

Redemption

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The hulking tauren's crimson eyes glowed with an intensity that his master had not yet seen in him.

"Demonstrike. Your brutality and cunning are noteworthy. You have progressed well in your training and your power has become immense."

Danomolis Thunderrike stood towering over his pupil, his eyes burning through his helmet. He was also a tauren, but much larger than Demonaro, almost unnaturally so. His black and scarred armor only made him look more menacing. Demonaro had remarked that even ogres must cower upon meeting him.

Danomolis smiled beneath his mask. "What is it that drives you so? Is it your brother?"

Demonaro - now called Demonstrike - quickly looked up at his master and locked his gaze. "Yes. That fool has stumbled into power his whole life. He has never earned it...just charmed his way through while I got stepped on repeatedly. The favorite son and pupil. Even our dead mother preferred him."

Demonaro knew that deep in his heart he didn't truly hate his brother, thanks to a brief moment of clarity he had experienced...but his jealousy was overwhelming, and he wanted his brother to suffer the same way Demon had.

Lord Danomolis laughed. "Soon, my friend, you will have what you desire. Much sooner than you may have imagined."

A creeping servant approached Danomolis and handed him a locked box. The Lord slowly unlocked it and opened it, revealing something that shook Demonstrike to the bone. Danomolis noticed his pupil's discomfort. "You recognize this?"

It was the ear of a troll...a Revantusk troll, he could tell from the earrings that graced it. One earring in particular, though, had caught his attention the moment the box was opened. It was a small, silver hoop with copper wire wrapped around it. Dangling from it was a raptor fang that had been dipped in gold.

It symbolized the first kill that Jin'tal the Betrayed had ever completed solo. Jin'tal had created it himself many years ago and was always proud of it. Demonstrike desperately wanted to feel saddened, but he couldn't summon the emotion. Lord Danomolis held the ear up and examined it.

"Apparently this one gave us quite a struggle. Wasn't this the troll that almost sent you to your death, just before I found you on that snowy hill?"

Demonstrike simply nodded and said, "Yes."

"He was apparently tracking you back here. Our agents ran into him about six miles from this location." He shot Demon a frightful glance. "He will not be returning to tell anyone of your whereabouts."

Danomolis tossed the ear back into the box and closed it. "Your brother and father will fall soon, as well. My agents are closing in on them. However, we will simply capture them and deliver them here. You will decide their fate when they arrive."

Demon felt no remorse. He wondered if it was his mind, or his transformation that had caused this. He nodded his head and decided that he would continue his daily training.

Ashenrock couldn't sleep. Even with Felora safely back in Stonard, Rock found it difficult to concentrate on what the Grin needed to do in order to reestablish themselves. His brother was lost, his father was mending, and his best friend was missing. What was a tauren to do? His thoughts again turned to Felora. Ashenrock could lie to himself all he wanted, but he knew there

was some kind of mental connection between them. He had felt her pain in the prison, and he had felt her while she was in the Dream. Of course, his feelings for her clouded his judgment...but he was sure it was more than that.

Suddenly Ashenrock came to a horrible realization. He was no longer fit to lead the Blacktooth Grin. There was too much going on in his life that couldn't go unresolved.

His thoughts were interrupted by a commotion in the corridor outside his quarters, and a frantic knocking at his door sent him to his feet.

"What? Enter!"

Two trolls appeared in the doorway. It was Alkus and Do'tanl, two emissaries of the Revantusk tribe.

"Ey dere, Rock." Alkus said "Dere be somtin' ya need ta be knowin' right quick. Da Betrayed...he be comin to da village last night and he be in a bad way, mon. He said dat he be needin' ya ta come to da village."

Don'tanl spoke much more eloquently, having spent years training with some of the finest Forsaken doctors. "Sir, yer brother by blood is badly injured. He needs ya to come and see him. He says he be having important information regardin' yer brother."

Ashenrock lowered his head and let out a very deep sigh. He couldn't possibly make this trip alone...he knew that there was going to be bad news when he got to Revantusk. He decided that he would ask Felora to come with him. Again his thoughts were interrupted by Don'tanl.

"Rock, there is another problem ya need ta know about. Yer father be missing. Tycho and Mirage be in his quarters...but the old tauren be gone fer a few days now."

Ashenrock stood silent for a moment, waiting for more. It didn't come. "I will leave after I've tended to matters here" he said. The two trolls stood silent as they watched Ashenrock. Finally Rock looked at them and said "Go! I will meet you in Revantusk. Be sure that Jin'tal is well cared for."

Saltrock Pumastrike snapped out of a cold daze and instantly felt a crush of blinding pain. It hit him from every limb on his body...and then he couldn't tell if all of his limbs were in place. He tried to open his eyes but they were swollen shut.

"What the hell happened?" he thought to himself. The last thing that he remembered was leaving his quarters to go fishing. He remembered leaving his home to go fish but nothing after that.

He couldn't make out quite where he was. He could tell that he was inside, though. It was musty and a bit damp. He picked up the scent of mold and death. He tried to move his legs but was quickly overwhelmed with pain.

"I see that you're finally awake, tauren," The words echoed a bit and Salt wasn't sure where the source of them was. He decided not to acknowledge the voice. After a few seconds of silence, again more words came.

"Rocksalt Pumastrike...the renowned tracker and hunter. Father of Ashenrock and Demonaro. Husband of the late elemental Sindall Featherwhite. Companion of one bear named Tycho and a ghost leopard named Mirage." The voice suddenly got much closer and more sarcastic. "Please...stop me anytime I need to be corrected."

"Wh...what do you want of me?" Salt mustered energy enough to pick his head up and point it at the direction the voice was coming from.

"You old fool. There are many uses for you. However, two right now are all that concern me." The voice became echoed and distant again. "For now, though, you're no good to me dead. While I do enjoy witnessing suffering and despair...I do have a little pity left in my heart."

Salt heard footsteps draw closer. "Open your mouth, old cow." Salt decided to do as he was told. Whatever was about to happen would either cure him or kill him. Both seemed a better

option then staying in this condition. He opened his mouth and felt the cool trickle and bitter taste of a healing potion against his tongue. He eagerly gulped it. Almost instantly he felt better. His body felt soothed, his bruises disappeared, and his swelling subsided. He even felt his femur come together where it had been broken. He opened his eyes and saw that he was in a stone room that resembled a prison. As his eyes adjusted to the poor lighting he glanced up and saw the figure that had been talking to him.

Hatred swelled in the old tauren and he spat out in anger. "You! You arrogant bastard! What have you done to me?"

Rock gathered his things for what he was sure would be the last time. He packed everything with care, taking his time to reflect on his time here spent with the Blacktooth Grin. They would always be family to him and he hoped they wouldn't think that he was abandoning them.

He slowly dressed for the trip to Revantusk and paused when he gripped his tabard. He looked on the black and white garment with pride. He started to fold it to pack it away but then suddenly stopped.

No. He would always be Grin...and he would make sure that everyone knew it everywhere he went. He pulled the garment over his head and ran his hands down the front to remove any wrinkles. He then took the dagger that Gorfrunch had given him and tied to his side just as Yagyu had taught him.

Yagyu. He would be far better a leader than Rock could have hoped to be. The Orc was the picture of what the Grin leader should be. Firm, steadfast, honorable, and feared by his troops. Rock would not leave room for discussion. Yagyu would lead the Grin...and anyone that opposed would face them both. Rock chuckled to himself. Before the Grin he would never have looked to solve a dispute with violence. Rock would inform Yagyu of his decision as soon as he was ready to go. He hated long goodbyes.

Particularly if he was going to have to say goodbye to Felora, the last thing he wanted. He wasn't sure what he would say...but he wanted her by his side on this. It would mean her leaving the Grin behind for a while, but he decided that perhaps she would welcome the respite. The least he could do would be to ask.

He knocked lightly on her door and she soon answered. She seemed tired but her eyes told him that she was regaining her strength from her ordeal with the Keepers.

"How are you feeling?" he asked, with genuine concern.

She lowered her eyes a bit and replied, "I'm almost one hundred percent."

Rock wasted no time. "You feel up to a trip?"

She looked up at him, frowning. "Where are you going?"

Standing in the doorway to her room, Rock proceeded to tell Felora everything. His troubles with his brother, his father, and his friend the Betrayed. Felora absorbed his words, carefully taking in the details and not stopping him. He finished in a rush, looking into Felora's eyes. There was one last thing he needed to tell her.

"You know, when you were gone I realized just how much I missed you...and not the usual way a leader misses his troops. I had a very real connection with you. I felt your pain as the warlock tormented you, and I felt you fall into the Dream...I felt your anger and your hopelessness. I've always had an empathetic connection with nature and the simple minded creatures that inhabit the lands. I've never felt a connection to an equal like that, though."

Ashenrock turned and looked out the window. The courtyard was filled with blood-thirsty recruits all looking to make their mark on the Grin by making their mark on alliance heads. He loved the Grin, but it wasn't a true place for Tauren. While he had always followed and respected the traditions and lore of this storied clan, he never felt truly comfortable with it all. He turned back and looked at Felora...realizing that she most likely felt the same way.

"It's time for me to leave this clan in the capable hands of someone who is destined to lead it," he said. "I will be handing the guild over to Yagyu. Warchief of the Blacktooth Grin is a role best suited to an Orc and Yagyu truly fits the mold. Where Gorfrunch was too violent...I was too soft. Yagyu seems to have a balance of that."

Felora sat slowly onto her bed, still speechless. Rock knew it was a lot for her to absorb. "I would like it very much if you would accompany me on my new journey away from the Grin, Felora. While I will always be Grin...I will not likely be here." He looked at the floor waiting for her reply.

Felora's initial feelings at his words had been those of disbelief. Ashenrock was leaving the Grin? But as she listened, she knew that she mirrored his feelings more closely than she had first thought. And now, he was asking her to go with him.

No one had done that much before. Even Faquarl had bid her stay when he had left the Grin the first time, heedless of her pleas and fears.

She looked up at him, this tauren who had easily gained her admiration even before he had climbed the ranks to become Chieftain of their clan. She'd been drawn to him from the beginning, and it hadn't just been the fact that her mentor had professed his fondness for Ashenrock. He had risked his life to rescue her from capture, and he had placed his trust in her to provide him with council. She would have followed him anywhere.

She swallowed and looked up at him, her gaze softened in understanding.

"Even with all of our alliances and the friends we've made, sometimes it's difficult to find a place where you feel you truly belong, isn't it?" she asked.

He nodded almost imperceptibly.

"This clan is all I have for family," she said. "Here I have known a camaraderie like no other. It will always be my home. But after all this time, I still find my values do not exactly match those that the Grin holds dear.

"You know how I feel, Rock. You know it quite literally." She placed a hand on his arm and looked searchingly into his face. "And after knowing that, I would not want to be left behind again."

Rock smiled at her, happy to know that neither of them would be alone.

Blood seeped into the fabric of the cot as Yagyu lay unmoving on his back, staring at the ceiling. The wound from the Death Knight's blade had still not fully healed and his continued movement wasn't helping, so this short repose was his feeble attempt at recovery. Silently he stared up at the wooden beams of his quarters. As a Warlord his quarters were larger than most others but in comparison to those of officers in Orgrimmar it was spartan, to be generous. He had four walls and a door, but the interior was bare save for a cot, a large trunk, a small desk and chair and one shelf on the wall between the cot and desk. The shelf held a few trinkets. Mementos, mostly - of battles and wars and warriors he had known.

Through the thin walls he could hear murmuring coming from the direction of Felora's quarters and he could make out the low tones of Ashenrock's voice. Something was amiss with the Warchief. He felt it more than anything. He knew the tauren was troubled and the recent battles with the Keepers, Fenris, and the vague family issues that troubled him were not helping matters. Ashenrock was proud and was loathe to trouble others with his own difficulties and Yag respected him for that. But as the murmuring subsided he wondered if perhaps Rock had taken on more than he could handle. He had been particularly troubled by Felora's kidnapping. The tauren were a strange race and they felt things that orcs had no concept of. Rock seemed to feel more pain from her disappearance than any other. While Yagyu and others had been enraged and moved to vengeance, Rock seemed more pained and almost withered by her predicament. As he thought of these events Yagyu felt a twinge of guilt nearly as sharp as the

stabbing pain that lanced through his chest as he breathed in and out. Why didn't he feel her pain? Why couldn't he feel her despair? He had known her longer than most and yet it was the Warchief who suffered for her. He worried...had he changed? Was he uncaring for his friend?

When she had emerged from the Keep, Yagyu was shocked to see her. She seemed to be a shell of her former self. Her fur matted with caked blood, her skin torn and burned, and her eyes...her eyes were dark and listless. The mirth that usually danced behind her eyes was no longer there. She seemed to stare through him before she passed out. It disturbed him to see her in such a state and he wondered if she would ever again be the same Felora he had known. And even as he thought of these things, his mind returned to the rest of the clan. The old guard seemed to be retreating and he was surprised to find that he himself was now one of the oldest remaining members. There was training to be done and defenses to attend to. Stonard was quiet for the moment, but that could not last. The Alliance had become more aggressive as of late and Yag could not trust that the Swamp was a safe haven. There were internal issues that needed attention as well. The Grin had seen treason and lost officers to battle and more. There were rumors of love affairs among some of the elves and it could prove dangerous to morale if dissention was to erupt from broken hearts and betrayed feelings. He needed to talk to Grimnir. The old shaman would see things clearly and together they would give the Warchief the best advice they could.

Yag grimaced as he sat up and felt the wound tear a bit where it had started to close. He coughed and spit a bit of blood into a brass pot near his cot. He needed to talk to Grimnir and then they would speak with the Chief. He rose and headed for the door.

Grimnir lay in his quarters, shimmering and translucent in spirit wolf form. Visions of past and present danced before him, some from the mortal world, some from the world of his ancestors. He concentrated, closed his eyes, and considered his Clan.

In some ways he was a mystery to them, he knew. Who was the old orc who slept eighteen hours a day? Why did he appear so infrequently? By what right did he lead them?

In some ways, they were a mystery to him, too. He would open his eyes and see an entirely new batch of grots. Younglings seemed to become veterans...or corpses...with alarming rapidity. New friends became old friends became memories...and the cycle repeated.

In some ways, time was skipping ahead at breakneck speed.

...In some ways, it wasn't moving at all.

And yet, despite it all, the old shaman retained his intuitive connection to the Clan. After years and years of mingling blood with them, Grimnir could feel the heartbeat of the Blacktooth Grin almost as his own. And he knew the Clan was approaching another pivotal moment. Another of the times where the Clan could teeter dangerously close to dissolution, or destruction.

Grimnir reached further, and felt the confusion and turmoil within his oldest friend, Yagyu. He would need counsel, as would the Warchief. And to give it...to be *worthy* of giving it...Grimnir needed to steady his wayward self. He had been conserving his precious time on the mortal plane for situations just as this.

He opened his eyes. Resumed his orcish shape. With only a bit of hesitation, pushed himself to his feet. He would go out, and be with his Clan. When counsel was needed...he would be prepared to offer it.

Grimnir and Yagyu stood stunned. Ashenrock carefully removed the tooth-filled necklace from around his wrist and handed it to Yagyu. The orc reached out and took it, and then placed it

around his neck. Grimnir assumed his spirit state and howled into the night sky as Ashenrock pumped his fist into the air and yelled, "FEAR THE GRIN!"

Just like that, Ashenrock's reign had ended. He breathed a heavy sigh of relief. Yagyu was the proper one to lead the Grin...and with Grimnir by his side, they would make the Grin flourish.

"I must ask that you excuse me, Warchief, but I must return to my quarters in order to prepare for my journey," Rock said.

Yagyu saluted the tauren. "Dismissed."

Ashenrock returned the salute and then placed his hand on the orc's shoulder. "As long as I can still draw breath, I will always be Grin. One day I'll return to fight by your side."

Yagyu simply said, "Yew better."

Rock returned to his quarters. While he had let Yagyu know that Felora would be going with him, he had yet to talk to Shadiel. Ashenrock was still going to perform the ceremony between Londra and Shadiel later in the week. Rock would wait until then to see what the Elf had planned.

For now though, he needed to get his ass in gear and get to Reventus. He knew that Jin'tal would only have bad news for him...and he prayed that the poor troll wasn't too badly hurt. Rock decided to check and see if Felora was ready to go. The trip wasn't too long, and they'd be back in Stonard for the wedding in a few days.

Truth be told, though, Rock was really looking forward to returnig to Reventus without having to carry the weight of the Grin with him...and he wanted to show Felora his beloved, adopted, home and introduce her to his "family" there.

Felora glanced once more around her room before her gaze settled on the carefully packed bag in the center of her bed. A small sigh escaped her; she would miss this place. A feather-trimmed cloak hung on a low hook behind her door, and she reached out to take it and clasp it around her shoulders. Her pack followed, and she made her way gingerly down the stairs to the entrance of the inn. A slight spasm in her back gave her pause only briefly.

Tamar rumbled at her in low tones as she approached the pen in the rear of the building where the mounts were kept. She smiled and rubbed the top of the kodo's broad head as she lay the saddle across his back before leaning down to cinch it tighter around his middle. As she stood back up, she came face to face with Ashenrock. He appeared relaxed, but Felora sense a nagging worry and urgency about him. She gave him a disarming smile.

"Are you ready to leave?" she asked. "We can go anytime."

Ashenrock nodded, trying to hide the concern he felt. He could only hope that Jin'tal would be conscious enough to tell him what he needed to know when they arrived in Revantusk. The news of his blood brother's injuries had unsettled him. Felora touched his arm gently and nodded her head in the direction of the gates, knowing that the sooner they left, the sooner they would arrive, and the sooner Ashenrock's mind would be put at ease.

As Ashenrock and Felora arrived in Revantusk, they could tell that there was a ruckus. Rock quickly dismounted his raptor and looked up at Felora.

"Stay here for a moment," he said, rushing into the large hut that served as an inn. Felora slowly dismounted her kodo, a wry smile creeping across her face. She followed Ashenrock into the hut.

Rock couldn't have been more surprised at what he found. There was his father - who was supposedly missing - arguing with a troll healer. Right beside him stood Jin'tal, his head swathed in bandages and yelling at Salt, trying to calm the old tauren down.

"Dammit ya old fool! Sit wouldja? Let da woman do wat she be havin' ta do!" Jin'tal barked in frustration.

Felora barely managed to suppress her laughter.

"I guess that you can relax a bit now," she whispered to Rock, raising an eyebrow at him. Rock simply furrowed his brow and let out a sigh.

"Are the two of you finished?" Rock growled. Jin'tal and Salt both spun around and stared at Rock, looking like two children that had been caught red-handed doing something they shouldn't.

"Son!" Salt finally found his voice. "It's about damn time you got here! You have no idea what's happened in the last few days!"

Rock ignored his father as he noticed the extent of Jin'tal's injuries. He was missing his left ear. Rock approached the Betrayed and put his hand out to touch his old friend, exasperated by what he was seeing.

"Did our brother do this...?"

Jin'tal waved Rock off. "Nah mon. I be runnin' into sum o' 'is friends though. Don't'cha be worryin' 'bout me...it just be some missin' flesh."

He wrinkled his nose and looked at Salt. "I can still be hearin' jus' fine!"

Salt just huffed. Ashenrock was greatly relieved to see that Jin'tal and his father were obviously alright. "Father. Where have you been?"

Salt's eyes opened wide. "Son, do you remember a human warlock that I used to sell some of my collectibles to? His name was Kirtan."

Ashenrock remembered the man well. He was a sinister-looking fellow - though he found all warlocks rather sinister looking - and he had betrayed Salt to the Alliance after a year of purchasing human relics from him. There was much more to the story, Rock was sure, but there was a terrible hatred that burned in his father over the situation. "Yes, what of him?"

"He saved my life from a few of Northrend's finest. It looks like your brother has it out for all of us, now. Kirtan has interests in Northrend, and he knows quite a bit about the place and how its inhabitants work," Salt revealed.

"How can you trust this human? He is a liar and a traitor!" Rock couldn't believe his ears.

"The story is complicated, son. I'll explain it once we're on the road." Salt suddenly noticed Felora standing quietly behind Rock and his eyebrows went up in curiosity. "Hello there, young lady." He nodded curtly to his son. "And who, may I ask, is this?"

Ashenrock motioned Felora forward to join them. "This is Felora. She was my counsel while I was leader of the Grin, and she's accepted my invitation to join us on our search for Demonaro. Felora, this is my father Saltrock, and of course, you already know Jin'tal."

Salt looked at Rock in surprise. "It is a pleasure, Felora...hold on, son...you said that as if you are no longer leading the Grin. You've stepped down?"

"A story meant for the road, as well," Rock responded. "For now, you should let Felora look at your wounds...both of you. She is an exceptional healer and I trust her with my life. I suggest you both do the same."

Felora smiled reassuringly. "He's still alive, as you can see."

Salt stifled a laugh. "Apparently you work miracles, my dear."

Night had fallen over the Hinterlands, and Revantusk had settled down into a low murmur, the resting quiet broken only by whispers and the crackle of bonfires. Felora stepped softly to the doorway of the inn and glanced around. Small waves broke on the shore, bringing with them a light breeze. Felora liked the sound of the sea, it was soothing and quiet. A different kind of quiet from the sea of grass which was Mulgore. She turned toward the little dock in the west of

the village and saw Ashenrock standing at the end of its reach, looking out over the expanse of water. Her hooves carried her to him before she had the chance to think about it.

"Rock," she whispered, and he turned around. She smiled.

"Your father and brother are sleeping now," she said. "Although it took some doing."

"Fairly typical, with those two." Rock gave her a crooked smile. "Thank you, Felora."

Felora nodded as settled herself onto the dock, her legs dangling out over the water. She looked up at him.

"Your father worries after you, I think," she said quietly. "About how this is affecting you."

"And he ought to be worrying about himself," Rock said, looking down at her and frowning a bit. "Making deals with demons."

"He seems a capable tauren," she said.

Rock snorted quietly, leaning down to sit beside her. "I don't disagree with you, but sometimes I question his good sense. This is beginning to look like a fool's errand. Who knows how powerful Demonaro has become. I know my father wants to face him, but I don't like the thought of putting those I care about in harm's way."

His darkened eyes came to rest on her, and Felora found her face grow hot. Her nose caught his scent, a blend of woodsmoke and salt, and a fluttering sensation exploded in the pit of her stomach. She looked down at the water below her hooves.

"I know," she said. "But we're willing to go with you because we want to help you. I don't think anyone knows how dangerous your brother is at this point. We've no idea what he's learned since he left, what he's capable of."

Rock sighed a bit, rubbing at one of his horns. "I suppose you're right. I've just got a lot on my mind."

"As usual." Felora smiled, turning to look at him. "You should try to relax; this should be a reprieve. We will have cause for worry soon enough."

In his quarters, Rock reflected on the moment he had shared with Felora on the dock. He wanted so badly to hold her close and the tension was palpable. He laughed at himself. I've charged head-first into scenarios that should have killed me without giving it a second thought, yet this woman frightens me more than Illidan himself, he thought. He sat on his bed and sighed. He knew that he was being foolish. Felora was right...there was always a lot on his mind...and that would likely not change any time soon. Perhaps he simply needed to let go of it for a bit. His father and troll-brother were alive and seemingly well, the Grin was no longer his problem, there was nothing that he could do about Demonaro at this point in time, and the woman whose affection he'd pined for had jumped at the opportunity to travel with him.

A knock came at his door. He quickly opened it but was disappointed to see that it wasn't who he'd hoped that it would be. Jin'tal stood in the doorway for what seemed like minutes. Finally he furrowed his brow in anger. "Ey mon! Ya gonna let me in or no?"

"Yeah...sorry, Betrayed, I lost myself for a minute there." Rock said, moving aside to let his old friend in.

Jin'tal limped over to the bed and sat down. "They really got you good, didn't they?" Rock said while examining his friend's wounds.

"Bastards be jumpin' me. Two o' da damn t'ings. Dem Death Knights be some crazy powerful bein's," Jin'tal responded.

Rock was taken aback by the statement. He remembered back to their fight with Fenris. It had taken all of the skill of some of the Grin's finest to bring down just one Death Knight...yet Jin'tal had survived an attack by two of them? "How...how could you have escaped them?" he asked, bewildered.

The Betrayed looked up at him...the pain evident in his eyes. "Dey didn't want me dead, Rock. Dey wanted me ta bring ya a message."

Rock raised his eyebrows. "Me personally?"

Jin'tal nodded and pulled a piece of parchment from his pocket. He handed the paper to Rock who quickly unfolded it.

Such a fool you are to think that you could rescue your brother from the grips of the Lich King. The only reason that I return you your troll is to deliver this. Your brother will find you one day when he is ready. Any attempt to rescue him before that day will be met swiftly. We will kill you, and then we will kill your family, friends, wipe out your precious Revantusk, and then hunt down your Blacktooth Grin mates. I've removed your friend's ear to push my point through. Do not enter Northrend. – Danomolis

Ashenrock sighed heavily and let the note fall to the floor. He looked up at Jin'tal. "I suppose you've read it."

"Aye, and ya father too. A bunch of rubbish it be! If ya don't go in dere, I be doin' it alone!"

Rock smiled. For the first time for as long as he could remember, he felt like he had the upper hand. Only fear could drive someone to write something like this. The truly powerful would have paid him no mind. There was obviously a weakness that Rock hadn't thought of yet. Perhaps it was time to talk to his father's warlock friend.

"Jin'tal, my brother. Nothing will stop our pursuit of Demonaro." Then Rock chuckled at the thought of Yagyu and the Grin being "pursued" by these Death Knights. That would be a terrible mistake for them...fighting the Grin on their own ground would not be smart.

Ashenrock felt invigorated and ready to take on the world. It was time to plan for their push to save his brother. They wouldn't fail and he knew it now. Another knock came at the door. Rock opened it to find Felora standing there with his father behind her. "Rock, your father and I..."

Ashenrock interrupted her by placing his hand on her waist and swinging his other arm around her, resting his hand on the back of her head. He pulled her in close and kissed her as he had wanted to do from the day he met her.

Jin'tal beamed and shot a look at Salt, who seemed rather surprised at his son's actions. "Maybe this is a bad time then," he said. "I'll come back later."

Rock paid him no mind as he felt Felora kiss him back. For the first time in his life, he felt as if he was in control of his future.

Her whole body was practically singing.

Felora wasn't sure how she'd managed to actually walk out of the room later that night, considering how weak her legs were. Did that happen to everyone? She was almost giddy at the idea. She'd been waiting for that kiss for so very long, and the wait had been worth it. One thing's for sure, she thought with a smile, there's never a dull moment.

Ashenrock had changed his mind about his father's warlock friend. They'd only just arrived in Revantusk, and now they were preparing to leave again. It seemed that Kirtan might have more to offer them than lies and slander. Rock's mood was much improved, which in turn made Felora feel as though nothing could touch them, not even this death knight Danomolis. It had been a long time since she had possessed that sort of optimism. She had been so entrenched in the role of worrying after everyone, the sudden lack of fear or concern was liberating.

She carefully descended the steps at the entrance to the inn and walked along the side of the building, where Tamar was tethered next to Ashenrock's raptor. The kodo bumped his head into her leg and she leaned down to murmur at him, feeding him a bit of mushroom from her belt pouch. Ashenrock's low voice found her ears as he stood near the window talking with his father, and Felora shivered in response.

She turned and walked back into the inn, intending to go upstairs to pack her things. Ashenrock turned to look at her, and Felora smiled at him, unspoken thoughts filling the air between them. She continued into the room beyond, disappearing from his view.

Everything was changing, and for the first time, Felora wasn't apprehensive about where it was going.

Ashenrock watched Felora disappear from his sight just as his father said to him, "Good for you, son. She's a good woman. I see in her the same strength that your mother carried - though the two of them are quite different in most other aspects. She's got a kind heart, though, Rock."

Ashenrock nodded at his father, noting his wistful gaze. No doubt he was thinking about his departed wife, and Rock's mother, Sindall. Salt was right. While Felora was a pillar of strength, she was quite shy and soft-spoken. His mother had been a fireball of words and outward emotion. She was a shaman and at one with the elements. She fed on constant natural energy that fueled her daily life. Never a day went by that Rock and Demonaro saw their mother frown or give in to a hopeless situation. It was that spirit that probably led to her death, though. The circumstances of her death were never fully revealed, but from what Rock had been able to discover on his own, she had been involved in a plot to help Jaina Proudmore bridge peace between Theramore and Cairne. Sindall had been captured by separatists and it was believed that they had killed her. That was such a long time ago. Ashenrock stood and put his hand on his father's shoulder. "It doesn't get easier. I miss her too."

Salt looked up at his son with sad eyes. "I can't lose your brother, too." Salt said. The soft and faint shimmer of Mirage, Salt's ghostly companion appeared as he plopped his head in Salt's lap offering condolence.

"We'll get him back, pop."

The next morning brought a beautiful day, sunny and mild in temperature. Ashenrock met his crew just outside the gates of Revantusk. They were to meet Kirtan here. Hopefully this warlock would be able to offer evidence of the weakness that Rock was sure this Danomolis had. He was unsettled a bit, though, as he knew there would be a price behind it. Humans were hypnotic with their charm...like snakes lulling you into a trance just before they strike. Rock distrusted them immensely. His father wasn't a fool, though, and if he said that Kirtan was legitimate then he would trust his wisdom.

Felora found her way next to him and gripped his hand with a smile. He returned the smile, seeing a light in her eyes that he'd never seen before. It put a fire in his soul that made him feel invincible.

Suddenly a flaming visage could be seen racing towards them. The guards of Revantusk bristled and gripped their halberds. "Stand down," Ashenrock commanded, and they did as they were told. Kirtan stopped well short of them and Saltrock walked out to meet him. They exchanged words and finally Kirtan dismounted and followed Salt to them.

He bowed before Ashenrock. "It is an honor to be in the presence of the offspring of such a noble and forthright tauren such as your father. It has been a long time since I saw you Ashenrock, and I am glad that you are alive and well." Kirtan looked up and offered a convincing

smile. Rock noticed that Kirtan had not called upon a companion. Most warlocks he'd met never traveled without one.

"Forgive me if I'm not as honored, Kirtan. You've caused my family quite a bit of grief over the years."

Kirtan grimaced. "Yes. Quite unpleasant business, that."

The warlock shot a questioning glance at Salt, who simply said, "I haven't had time to explain yet."

Ashenrock wasted no time. "So what is it that you can do to help aid us in our quest to find my brother, warlock? And what price will we have to pay for it?"

Kirtan offered a wicked grin. "Tauren, there is nothing that you possess that I want as fee. What I want is to travel with you. My prize lies in the same place that your brother is being held. There are treasures within those walls that could make a warlock a king of his order. If you get me there...I will help you to destroy Danomolis and free your brother from his mental prison."

Ashenrock was intrigued but wary. "What stops you from going there yourself and claiming your treasure?"

Kirtan raised his eyebrows. "Young tauren, I am but an old man with dark powers. Alone I can't take down the Dark Knights of Northrend. I am but a piece of the puzzle that can free the minds of the trapped."

Jin'tal spoke up. "You be da brains...but we be da muscle. Dat it?"

Kirtan nodded. "Yes. If we are to take down Lord Danomolis, I will need to be able to concentrate. You see...Death Knights under the control of the Lich King have a vulnerability that only a skilled warlock may exploit. They draw their powers from corrupt energies that I have learned to manipulate. If I can distract these energies from their natural ebb and flow, it can weaken a Death Knight to the point of futility. Lord Danomolis knows that I possess this knowledge."

Ashenrock glanced at Felora. "What do you think?"

Felora squinted a bit, searching Kirtan. "He seems to be genuine. His greed is what motivates him."

Kirtan grimaced again. "Greed, my dear, is mostly a dwarven trait. Humans lust after things that they want, be they carnal, material, or otherwise. We aren't fool enough to die for our petty wants, though. I wouldn't propose this alliance unless I was sure that I would leave with my hide intact."

Jin'tal jumped in. "Your hide ain't da one we be worryin' about."

"Enough. I can tell you that the warlock means no harm to us," Salt interjected. "He's telling you all the truth. He's crossed Danomolis before and he's just as marked for death as we are."

Ashenrock thought back to the note he received. If Danomolis knew Kirtan possessed this power, then he must have found out from Demonaro that Kirtan had ties to Salt. This alliance is precisely what Danomolis feared. Ashenrock smiled. "We have him right where we want him. How soon can you be ready to leave, Kirtan?"

Kirtan looked around sarcastically. "Tauren, I am ready whenever you are."

Ashenrock approached Primal Torntusk, who had been monitoring the meeting. "May I ask that you allow this human to take comfort in one of the guest lodges? I know it's an odd situation, but I'd rather not keep him exposed outside of the gates."

The Primal looked uncomfortable. "Ya know yer friends be welcome 'ere Rock. I not bein' wary o' yer judgement...but if he bein' 'ere, I want him guarded."

Rock nodded. "Jin'tal. You will stay with Kirtan at all times. Nothing like a rogue to shadow a warlock."

Jin'tal nodded and slipped into the shadows. This made Kirtan visibly nervous. "You'll have no trouble from me."

"Good. We leave in 2 hours. Get your things together. Father, we'll need both Tycho and Mirage for this trip. We're headed into snowy territory, so make sure you have the gear for it."

Ashenrock turned to Felora. "I'm already packed. Care to join me for a drink before we go?"

She smiled at him. "I'm packed as well...and a drink sounds good."

Felora drained the last bit of ale from her mug before setting it back on the tabletop. The alcohol warmed her through, making her a bit sleepy. She smiled to herself. Before she'd joined up with the Grin, her tolerance for drink had been next to nothing. She still had to watch herself, but it wasn't nearly as bad as it had been in the beginning. Still, a flush had found its way across her upper chest.

She was warm and comfortable now, but she also knew that Northrend was far from a temperate climate. She had very little cold-weather gear; the only snowy territories she had ever visited were Winterspring and perhaps the Alterac Mountains. In both cases, she hadn't stayed very long. She had needed to purchase a pair of lined boots and gloves from one of the leatherworkers here in the village; unfortunately her legs and hands were the first parts of her to feel the cold. Hopefully Faquarl's cloak would keep her warm enough.

Faquarl. She still thought of the cloak as his. He had, after all, given it to her - nevermind the fact that he had done so in the Emerald Dream and not here on Azeroth. She wasn't sure exactly how she had managed to bring it across the veil between the worlds, but it lay upstairs with her things all the same. She glanced across the table at Ashenrock. Would Faquarl have been happy for her? Felora thought that perhaps he would.

Ashenrock was watching her from across the table, but she could practically see his brain wrapped around something else entirely. She could feel a buzzing of adrenaline in the back of her head, an anxious excitement that she knew was projecting from him. Felora reached out to cover his hand with her own, and he looked up.

"Relax," she said. "You're not alone."

Rock grimaced. "I know."

Felora traced his knuckles with her fingertips, her violet eyes dark. It suddenly dawned on her that she was very possibly the only audience to his emotions, save perhaps the Earthmother. He was always saving his strength for others; the Grin, his father - all had never seen the side of him that he seemed to reserve solely for her. She looked up at him.

"I'm as ready for this as I'm going to be," he suddenly said, standing from his chair and catching her gaze. She followed suit, brushing a stray lock of hair back from her face as she smiled at him.

"Let's go," he said quietly.

Demonstrike gazed out across the landscape. Danomolis stood beside him, examining the same terrain.

"My brother is in Northrend," Demonstrike said callously. Danomolis looked up at him, surprised.

"How do you know this?"

Demonstrike squinted his eyes and looked harder over the terrain. "I can feel it...the snow is but frozen water. It still conducts energy. My brother traverses these very lands that are all linked by this frozen blanket. A shaman can feel these things."

"You are a shaman no more! Remember your place! The damned fool continues his search for you. He aims to come and kill you," Danomolis snapped.

Demonstrike could hear the strain in his master's voice. He also knew that he was lying. Ashenrock would never kill him unless it was absolutely necessary. It hardly mattered, though. One way or the other, they would come face-to-face, and Demonstrike would put an end to his brother's life once and for all. "I am not afraid of my brother, master. If he is to come for me, then he will regret it."

"Continue your training. I have other things to attend to," Danomolis said, and rode off towards the keep.

Demonstrike sighed heavily. He couldn't think clearly anymore...everything was skewed. He had become more powerful than he could have imagined. He had sacrificed much for this power and any time that he tried to rationalize his feelings, his mind was filled with an unnatural anger and rage that kept him from putting those thoughts together.

He pulled the rune blade from its sheath and was about to continue his drills when he felt another familiar presence in the snow. "Jin'tal...but you're supposed to be dead..."

"THE FOOL CALLED MY BLUFF!"

Danomolis put his fist into the stone wall of his study, breaking off a rather large chunk. He knew full well that there was no way he could use the resources at his disposal to hunt down the Grin and destroy them. The Lich King would not be amused if Danomolis sent out his army on a matter of personal importance. He would have to move quickly to cut them off. Demonstrike was still far too vulnerable to suggestion. Danomolis feared that a full-tilt confrontation with his brother would lead him away from the grasp of the Lich King. He turned to a sentry.

"You. Gather up five more of your ilk and report back to me. I have a task for you."

Danomolis then pulled his pet raven from its cage and whispered to the bird, "Find the tauren who invades these lands. Quickly..."

The ride into Northrend had been smooth. Kirtan had apparently scouted a route well beforehand. Twice they had almost been discovered by Danomolis's agents but they had managed to avoid them.

"There!" Kirtan said as he pointed to a large stone building in the distance. "There you will find your brother and our destiny."

Rock shrugged off the falling snow that had accumulated on his shoulders. He glanced at Felora and then to his father. Both were fixated on the structure. It was an ominous building that loomed very large on the landscape, and seemed dark and forbidding with large spires that rose far into the dusk sky.

"From here we walk." Ashenrock said, as he hopped off his frostwolf. "It's only about a mile...we should be fine. Kirtan, do you know where we will enter?"

Kirtan nodded "Yes. There is an entrance along the western bank hidden from view. It's an emergency tunnel that I've seen them rarely use. If our luck holds then we should be able to enter undetected."

Jin'tal grimaced "Ya sure seem ta' know a lot about dis place, mon. Rock...ya sure he not be leadin' us into a trap?"

Rock shook his head without looking back at the troll. "If he wanted us dead, we'd be dead. Our plan was to face Demonaro on his terms...so here we are. Let's go."

Lord Danomolis sat slumped on his throne. He was dreaming up strategy for how to use his troops to invade Azeroth. His thoughts were interrupted when one of his guards burst through the door. "My Lord! We are under attack!"

Danomolis jumped from his seat. "What?!" he hissed. "Under attack by whom?!"

The guard moved his arm to reveal an arrow stuck under his arm. He collapsed without another word, though it wasn't necessary. Danomolis knew that it was Saltrock Pumastrike and that meddling warlock. His fear had been made a reality.

Salt let go another volley that took down the third and final guard. "That's the last one. Betrayed! Get moving!" Jin'tal nodded and slipped into the shadows. It would be up to him to find Demonaro while the rest of them fought their way into the throne room.

"The defenses here are very light," Kirtan said. "I would estimate that there may be only a few left, and they'll only be warriors like the others. I would venture a guess and say that Demonaro and Danomolis are the only Death Knights here."

Ashenrock assumed his ursine form and motioned for Felora to do the same. "We charge through them!" he yelled. Felora took her bear form and joined at Rock's side. They quickly made their way into the main foyer where the remaining guards had gathered. Rock wasted no time. He charged hard at the first guard he saw, sending him sprawling head first into the wall. Felora followed suit and tore down another with more grace and less ferocity.

Kirtan sent a wave of terror coursing through one of the approaching guards and Salt finished him off quickly. The final two guards were stunned and not quite sure what to do. They spun around wildly trying to figure out where the next blow would come from. Their questions were answered with a flurry of blows. Ashenrock had assumed his cat form and snuck up behind them. He tore the first guard's throat from his body with a single swipe. He then quickly reverted back to his bear form and crushed the second guard under his weight.

Felora watched in shocked awe as Ashenrock attacked the guards. It had been a long time since she'd seen him fight with such feral aggression. Salt, too, was a bit taken aback by his son's absolute measures.

Rock shifted back to his tauren form and walked to the throne room door, a wildfire still burning in his eyes. "TEAR IT OPEN!"

Kirtan protested "Wait! I must prepare for this fight with Danomolis if we are to survive. Patience, druid."

Felora approached Ashenrock and placed her hand on his arm. Her touch seemed to instantly snap him back to focus. He looked into her eyes and exhaled deeply. "Yes, of course," he said. "Do what you need to do. Father...I need Tycho and Mirage to protect Kirtan. If he loses his concentration then we lose the fight."

Kirtan called forth his voidwalker, Klyth. "You will protect me! Do not engage the enemy unless they are on me! Do you understand?" Klyth nodded slowly at his master. Kirtan closed his eyes and breathed deep. He began chanting softly and a green haze began to form around him.

Danomolis listened to the commotion outside of his throne room. He'd heard the roars of a dire bear, the screaming of his own guards, and then the gruff voice of a tauren yelling something incomprehensible. He now waited with his sword in hand, ready for the intruders to make their entrance. It didn't come. He waited for a minute more and then relaxed his position a bit.

"What are those fools waiting for?" he grumbled. It was then that he fell to one knee as his strength left him. He regained his composure slowly, still feeling drained and weak. "No!" he murmured. "The warlock has figured it out!"

Demonstrike's head began to swim. He dropped his blade and grabbed at his head.

"What is happening?" he stammered. Suddenly a figure emerged from the shadows. Sensing that Demonstrike was drained, Jin'tal revealed himself to his old friend. "Ey there, Blanc. Feelin' fine?" he mocked.

Demonstrike rose to his feet, quickly adjusting to his lost strength. "They told me you were dead. A pity that they were wrong. You should have killed me on that mountain, Betrayed, because today will mark the true end of you."

Jin'tal laughed. "Ya couldn't do da job then...I be doubtin' that ya could do it now."

Demonstrike grunted as he struggled to throw the runeblade at Jin'tal. It fell just short of the troll landing with a heavy clang. He grimaced as he realized the extent of his disability. Jin'tal just smiled and began to walk toward the stairs. "Come now, Blanc. It be time ya be seein' yer family."

"Ashenrock is a fool to meet me here. This is not a proper place to bury him."

Jin'tal looked back at him. "You be da fool, old friend. Ya got more ta worry `bout then just yer brother." He disappeared down the stairwell with Demonstrike following slowly behind.

Kirtan was in full meditation with the mystical haze pulsing and glowing around him. Ashenrock knew that the time was right. "Dad! Help me break through this thing."

Salt ran over and together they started to slowly break through the door that led to Danomolis's throne room. Felora pitched in to help, taking turns hurling her massive, ursine form at the wooden barrier. Finally on Ashenrock's last attempt the shattered to reveal the occupant waiting for them.

"So you have chosen this day to be your last, have you? Your warlock sapped a bit of my strength, but you'll soon learn just how powerful I am." Danomolis jumped high into the air, swinging his runeblade high above his head. Ashenrock barely managed to get out of his way as he came crashing down while slamming the blade into the floor where Ashenrock had just been.

Rock quickly took on his cat form and pounced onto the back of the death knight while tearing large chunks out of his rear armor. Salt unloaded a barrage of arrows that somehow Danomolis was able to dodge as he wrangled the druid from his back and tossed him across the room.

Ashenrock landed hard but was able to regain his footing quickly. Felora was fast to soothe his wounds and her curing touch only invigorated him more. He assumed his bear form and charged at the hulking tauren, pinning him against the stone wall. He pressed his attack swiping and mauling at his foe, each attack landing with heavy precision. Danomolis was obviously weaker than he wanted to let on, but even in this weakened state he was a powerful foe to contend with. The death knight summoned some of his remaining strength and picked up the bear lifting him helplessly over his head. Salt took the opportunity to land another three arrows into the space between his padded armor. In his rage, Danomolis hurled Ashenrock at his father. Salt tried to dodge but ended up taking his son's full weight in a tremendous blow. Rock quickly leapt off of the elder tauren.

"Dad!" Salt was out cold. "Felora! See what you can do about that!" Ashenrock cried as he turned to face Danomolis.

Danomolis coughed up blood as he laughed, one of the arrows still lodged in his chest. "One down," he said wickedly. "Give up, Ashenrock. You cannot take your brother from me." He picked up his sword and steadied himself with a new resolve. Ashenrock simply looked at him, clenched his teeth, and prepared to attack.

“He’s breathing, Rock, but his old wounds have reopened. I need time to heal him.” Felora said.

Rock looked down at her. “Concentrate on keeping him alive as long as you can. I’m going to end this.”

It was then that Ashenrock saw Danomolis fall to his knees again in obvious pain...he was disoriented. Jin’tal appeared from the shadows. “He be sapped, take im down!”

Ashenrock assumed his bear form and charged hard at his enemy. He roared as he approached Danomolis, looking him in the eyes. Suddenly Danomolis smiled and shifted his hands. There was nothing that Ashenrock could do to stop himself. Danomolis angled the runeblade at his aggressor and it punctured Ashenrock’s left side and drive through his back.

Felora screamed.

Ashenrock shifted out of his bear form, clutching the hilt of the blade as he felt it pierce him. He looked up at Danomolis, then back to Felora. He couldn’t speak and he started to feel sick. He reached an arm out toward Felora as he collapsed on the ground.

Felora couldn’t breathe. This couldn’t be happening. As she rose to her feet to confront Danomolis, she was consumed by pain and suffering as the death knight cast a debilitating spell. Felora fell to her knees and could only watch as the Death Knight turned to meet the charging Jin’tal. The poor troll was could do nothing to stop the power and fury of Danomolis’ swift and brutal blow to his chest. The Betrayed fell hard to the floor.

Ashenrock slowly rose to his feet and took in the landscape. He was in Mulgore. A gentle breeze washed over the endless fields like waves lapping a coastline. There was no one else in sight. He could smell the morning dew burning off under the heat of the newly risen sun. He felt at peace and felt no pain at all. He reached down at his side, where the sword had pierced him to find that the wound was gone.

“Am I dead?” he said to himself. “Why have I not gone on into the Dream?”

He walked a bit through the fields, trying to get a bearing on which way to go when he heard a soothing and familiar voice.

“You will not find your way home that way, my son.”

Ashenrock’s eyes swelled with tears. “Mother,” he said. “Have I died? Why can’t I see you?”

“I am but a link to the past, my son. I have been granted the opportunity to steer you away from death and help you bring your brother back from the brink of insanity.”

“You both need to act now, before it’s too late!” The heavy, booming voice was Kirtan’s.

Although he was in heavy meditation, his voidwalker shared what he saw with Kirtan. Damn it, he thought to himself. He could hear Ashenrock and his mother speaking through the planes and voids he channeled this moment. Sindall understood.

“Warlock,” she said. “Demonaro has just seen the result of this fight. I need you to break his mental bond with Danomolis!”

“I understand, my dear,” he replied. He dug deep within himself and found the extra energy he needed to amplify his field.

Demonstrike finally reached the hallway and surveyed the scene. His brother and his father lay motionless on the floor while his friends convulsed in pain. Danomolis stood defiant clutching his blade, preparing himself to end the fight for good. Danomolis noticed his pupil enter the room.

“Good! Demonstrike! Finish off the warlock. He is the one blocking our power – destroy him!”

Demon could do nothing but act on his master’s words. He summoned a bit of strength and began to make his way towards Kirtan. Tycho roared loudly and planted himself in front of the warlock, ready to protect him. Demon looked hard at his father’s companion. “Tycho...step aside...there has been enough blood here today.”

Danomolis scowled at his student. “Show no mercy! Kill what stands in your way!”

As Demon reached for his blade, he suddenly noticed the warlock open his eyes. They were on fire and burning their gaze at him. The field around the warlock intensified.

“Follow this evil no more, my son.” His mother’s voice came from the lips of the warlock. “Free yourself! Live your own life once more!”

Demonaro felt as though someone was lifting a curtain from his mind. He blinked a few times to clear the cobwebs. “Mother!”

He turned his attention to his master who at this point had buckled over in pain as the warlock’s field grew stronger. Demonaro was free from his master’s torment, and he finally saw the battle for what it was. He lifted his runeblade and walked over to Danomolis.

“You made me hate my own family...you turned me into a monster.”

Danomolis conjured a smile. “No. Your hate was pure. I only taught you how to use it. You could have been our most powerful ally.”

Demonaro lifted the rune blade above his head and prepared to deliver the final blow.

Danomolis looked up at his student and whispered. “You will live with your misery and this curse forever. You will live with the shame of your hatred. You will live knowing that your actions are what have brought these events to unfold.”

Demonaro looked down at him.

“At least I will live to make amends.” He finished his sentence by severing Danomolis’s head from his body.

Ashenrock sat on a hill overlooking the mountains in the distance when he started to feel very tired.

“Son. Your time here is coming to an end. You must return to your plane and live the rest of your life. These are the things that shape who you are. Your brother will be stronger because of this.”

“Mom, what of Dad?” Ashenrock said, remembering suddenly that Salt had also been hurt.

“Don’t worry, dear. He’ll see you when you get back. I love you, my son. Don’t forget that.”

The world grew dark and Ashenrock felt himself slipping into the abyss.

“I love you too, mom.”

His eyes shot open and there were Demonaro and Salt kneeling over him with tears in their eyes. Felora dropped to her knees beside him and Ashenrock pulled her into the circle of his arms. Her eyes were tightly closed as she clung to him.

“She saved us all.” Demonaro said as he smiled down at his older brother. Ashenrock smiled back and sighed in relief. They would finally be able to mend.