact that he was dead at all served only to point out to the rogue just

how much the situation had taken out of him. He growled quietly while thinking to himself. A simple sap...I shouldn't have hit him that hard...and then not hiding the damn body quickly enough....gods, but I need sleep.

He had been in the Keep going on 4 days now. The Keepers maintained diligent posts, and he was always moving. Sleep was a luxury that was just going to have to wait.

Movement below snapped him out of his thoughts. It was the human warrior that he had been following, his face contorted with rage. This wasn't the first time Mortael found comfort in the shadows that he wrapped himself in. He wouldn't like to face the warrior right now. The way the human took charge of the situation left no room for doubt that this was a man used to having his word obeyed. This peaked the rogue's interest. For the first time since he had come here, Mortael had obtained a vital bit of information. The guards posted, the presence of someone of rank, and the unknown commotion coming from inside the building that the warrior had recently left all pointed to a likely location as to where Felora was being held.

Mortael slipped down silently from where he had been crouched and moved along the shadows. The death - his mistake - had served a purpose in the end. It was time to get the information to the Chieftain. Felora was his Seer and confidant. He would be beside himself with worry. It wouldn't be surprising to learn that he had slept as little as Mortael. Yagyu would be in a similar state. It was time for this to end. Haste was required as much as ever. While the death provided information, it also alerted the Keepers to the presence of an intruder. They would comb this place top to bottom, and when they didn't find anything - and they wouldn't - they would begin to take strategic action. Moving Felora could very well be one such action.

Mortael moved quickly back to where Arahin was hidden. His fellow rogue looked as ragged and as tired as he did.

"Arahin, alert the rest of the Dreadstalkers. I have the information we require and I'm moving now to get word to the Warchief."

Arahin nodded in the affirmative.

"It will be done."

Mortael's only regret was that he was unable to get word to Felora. There were too many and the risk was too great. She was going to have to have faith that the Grin would come for her. Such a faith would not be unfounded. The Grin was coming. A smirk crossed Mortael's face as he thought of the suffering that was going to befall the Keepers.

Ashenrock could no longer sleep. He sat on his bunk thinking about the vision and the emotion he felt. He wanted desperately to charge into Stormgarde to free her but he knew that it would be an endeavor that would get them both killed. I have to remain calm, he thought. Have to let Mortael do his job. Without intelligence, there was no way he could devise a plan that would free his Seer without harm...or at least any more harm that had come to her.

Suddenly he was brought to his knees, gasping for air. The world around him swirled and shook violently. A green haze descended all around him. He felt completely lost and frightened. Yet all the same...he felt an intense anger...almost a betrayal. These weren't his feelings, though. They weren't coming from his mind but from another. He grabbed at his head, trying to shake off the feeling until he realized that it was Felora he was feeling again. Where was this place? It was like nothing he had ever experienced.

As fast as it had hit him it was gone. He was left kneeling in his quarters searching for answers.

"I am sure you can be telling me," Aurhia said.

The fire elemental glided back toward its totem, but she didn't release it. Watching the warlock, she stepped backward over Aeldon's prone form, and looked away from Hifazat only long enough to make a quick field assessment of his injuries.

"What are your masters promising you for sacrificing us?"

She clearly expected the warlock to attack again as soon as his power had returned. Light began to string together between her hands. "And what information is the Tauren having that you are not wanting us to know, I wonder?"

The light grew and expanded to surround Aeldon, healing his physical wounds. She steps forward again, standing between them. She would fight to her last breath to protect her friend, a concept the warlock was obviously no longer capable of understanding.

The lights were out. Aeldon was alone, surrounded by rocking shadows.

"Who is there," he cried, receiving only an echo in return. "Answer! Who is out there?"

There was mumbling all around him, the voices of dozens, maybe over a hundred folk.

"Hi," came a quiet, young voice.

Before him, a young girl walked out of the shadows and into a light. She was covered in blood, her face pale, appearing as though she had recently died.

"Who are you?" Aeldon asked, struggling to get to his feet.

"You killed me, when my mommy was holding me too close. You killed me, and my mommy, for our money!"

It was then he remembered. It was years ago, when he was still with the Syndicate. The father was dead, and the mother was trying to protect her child. She wouldn't tell us where their treasures had been hidden, and in anger, Aeldon ran them both through. As he remembered, the mother stepped forward, appearing bloodied and dead, her cheeks covered with dried tears.

"You killed me, Syndicate lackey. Why did you kill us? Why!?"

"It was," he tried to say, "We...it was...I was different back then...I thought it was necessary!"

Another stepped forward, a young mage, saying, "Was my death necessary? You killed me for a whim! I had done nothing to you, and you killed me!"

"I...you were....I...couldn't...I didn't like Dalaran mages, it was out of anger!" Aeldon said, becoming more distressed.

A group now stepped forward, each with a single sword wound to the neck. Each of them looked like Aeldon, each had his hair, and his face. Men and women, brothers and sisters.

"And us, brother," they said in unison. "Why did you kill us?"

Aeldon could only stare forward at them, too traumatized to move or speak.

"I...I....you..." he stumbled.

"You killed us, brother. Two, robbed and murdered, four, murdered in their sleep. You killed us! You killed us!"

"I...thought you had Plague...you had the symptoms...I didn't...want you to...."

"To what, brother? Live? The Paladins could have helped us, you know they could have!"

"No one...could have known..." His voice was now becoming but a whisper in his mind. "No one...how could I have...it was all wrong..."

"You killed us," they all began to chant. "You killed us! You killed us! You killed us!"

There was a bright light beginning to shine around him, but the shadows refused to go away.

"We can't leave, not anymore! Your friend saw to that! We will stay, for longer and longer. You can't smoke our voices away. Nothing will block us out now! You won't rest...you won't be at peace...you will remember us....forever...and forever...."

His eyes opened, and he saw above him a figure. At first glance, it was someone he remembered - his sister, blood dripping down from her neck.

"You killed me, Aeldon!" Her voice filled his ears.

He turned away, rubbed his eyes, and looked back. He saw Aurhia standing above him, in place of his sister. She was standing between him and Hifazat, and he knew such a battle would not end well with that monster. He tried to stand, but the pain was unbearable, but he couldn't let Aurhia fight him alone. For the first time in his life, he was helpless, and he hated it.

"Aurhia," he tried to say, "Aur...hi...a. Don't worry....get out of here,"

He rolled over, looking now towards Hifazat, with a look of pure hatred in his eyes.

Aurhia fought the urge to glance back at the rogue, knowing that even an instant's distraction could be fatal for both of them.

She watched the warlock patiently, ready to counter any offensive move.

Chuckling to himself, Hifazat looked straight at Aurhia. "Hurt me all you want. The beast is beyond aid now. I would suggest you do your duty and aid a druid who has killed Keepers. It's good to know we have such loyal members now.

"First traitors, and now Horde-lovers. A pathetic bunch indeed. You lot insult the memory of Keepers who gave their lives defending these lands. If I could, I would kill you both for defending this wretch." Hifazat brushed past Aurhia without further comment, heading out of the room.

Aurhia watched the warlock leave the room warily. Under her breath, she responded to his words. "If I could, I would be killing you for attacking Aeldon, so I guess we are being even."

When she was sure he had gone, she turned on her heel and knelt next to her friend.

"You are being alive still down here, yes?" she asked, smiling at the rogue reassuringly. "That was being very brave. Very stupid, but very brave."

Felora's arrival could not be the byproduct of anything good. In fact, Faquarl was sure that she would not have come back unless she had no other choice. He didn't know whether her arrival was a blessing or a curse, nor did he much care. Nothing good could come from this, he decided. Besides, his masters would not be pleased with Faquarl's departure for a simple tauren girl. Still... Felora looked afraid as ever even with her finding him. Perhaps he would stay a little while longer to keep her company until she would find her way back.

"Take an apple." Faquarl gestured to the pile below the tree. Felora stared at him like he was alien to her world. It was expected – he, of course, was dead. Nodding his head toward the apples once more seemed to release Felora from her daze. She walked slowly to the pile of apples and picked one up.

"I... it's good to see you sir." Felora said, staring at the apple in her hands.

"Yes well, I won't say I'm not surprised to meet again, but please, cease with this 'sir' business. I have no time for it. Precious few call me 'sir' these days and you do not wish to be thrown in with that lot. How long do you expect you will be staying?"

"I don't know." She took a bite from her apple and chewed thoughtfully. When she had swallowed she looked back up. "Where are we?"

"In the Emerald Dream, of course," Faquarl smiled at his stab at humor, then sobered himself soon after. "However within the Dream we are about where Arathi once was, breadbasket of the humans in your world."

"I was expecting to find the Nightmare."

"Yes, I wouldn't blame you," he said, his eyes darting to her hand that was wounded so long ago. "The Nightmare has not progressed this way. You will find it mostly congregating around your Northrend and Silithus."

Felora let out a sigh of relief at this but then looked up perceptively. "Why is that apple tree dying then?"

Faquarl looked up at the limbs once again, which were now beginning to rot as the brown leaves started to fall. "Even though the Nightmare is contained, it still sends heralds to the unclaimed lands. The effect of these heralds does leave a mark. That should not concern you, though. Have a seat; I am sure you have many questions and I could use the company of a free thinker."

The two tauren sat on the soft grass underneath the shade of the dying apple tree. Faquarl muttered some words and the tree bent forward and some of its dead limbs fell off between them. Faquarl nodded and the tree resumed its straightened position. Looking at the wood, Faquarl muttered, "*Reth ignon*," and the wood was set ablaze. Smiling he looked back to Felora, preparing himself for conversation that he had not been able to have since life on Azeroth.

It was almost too surreal.

Faquarl seemed to have changed; he had always been proud, even slightly arrogant, with a sharp wit and a sharp tongue to match. In the weeks before his death, Felora had never seen him so weary beneath the weight of his burdens. He had never been particularly close to anyone, even herself, and so had no one to open up to.

But here, in the Dream, he appeared more content than she ever remembered. Seated across from her as he was, it almost felt as though they were back in Taugrek's Stand, as though he had never left her.

She considered the apple that she held as Faquarl glanced at her from across the little fire, with a ghost of a smile on his face.

"If you have questions, Felora, here is your opportunity to ask them," he said, gesturing broadly with his hands. "I have neither the reason nor the compulsion to keep secrets."

A million questions danced behind her lips. She found herself smiling at him.

"I have learned much from you - learned about the world around me, learned about my clan, learned about myself."

She brought her violet gaze to meet his. "But I know nothing about you."

"I wanted it that way," he said. "You didn't need another reason to stay by my side, Fel, and I could not allow my past weaknesses to affect my duty as Warlord. It was best for me to be the silent overseer. In a way it was also to protect you, protect you from following my footsteps and staying within my shadow."

She frowned at him. "No, it took your death to accomplish that."

Remnants of her feelings of anger and betrayal began to surface amidst her simmering fear, and she quickly squelched them. Her eyes still darted away, minding the shadows that floated at the edge of her vision. Faquarl's voice brought her back to herself.

"What's done is done, Felora."

"Aye. I know."

She sighed and looked at him. "Was I wrong to bury you in Maraudon, sir?"

The title slipped out before she could catch it. She took a quick breath before continuing.

"I only remembered that you spoke of it often. But you speak now as though it was the last place that you would have wanted to be put to rest."

Faqualr gave a heavy sigh and stared into Felora's eyes searchingly. He snorted to clear his nose before answering, trying to find the words he wanted. "You did a very kind thing. You risked going into the heart of centaur lands to bury me. After I'd been buried, I awoke within this place feeling as though only mere seconds had passed after I'd been shot. I prepared myself for battle as though I was still in Netherstorm."

Faqualr took a stick and started poking the fire to keep the flame alight before continuing. "I suppose you should know a few simple truths. I was not perhaps the most altruistic of our kind. Desolace holds a different life for me entirely, a life of passion and commitment. My time as Warlord for the Grin was a service; my time as Chieftain of the Swiftpride was an honor.

"My final day as Chieftain of that tribe ended in bloodshed within the halls of Maraudon. My entire tribe was killed by the centaur - even those most dear to me could not be protected. So in a way it is fitting for my grave to be found there, immersed in my life's greatest shame. Well, perhaps not the greatest shame, but one of them."

Faqualr's face was pensive, closed. Felora looked down, an epiphany rolling over her. He had trapped himself inside one painful event that he couldn't prevent, and in doing so, had kept himself from ever opening himself or his heart again. The guilt had ridden him all these years.

In a way, he knew exactly how she felt when she had lost him to this place. He had never been hers to lose.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I had no idea."

"Don't be sorry. There was nothing that you could do. Nothing that anyone could do."

She nodded, suddenly feeling that she had needed this - this closure, this understanding, this distraction from her paralyzing fear. She looked at him.

"Nothing remains of it now, your tribe," she said, her voice soft. "You were the last."

He said nothing, the flames reflecting in his eyes as he stared at them. Felora nearly reached out to him but caught herself and instead shifted her weight, one hand on the grass beside her. In his presence, her fear was dissipating despite knowing where she truly was. Had she been able to hear what was going on around her body that might not have been the case. She admitted to herself that she wasn't quite sure how she'd come out of the Dream the first time, and knowing that...how was she to come back now?

The air crackled with energy. Ashenrock barked commands at random grots in preparation for the upcoming battle. Rock was a bit pensive. He had no idea just what the plan was yet. He prayed to Therazane that one of the rogues would return with information that would help him formulate an attack plan...and soon.

Yagyu approached the Warchief. "You don't know what we're gonna do yet, do ya boss?"

Ashenrock grimaced, but said without pause, "I know exactly what we're going to do, Yagyu. We're going to rescue Felora."

Yagyu laughed and adjusted his chestplate. "Well at least that plan should be easy enough fer the grots ta follow!"

He planted his hand firmly on his Warchief's shoulder. "One way or another, wer gettin her outta, there." He then turned and walked off.

As Rock went back to overseeing his troops he heard someone yell from the gate. "Rider approaching! Mortael incoming!"

It was music to the tauren's ears. He only hoped that Mortael had something to report.

Mortael could hardly keep himself in the saddle. The last leg of the trip had been possible only because Ammorachus was so well-trained. The rogue rested his hand on the neck of his mount and willed him onward.

The sight of Stonard was a blessing; a reprieve from a near week of sleepless days and nights. He could see Ashenrock and Yagyu standing in the entryway watching him approach. He was glad they were waiting; he didn't think that he would make it much further.

As he approached the Warchief and Warlord he slid out of his saddle and managed a weak salute. Ashenrock looked on him with concern.

"Mortael, tell me you have information."

Mortael breathed in deep and steadied himself against the wooden palisade before speaking softly, "Sir, I do.....Felora....kept in the crypt.....wasn't there when we looked at first....killed a guard....it was an accident....infighting amongst the Keepers....time to get her back."

The rogue heard Ashenrock begin to say Yagyu's name but that was all. He felt his body go slack and his mind slip away into blissful nothingness. His mission was complete, he had earned his sleep.

Yagyu and Ashenrock lurched to catch the rogue as he passed out from exhaustion. Calling a few grots from within the courtyard they quickly carried Mortael to his quarters. His task was complete and he would need his rest before the battle to come.

Yagyu looked at Ashenrock and knew that he must be feeling the same anticipation he was at that moment. Finally they had the information they needed. They knew where the Seer was and it would be time to get her back. The sounds of ringing metal and the murmuring of the troops was a calming effect upon the orc as he listened with a sort of detached reverie.

For some reason his thoughts drifted back in time to an earlier fight with the Keepers, when the Bhurkas had kidnapped one of their own. Little Pinky Stickyfingers had been rescued just in the nick of time by Yammie and Gixxer and a swarm of angry warriors from Stromgarde. Yagyu now thought upon them and that battle in the Burning Steppes as he absently tightened the straps on his hauberk. He wondered - did those gnomes feel then as he felt now? Did they feel the same gnawing emptiness in the pit of their stomach? That feeling of impending doom that somehow told them that no matter what the result of the battle, nothing would ever be the same again for the kidnapped or for the rescuers?

Yagyu shook his head as Ashenrock's voice woke him from his thoughts. He must be getting old. He never would have thought so much in the old days.

"Prepare everyone you can muster, Yagyu, and let them know that they have six hours to rest. We strike the Keepers as the sun sets," the Warchief said to him. Yagyu simply nodded as Ashenrock turned his steady gaze from his Warlord to the courtyard and strode purposefully into Stonard.

Clear your mind. Concentrate. Rally the troops. Make sure the Warchief's orders are followed. Find Felora. Bring her out safely. Slaughter the Keepers.

This was his mission; his purpose. The orc closed his eyes and pulled a deep breath in through his nose. Slowly he opened them and walked back into Stonard to begin preparing the Grin for battle. An excitement was in the air and he suddenly felt a surge of adrenaline race through his veins. He beat his fists on his chestplate as he roared out a challenge to the Keepers of Stromgarde and a lone human adventurer passing through the swamp of sorrows heard the roar in the distance and his blood ran cold. Turning back along the path he ran towards the safety of Duskwood.

The grots carried Mortael to his quarters; he would be fine. Rock turned to Yagyu and found the orc lost in his thoughts. Ashenrock sighed in relief as he grasped the magnitude of what Mortael had told him. Felora was alive and in the crypts of the Keep.

It wouldn't be an easy endeavor to retrieve her, but he was already formulating a plan. Ashenrock headed to his quarters. He would need a sharp mind for this offensive.

"I donno' like it"

Stonemug pounded his mail boots across the floor, his frustration mounting with each step.

"We shoulda 'eard somethin' more by now." He glanced at the bemused Danath Trollbane, standing patiently behind his desk.

"Messengers get lost all the time, my good dwarf, especially if they must pass the Dark Portal."

Danath spared him a grim smile. The problem, he realized, wasn't a lack of news, but a lack of action. This hunter was never calm behind the walls of Honor Keep. Only outside, where he could prowl the landscape looking for prey, did this one ever seem comfortable.

"Perhaps we should send word to Stromgarde - at the very least, an accounting of the new troops and their actions here would not go amiss with the Prince. I cannot spare a large troop, of course, but perhaps a single individual might sneak past the demons and reach the steps?" Danath let the question hang in the air.

Stonemug smiled, snapping a salute. "Aye, that they might. An' I've just the man fer the job. Me."

Danath nodded, having well expected the answer.

"Take news to Stromgarde then, and return quickly with any further orders the Prince may wish to impart." Danath waved a dismissal, and Stonemug turned on his heels, heading to the barracks to prepare.

Insects buzzed noisily over the still water, unsettled only a moment by the stealthy passing of a crockalisk just under the surface. Stonemug waited patiently for the creature to pass by, waiting nearly invisible in the tall plants.

The passage from Honor Hold to the Dark Portal across the fire-scarred land of Hellfire Peninsula wasn't nearly as bad as the mucky silence of the Swamp of Sorrows. At least in Hellfire, you saw the enemy from a far away, with plenty of time to line up a shot before the stalking demons were on you. Here, everything lay in hiding until the last second, a landscape of concealed predators poised to strike in a moment's notice. Still, the hunter knew this ground well - he'd stalked the swamps many times as a lad, learning his trade by tracking the dangerous crocs and cats of the mire.

Now, of course, it was infinitely more dangerous than those early days. Another species had come into the Swamp and despoiled the natural habitat.

Across the water, Stonemug could just barely make out the mud road to Stonard. A scout from the fort had passed a few minutes ago, forcing the dwarf to take shelter amongst the concealing vines. He was dangerously close to the fort now - could almost make out the vile smell of orcs that seemed to drip continuously from the place.

Stonemug slid slowly from his hiding place, passing into the stream much like the crocs, so that the slow ripple of water would seem as natural a part of the swamp as that predator to any that marked it. He crossed the water quick and silent as a water snake, pulling himself up slowly along the roots of a willow tree on the other side. A noise from the road alarmed him, and he bounded up the tree to the concealing canopy above, setting his foot in a small crack to steady himself and grasping bow and arrow.

The labored breath of a horse in full gallop down the treacherous road resounded in Stonemug's ear, as he braced himself and took aim. This was no place for a battle, he quickly decided - the closeness to Stonard meant any shout or scream might quickly bring many troops.

Stealth alone would be an ally here, and so he held his shot as the rider came suddenly into view.

Luck was with him, he decided, for the ride pushed his horse at such a pace, focusing intently on his destination, that both swept past the hunter's tree without notice. Stonemug could barely make out the rider's features, though it seemed to provoke to him a memory of one of the Grin's veritable army of rogues. Stonemug frowned suddenly - the Grin's killers always seemed a careful, patient bunch. For one to be racing so haphazardly through the swamp, caring nothing for his mount's health or the dangerous predators lurking just off the road, meant the rider was on an errand of great importance.

And that was never good for the Keepers.

The rider was out of range now; Stonemug cursed and pulled himself slowly out onto a branch, further into the tree. From here, the mossy towers of Stonard could be seen peaking out of the swamps dense vegetation. Stonemug squinted his eyes carefully, calling up the primal aspects of hunting birds, and casting his vision towards the turrents. The courtyard focused into view. The hunter quickly noticed the towering form of Ashenrock standing by the entrance, with his pet orc Yagyu nearby. The rider pushed through the gate, seemed for a moment to speak, and then collapsed. Unfortunately, Stonemug could make nothing of the expressions of the two Grin.

Then, suddenly, the calm quiet of the swamp was broken by a great voice, and Stonemug had his answer. Yagyu beat his chest and shouted, which Stonemug could clearly make out, and the words, though mouthed in the harsh guttural noises of the orc were familiar enough.

A challenge to the Keepers....the Grin were preparing for war.

A sudden movement to his left snapped Stonemug from his concentration, and the hunter twisted to aim. Again the arrow stayed put, as a bewildered human, probably from Darkshire by his look, tore past the tree and sped down the road with a look of terror etched across his face. Stonemug smiled wryly for a moment. "Aye...Yagyu 'as that af'ct on people." Understanding the wisdom of the human's course, Stonemug caught the edge of the branch and swung down, allowing himself to drop the last few feet into the soft mud.

If the Grin were moving, he would have to put a huge distance between himself and this place, and could only hope to reach the Keep a few hours ahead of their advanced parties. Keeping to the side of the road, hoping the shifting water of the swamp would wipe the tracks of his passage, Stonemug set a brutal pace towards the gap of Deadwind.

Aeldon managed to smile back at Aurhia, still shaken by the onrush of images bombarding his mind.

"Thanks....I guess..." he finally said, struggling to his feet.

He swayed around on his feet, dizzy and with a pounding migraine, and managed to find a wall to lean against. He grasped his head, clenching his eyes shut as he tried to block the visions from his sight.

"Being hurt still, are you?" Aurhia asked.

"Oh...uh, no, not at all. Tend to the prisoner, do what you can for her. I'll head up top and get her moved out of the Crypt..."

He rushed out of the door and moved to the light of the sun above him, the sudden rush of light overwhelming his sight and sending him back onto the ground. It took him awhile to get back to his feet, and he balanced enough on his feet to begin making his way to the Princes chamber. He would do what he could to transfer the prisoner before the Grin could find her.

Felora's last question had echoed before Faquarl; a question he had believed to know the answer to for years. However, like most "facts" of the world, he had found he was utterly wrong. Still...did she have the right to know? She was no Swiftpride! He could call all of the dead Swiftpride before him now within the Dream and truly show her who they were.

They were no family. They were an army. An army that none could ever hope to match. Only the centaurs backed by a god's daughter had been able to stop his people.

He shook his head lightly. No, it wasn't his tribe being misunderstood that bothered him. It was that she felt the same as another Swiftpride. She, who was not even used to the customs, had felt the compassion of one of his own blood.

He felt perhaps that it was best she knew; she might yet find and befriend him. It would be an accomplishment that not even Faquarl had been able to call his own.

"There is one remaining Swiftpride, to my knowledge," Faquarl's mouth was dry. This secret was only known by one other; an elf, and Faquarl had made sure that the elf's life was shortened. "His name is Rawlk."

After making this statement, Faquarl felt he needed to stare into her eyes. He did so almost defiantly, as if to try and salvage a bit of himself. Felora's gaze was kind and compassionate.

"Who is he? Why have you never spoken of him before? You must have been very close, being the...last of your kind."

This statement made Faquarl smile in a sardonic way. "Rawlk... is my son. As to why we have not bonded as father and son should...I did not know he was alive until after our Khaz Modan campaign. He despised me so. When the Warchief returned, I had no choice but to return with him. However, my heart was not fully into warfare any longer. I know that my different stance as Warlord caused much questioning of my motives. I was deluded that perhaps I could claim the forgiveness of a son I never got to know."

Telling the tale, however brief it was, seemed wash a combination of relief and guilt into Faquarl. He felt like a child who had done wrong. He found himself staring into the fire as Felora digested his words.

She struggled to contain the sudden bloom of pity that she could feel welling up, ready to show itself plainly on her face. Her expression managed to twist itself into one of compassion, much to her relief. She reached out to place her hand on top of Faquarl's. Just as she would have touched him, a sharp pain lanced through her arm. She watched as the broad scar across her hand began to bleed.

Faquarl's eyes were dark. Voices began to echo faintly in her ears, calling her name. She looked across the humble little fire at her mentor, her fear long forgotten.

"Sir...I think they're calling me home."

"I know." His face lightened slightly in a half-smile. "You know where you belong, Felora. You don't belong here yet."

She nodded. "Someday, though."

He stood, and she followed suit, bowing to him. Her hand continued to slowly seep blood, the pale fur of her fingers becoming ruddy.

"Don't forget, Fel," Faquarl began. "About -"

"I won't, sir."

Her eyes smiled at him. "Take care of yourself."

He nodded slowly. "And you."

Felora watched him as the Dream began to grow faint around her, until all that she could see were a pair of golden eyes. The world shifted, and the reality of the crypt of Stromgarde came suddenly back into focus - she lay on the stone floor exactly as she had been...how much time had passed? Had it been days, or hours? The pair of eyes still floated in her vision, and

she gasped as they materialized in front of her in the form of the rogue Mortael. A thin coating of blood lay on the edge of his weapon, a match to the slice in her hand. He'd been able to wake her with pain.

"Sythegar!" he said, gripping her shoulder with a boney hand. "Can you move? We need to get clear of the crypt."

She nodded wordlessly and pushed herself into a crouching position. Reeper appeared from the shadows behind her, and she began stumbling up the steps and out of the crypt.

Her hands and wrists stung in the open air. Even the twilight was blinding after so many days in the darkness, and Felora squinted to look beneath the trellis and towards the bridge at the front of the Keep, where she could just make out a large group of Horde holding their own against the Keepers' defense. She smiled weakly. Flanked by Mortael and Reeper, she pulled herself toward her clan. Every muscle burned and ached, and she could feel her hand throb as it continued to bleed darkly onto the flagstones below. The sounds of battle grew louder, and after so many long moments, she collapsed into Ashenrock's arms.

Faces crowded her vision; Grimnir, Signe, Yalim. The orc shaman leaned over her in concern, his eyes straying to her wounded hand. Ashenrock tightened his grip on her, and Grimnir turned away, relief etched all too plainly on his features.

"We've liberated our comrade and taken our vengeance in blood!" Ashenrock shouted. "You have all performed well."

He knelt and propped Felora up against the stone wall of the bridge before standing to deflect another incoming assault. The Alliance forces seemed to be growing by the minute.

Grimnir spoke in her direction, his voice gruff. "Yer sure yer okay? Nae wounds tha' need cleansin'?"

She smiled at him. "...just need rest, Grim."

He nodded, remaining unconvinced.

"Rest you shall have, my dear." Ashenrock's voice floated back to her. She was safe now...and so was he.

Her eyes fluttered against the spots in her vision. The Druid drifted into unconsciousness, feeling truly safe for the first time in days. She hardly noticed the dark blue, feather-trimmed cloak which was wrapped around her body.

The swamp was quiet once again, save for the haranguing of crickets and the occasional splash of a crocolisk as it moved through the mire. The drums of war had since gone silent.

Felora rested easily in her quarters on the second story of the Stonard inn, her wounds covered in soft bandages. Grimnir had seen to it that she would recover as quickly as she was able. A stick of incense perfumed the room in a sweet, musky smell, and a white candle burned on her altar. She stared into the little flame and thought back to the confrontation in the crypt of Stromgarde Keep.

She wondered what had happened to the rogue who had gone so far as to bring her water and treat her with a modicum of kindness. He had, perhaps, forgotten her by now. She frowned. The experience had not earned the Keepers any respect from her; in fact, her anger still burned, low and hot. She had lived to fight the Alliance another day.

Grin would clash with Keeper once more. And when they did, she would be ready.