

Rise of the Horde

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My name is Thrall

The word means "slave" in the human tongue, and the story behind the naming is a long one, best left for another time. By the grace of the spirits and the blood of heroes before me that runs in my veins, I have become Warchief of my people, the orcs, and the leader of a group of races known as the Horde. How this came to be, too, is another tale. The one I wish to set to parchment now, before those who lived it pass to dwell with the honorable ancestors, is the story of my father and those who believed in him; and of those who betrayed him and indeed, all our people.

What might have become of us had these events not unfolded, not even the wise shaman Drek'Thar can say. The paths of Fate are many and varied, and no sane being should ever venture down the deceptively pleasant one of "if only" What happened, happened; my people must shoulder both the shame and the glories of our choices.

This is the tale not of the Horde as it exists today, a loose organization of orc, tauren, forsaken, troll, and blood elf, but of the rise of the very first Horde. Its birth, like that of any infant, was marked by blood and pain, and its harsh cries for life meant death to its enemies....

PROLOGUE

The power the stranger radiated swirled in glorious hues and vibrations, flowing like a cape behind him, encircling his mighty head with light like a crown. The voice was audible in both the ears and the mind, and raced along the blood like a sweet song long forgotten and now suddenly recalled.

What he offered was tempting, was exciting, and made the heart ache with yearning. But still, but still. . . there was something. . .

When he had gone, the leaders of the eredar turned to one another and spoke softly, the words intended for their minds alone.

"It is little enough to ask, for what he offers us," said the first. He stretched, in the physical world and in the metaphysical one, sending forth echoes of his strength.

"Such power," murmured the second, lost in thought. He was the elegant one, the beautiful one, and his essence was glorious and radiant. 'And he speaks the truth. What he showed us *will* come to pass. No one can lie in such a telling."

The third was silent. What the second had said was true. The method by which this powerful being had demonstrated the truth of what he offered could not be falsified, they all knew that. Still, this entity, this . . . *Sarger*as . . . there was something about him that Velen disliked.

Velen's fellow leaders were also his friends. He was particularly close to Kil'jaeden, the most powerful and decisive of the three. Friends they had been down the years that had slipped by unnoticed by beings beyond the reach of time. That Kil'jaeden was inclined to accept the offer carried more weight with Velen than Archimonde's opinion, which, though usually sound, could occasionally be swayed by appeals to his vanity.

Velen thought again of the image shown to them by Sarger^{as}. Worlds for them to conquer, and more importantly, to explore and investigate; for above all, the eredar were curious. For beings so powerful, knowledge was what meat and drink were to lesser beings, and Sarger^{as} offered them a tantalizing glimpse into what could be theirs if they would only . . .

Only swear their loyalty to him.

Only pledge the same for their people.

"As usual, our Velen is the cautious one," said Archimonde. The words could have been a compliment; instead, they struck Velen as condescending. He knew what Archimonde wanted, and Velen knew the other viewed his hesitancy as nothing more than an obstacle to what he, Archimonde, craved at this moment. Velen smiled.

"Yes, I am the cautious one, and sometimes my caution has saved us as much as your decisiveness, Kil'jaeden, and your instinctive impetuosity, Archimonde."

Both of them laughed, and for a moment Velen was warmed by their affection. Then they quieted, and he sensed that they, at least, had already made up their minds. Velen felt his heart sink as he watched them go, hoping that he would make the right decision.

The three of them had always worked well together, their diverse personalities serving to balance one another. The result was harmony and peace for their people. He knew that Kil'jaeden and Archimonde truly wanted what was best not only for themselves, but for those they led. He shared that sentiment, and always before, they had reached agreement on such things.

Velen frowned. Why did the confident, appealing Sarger^{as} unsettle him so? The others were obviously inclined to accept the offer. Sarger^{as} had told them that the eredar were exactly what he had been searching for. A strong, passionate, proud people, who would serve him and advance a cause that would bring all worlds, everywhere, together. He would enhance them, he said. He would change them, make them better, give them gifts that the universe had never before seen, for indeed, the universe had never before brought together the powers that Sarger^{as} claimed and the uniqueness that was the eredar. And what Sarger^{as} had told them would indeed come to pass.

And yet. and yet...

Velen went to the temple, where he had often gone before when troubled. Others were there this night, sitting in a circle around the single pillar in the room that bore the precious ata'mal crystal. The artifact was ancient, so ancient that none among the eredar could remember its origins, any more than they could remember their own. Legend had it that it was a gift bestowed upon them long ago. The crystal had enabled them to expand both their mental abilities and their knowledge of the universe's mysteries. It

had been used in the past for healing, for conjuration, and, as Velen hoped to use it tonight, for visions. Respectfully, he went forward and touched the triangular crystal. The warmth of it, like a small animal nestled in his hand, calmed him. He breathed deeply, letting the familiar power penetrate him, then dropped his hand and returned to the circle.

Velen closed his eyes. He opened every part of him that could receive, body and mind and magical intuition. At first, what he saw seemed only to confirm what Sargeran had promised. He saw himself standing with Archimonde and Kil'jaeden, lords not only of their own noble and proud people but of countless other worlds. Power shimmered around them, power that Velen knew would be as intoxicating as any liquor he might sip. Shining cities were theirs, along with the inhabitants of those cities, prostrating themselves before the three with cheers and cries of adoration and loyalty. Technology such as Velen had never dreamed of awaited his exploration. Tomes in strange tongues were translated for him, revealing magic hitherto unimagined and untold. It was glorious, and his heart swelled.

He turned to look at Kil'jaeden, and his old friend smiled. Archimonde put a friendly hand on his shoulder.

Then Velen looked down at himself.

And cried out in horror.

His body was now gargantuan, but twisted and distorted. Smooth blue skin was now black and brown and gnarled, like some once-noble tree disfigured by disease. Light radiated from him, true, but not the pure light of powerful, positive energy, but a sickly green. Frantically he turned to behold his friends, his fellow leaders of the eredar. They, too, had been transformed. They, too, retained nothing of what they had been but were now—

Man'ari.

The eredar word for something horrifically *wrong*, something twisted and unnatural and defiled slammed into his mind with the force of a shining sword. He cried out again and his knees buckled. Velen pulled his gaze away from his tormented body, searching for the peace and prosperity and knowledge Sargeran had promised him. He beheld only atrocities. Where before him had been an adoring crowd, now he saw only mutilated corpses or bodies that, like his, like Kil'jaeden's, like Archimonde's, had been transformed into monsters. Among the dead and the distorted capered beings that Velen had never before seen. Strange dogs with tentacles sprouting from their backs. Tiny, twisted figures that danced and capered and laughed at the carnage. Deceptively beautiful creatures, their wings outstretched behind them, who surveyed what had been wrought with delight and pride. Where their cloven hooves fell, the earth died. Not just the grass, but the soil itself; all that gave life was obliterated, sucked dry.

This, then, was what Sargeran planned to do to the eredar. This was the "enhancement" he had spoken of so glowingly. If Velen's people allied with Sargeran, they would become these monstrous things . . . these man'ari. And somehow Velen understood that what he was witnessing was not a single incident. It was not just this one world that would fall. It was not even a dozen, or a hundred, or a thousand.

If he threw his support behind Sargeran, everything would be destroyed. This legion of man'ari would keep moving forward, aided by Kil'jaeden and Archimonde and—may all that was good and pure help him—Velen. They would not stop until everything in existence was as scoured and blackened as this patch of ground that Velen viewed through blurred vision. Was Sargeran insane? Or, worse, did he understand this and still crave it? Blood and liquid fire poured over everything, rained down upon him, burning him and spattering him until he fell to the earth and wept.

The vision mercifully vanished, and Velen blinked, trembling. He was now alone in the temple, and the crystal glowed comfortingly. He was grateful for that balm.

It had not happened. Not yet.

What Sargeran had told them was indeed true. The eredar would be transformed, and their three leaders would be offered power, knowledge, domination . . . near-godhood.

And they would lose everything they held dear—would betray those they had vowed to protect—to do it.

Velen ran a hand across his face, relieved to find it damp only with sweat and tears and not the fire and blood of his vision. Not yet, anyway. Was it even possible to halt this, or to mitigate the destruction the legion wrought in any way?

The answer floated back to him, as reviving and sweet as a draft of dear water in a desert: *Yes.*

They came at once, responding to the emotion in his mental plea. It was but the matter of a few moments to brush their minds and let them see what he had seen, feel what he had felt. For a brief instant, he knew they shared his sentiments, and hope swelled within him. There was yet a chance—Archimonde frowned, "This is not a glimpse into the future that We can verify. It is only your hunch."

Velen stared at his old friend, then turned his eyes to Kil'jaeden. Kil'jaeden was not bound by his vanity as Archimonde was. He was decisive and wise....

'Archimonde is right," Kil'jaeden said smoothly. "There is no veracity here, only an image in your own mind."

Velen looked at him, pain welling inside him. Gently, sorrowfully, he detached his thoughts from theirs. Now, what was in his mind and heart stayed there. He would never again share it with these two who had once been like extensions of his own soul.

Kil'jaeden took the withdrawal as surrender, which was as Velen intended, and smiled as he placed a hand on Velen's shoulder.

"I do not want to give up what I know to be positive and good and true for what I fear might be unpleasant," he said. "Nor. I think, do you."

Velen could not risk a lie. He merely looked down and sighed. Once, Kil'jaeden and even Archimonde would have seen through such a feeble facade. But now, their thoughts were not on him. They were thinking about the apparently limitless power about to be bestowed upon them. It was too late to sway them. These two once-great beings were Sargeran's playthings; they were on their way to becoming man'ari. Velen knew with terrifying certainty that if they guessed that he was not with them, they would turn upon him with deadly consequences. He had to survive, if only to do what precious little he could to save his people from damnation and destruction.

So he nodded, but spoke nodding, and it was decided that the three leaders of the eredar would ally with the great Sargeran.

Archimonde and Kil'jaeden departed quickly to make the necessary preparations to welcome their new lord.

Velen grieved over his impotence. He wanted to save all of his people, as he had sworn to do, but he knew that was impossible.

Most would trust in Kil'jaeden and Archimonde, and follow them to their doom. But there were a few who thought as he did, who

would forsake everything merely upon his word. They would need to; their home world of Argus would shortly be destroyed, devoured by the madness of the demonic legion. Those who would survive would have to flee.

But... flee *where*?

Velen stared at the ata'mal crystal, despair flooding through him. Sarger was coming. There was no place on this world to hide from such a being. How, then, would he escape?

Tears blurred his vision as he gazed at the crystal. Surely it was his tears that made it seem to shimmer and pulse. Velen blinked. No ... it was no trick of the light seen through tears. The crystal was glowing, and before his shocked gaze, it rose slowly from its pedestal and floated until it was directly before him. *Touch it*, a voice in his head said softly. Trembling, awestruck, Velen reached out a strong blue hand, expecting to feel the familiar warmth of the quiescent prism.

Energy raced through him and he gasped. In intensity, it was almost as powerful as the dark energy that had surged through him in the vision. But this was as pure as that had been foul, as light as that had been dark, and Velen suddenly felt hope and strength well inside him.

The strange, glowing field about the ata'mal crystal grew, stretched upward, assumed a shape. Velen blinked, almost blinded by the radiance but not wanting to look away.

You are not alone, Velen of the eredar, the voice whispered to him. It was soothing, sweet, like the sound of flowing water and the rush of a summer wind. The radiance faded slightly, and hovering before Velen was a being unlike any he had ever seen. It seemed to be comprised of living light. Its center was a soft golden hue, the outer radius a glowing, soothing violet. Strange metallic-looking glyphs swirled around the center, calming and hypnotic, in a spiral dance of color and light. It continued to speak inside his mind, a sound that seemed to Velen to be light itself given voice.

We, too, have sensed the impending horrors about to befall this and other worlds. We strive to keep the balance, and what Sarger is planning will rip apart everything. Utter chaos and ruination will descend, and the things that are good and true and pure and holy will be lost beyond recovery.

Who . . . what . . . Velen could not even form the question in his mind, so swept away was he by this being's glory.

We are the Naaru, the radiant entity said. *You may call me ... K'ure.*

Velen's lips curved around the words, and as he whispered them aloud, "Naaru . . . K'ure . . .," he tasted the sweetness of them, as if speaking the names granted him some of their very essence.

This is where it all begins, K'ure continued. *We cannot stop it, for your friends have free will. But you have reached out with an anguished heart, to save what you can. And therefore, we will do what we can. We will save those of you whose hearts reject the horror of what Sarger offers.*

What do I do? Again tears filled Velen's eyes, tears of relief and joy this time.

Gather those who will listen to your wisdom. Go to the highest mountain in the land on the longest day of the year. Take the ata'mal crystal with you. Long, long ago, did we give it to you; it is how we will find you again. We will come and bear you away.

For a moment, a flicker of doubt, like a shadow flame, burned in Velen's heart. He had never even heard of such beings of light as the Naaru, and now this entity, this K'ure, was asking him to steal his people's most sacred object. They even claimed that it was *they* who had given it to the eredar in the first place! Perhaps Kil'jaeden and Archimonde had the right of it. Perhaps Velen's vision was nothing more than his fear manifesting itself.

But even as the twisting thoughts raced through his mind, he knew them to be the last vestiges of a brokenhearted yearning for everything to be as it once was, before things had changed so horribly ... before Sarger.

He knew what he had to do. and he bowed his head before the glorious, dancing being of light.

The first and most trusted ally that Velen summoned was Talgath, an old friend and one who had aided him in the past. All rested upon this friend, who would be able to move unwatched where Velen could not. Talgath was skeptical at first, but when Velen linked their minds and showed him the dark vision he had been granted, Talgath quickly agreed. Velen said nothing of the Naaru and their offer of aid, as he himself did not know what form that aid would take. He only assured Talgath that there was a way to escape that destiny, if Talgath trusted him.

The longest day of the year was drawing close. With all the discretion he could muster, while Archimonde and Kil'jaeden were obsessing over Sarger, Velen sent out tendrils of thought to those he trusted. Others were gathered by Talgath. coming to Velen's side in defense of themselves and their people. Velen then turned his attention to weaving the subtlest of magic webs about the two traitors he once held as dear friends, so that their attention was not caught by the frantic activity occurring just beyond their vision.

With startling speed and yet an agonizing slowness, an intricate web was created. When at last the day came, and the eredar who had chosen to follow Velen assembled atop the tallest mountain of their ancient world. Velen saw that their number was sickeningly small. They numbered only in the hundreds, these who were the only ones Velen truly trusted. He did not dare risk all by contacting those he thought would possibly turn against him.

Only a short time ago, Velen had taken the ata'mal crystal from its place. He had spent the last few days fabricating a false one, so that no alarm would be sounded when it was discovered missing. He had carved it from simple rock crystal with the utmost care, casting a glamour upon it so that it would glow. But it remained dead to the touch. If someone brushed this false crystal with his or her fingers, the theft would be revealed.

The true ata'mal crystal he now held close to his heart as he watched his people climbing the mountain, their strong legs and sure hooves finding easy purchase. Many had already arrived and looked at him expectantly, the question clear in their eyes if not on their lips. How, they were wondering, would they escape?

How indeed, Velen thought. For a moment he despaired, but then he recalled the radiant being who had linked its thoughts with his. They would come. He knew it. In the meantime, every moment that passed meant they were closer to being discovered. And so many were not yet here, not even Talgath.

Restalaan, another old and trusted friend, smiled at Velen. "They" will be here soon," he said reassuringly.

Velen nodded. More than likely, Restalaan was right. There had been no sign that his old friends and now enemies Kil'jaeden and Archimonde had been alerted to this outrageously bold plan. They had been far too consumed with anticipating their future power.

And yet, and yet.

The same deep instinct that had warned him to mistrust Sargeris now nagged at his mind. Something was not right. He realized he was pacing.

And there they were.

Talgath and several others had cleared a rise, smiling and waving, and Velen exhaled in relief. He started down to meet them when the crystal he held sent a powerful surge through his body. His blue fingers clenched tightly around the gem as his mind opened to its warning. Velen's knees buckled as the mental stench assaulted him.

Sargeris had already begun. He had already started creating his hideous legion, taking eredar who had been foolish or trusting enough to listen to Kil'jaeden and Archimonde and distorting them into the man'ari Velen had seen in his vision. There were thousands of man'ari of every physical description and ability, lying just beyond his sight and sensing. They were disguised, somehow. If he had not been holding the ata'mal crystal, he never would have sensed them until it was far, far too late.

It might already be too late.

He turned a shocked gaze to Talgath, suddenly aware that the taint was emanating from his old friend as well as from the multitude—the Legion—of monsters who lurked beyond his sight. A prayer, wrenched from the utter depths of his despairing soul, shivered up in his mind:

K'ure! Help us!

The man'ari were scrambling up the mountain now, sensing that they had been exposed and closing in like hungry predators for the kill. Except Velen knew that death would be preferable to what these distorted eredar would do to him and those who followed him. At his wit's end, Velen gripped the ata'mal crystal and thrust it upward to the sky.

As if the heavens themselves were cracking open, a pure shaft of radiant white light appeared. Its glory shone directly onto the crystalline prism, and before Velen's stunned gaze, splintered the white light into seven distinct rays of various hues. Pain stung Velen as the crystal he held shattered. The sharp edges sliced his fingers. He gasped and instinctively released the fractured crystal, watching enraptured as the pieces hovered in the air, each transforming itself into a perfect sphere, and taking on the seven radiant hues of the light that had once been a single, perfect shaft of pure white radiance. The seven crystals—red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo and violet—shot upward, then sped to form an enclosure of light around the frightened forms of the gathered eredar.

At that precise instant, Talgath raced toward him, naked loathing in his gaze. He slammed into the circle of multicolored lights as if into a stone wall and tumbled backward. Velen whirled and saw the man'ari descend, snarling, drooling, their claws scrabbling on a wall, made only of light, which yet protected Velen and his people.

A deep, thrumming sound raced along Velen's nerves, more felt than heard. He looked upward and on this day of wonders saw something that surpassed even the miracle of the seven stones of light. He beheld what looked at first like a descending star, so bright he almost could not bear looking upon it. As it drew closer, he saw that it was nothing so elusive as a star in the night skies, but a solid structure, its center as soft and round as the orbs, adorned with jutting, crystalline triangles. Velen wept openly as a mental touch brushed his mind:

I am here, as I promised I would be. Prepare to abandon this world. Prophet Velen.

Velen extended his arms upward, almost like a child begging a loving parent to be swept up into an affectionate embrace. The orb above him pulsed, and then Velen felt himself being lifted gently into the air. He floated upward, and saw that the others too were rising toward the . . . vessel? For such Velen now understood it to be, though it also vibrated with a living essence that he could not yet comprehend. In the midst of the quiet joy, Velen heard the shrieks and screams and bellows of the man'ari as their prey escaped. The base of the ship opened, and a few seconds later Velen found himself standing on something solid. He knelt on the floor, if such it could be called, and watched as the rest of his people floated toward safety. When the last one had arrived. Velen expected the door to close and this ship—this ship that was made of metal that was not metal, flesh that was not flesh, and what Velen suspected was the very essence of K'ure—to depart.

Instead, he felt a whisper in his mind: *The crystals— where there was one, there are seven. Recover them, for you will need them.*

Velen leaned over the opening and extended his hands. With shocking speed, the seven crystals surged upward toward him, striking his palms so hard he gasped. He gathered them close, ignoring the incredible heat they emanated, and threw himself backward. At once, the door disappeared as if it had never been present. Clutching the seven ata'mal crystals, his mind stretched so far he felt he was brushing the edge of madness. Velen hung suspended for an endless instant between hope and despair.

Had they done it? Had they escaped?

From his position at the head of the army. Kil'jaeden had an unobstructed view as the mountain was swarmed by his slaves. For a glorious moment, he tasted victory, almost as sweet as the hunger Sargeris had planted in his mind. Talgath had done his job well. It had only been pure luck that Velen had been holding the crystal at the moment of the onslaught; had he not, his body would be lying on the ground, torn into a handful of fleshy bits.

But Velen *had* been holding the ata'mal crystal, and he *had* been warned. Something had happened—some strange lights had sprung up protectively around the traitor, and something had come for them. Now as Kil'jaeden watched, the peculiar vessel shimmered and . . . disappeared.

He had escaped! Curse him, damn him, Velen had escaped!

The man'ari, whose delight had filled Kil'jaeden just seconds earlier, were now full of consternation and disappointment. He touched all of their minds; they knew nothing. What was this thing that had come to snatch Velen from Kil'jaeden's very grasp? Fear now shuddered through Kil'jaeden. His master would not be pleased with these developments.

"What now?" asked Archimonde. Kil'jaeden turned to look at his ally

"We find them," growled Kil'jaeden. "We find them and destroy them. Even if it takes a thousand years."

ONE

My name is Thrall. The word means "slave" in the human tongue, and the story behind the naming is a long one, best left for another time. By the grace of the spirits and the blood of heroes before me that runs in my veins, I have become Warchief of my people, the orcs, and the leader of a group of races known as the Horde. How this came to be, too, is another tale. The one I wish to set to parchment now, before those who lived it pass to dwell with the honorable ancestors, is the story of my father and those who believed in him; and of those who betrayed him and indeed, all our people.

What might have become of us had these events not unfolded, not even the wise shaman Drek'Thar can say. The s of Fate are many and varied, and no sane being should ever venture down the deceptively pleasant one of "if only. What happened, happened; my people must shoulder both the shame and the glories of our choices.

This is the tale not of the Horde as it exists today, a loose organization of ore, tauren, forsaken, troll, and blood elf, but of the rise of the very first Horde. Its birth, like that of any infant, was marked by blood and pain, and its harsh cries for life meant death to its enemies.

For such a grim and violent tale, it begins peacefully enough, amid the rolling hills and valleys of a verdant land called Draenor... .

The heart-beat rhythm of the drums lulled the younger ores to sleep, but Durotan of the Frostwolf clan was wide awake. He lay with the others on the hard-packed dirt floor of the sleeping tent. A generous padding of straw and a thick clefthoof pelt protected him from the chill of the bone-cold earth. Even so, he felt the vibrations of the drumming travel up through the earth and into his body, as his ears were caressed by the ancient sound. How he longed to go out and join them!

Durotan would have another summer before he would be able to participate in the *Om 'riggor*, the rite of adulthood. Until that much-anticipated event, he would have to accept being shunted off with the children into this large group tent, while the adults sat around the fire and talked of things that were doubtless mysterious and significant.

He sighed and shifted on the pelt, it was not fair.

The ores did not fight among themselves, but neither were they particularly sociable. Each clan kept to itself, with its own traditions, styles and manner of dress, stories, and shaman. There were even variations of dialect that differed so much that some ores could not understand one another unless they spoke the common tongue. They almost seemed as different to one another as the other sentient race who shared the bounty of the field, forest, and streams, the blue-skinned, mysterious draenei. Only twice a year, spring and autumn, did all the orc clans come together as they were doing now, to honor that time when day and night were the same length.

The festival had officially started last night at moon-rise, though ores had been gathering at this spot for several days now. The Kosh'harg celebration had been held on this sacred spot in the land the ores called Nagrand, "Land of Winds," which lay in the benevolent shadow of the "Mountain of Spirits," Oshu'gun, for as long as anyone could remember. While ritual challenges and combat were not unusual during the festival, true anger or violence had never erupted here. When tempers flared, as they sometimes did when so many were gathered together, the shaman encouraged the parties involved to work it out peaceably, or else they were to leave the holy area.

The land in this place was lush and fertile and calming. Durotan sometimes wondered if the land was tranquil because of the willingness of the ores to bring peace to it, or if the ores were peaceful because the land was so serene. He often wondered such things, and kept them to himself, for he heard no one else voicing such odd ideas.

Durotan sighed quietly, his thoughts racing, his heart thumping in answering rhythm to the voice of the drums outside. Last night had been wonderful, stirring Durotan's soul. When the Pale Lady cleared the dark line of trees, in Her waning phase but still bright enough to cast a powerful light that was reflected on the blankets of white snow, a cheer had gone up from the throat of every one of the thousands of orcs assembled—wise elders, warriors in their prime, even children held in their mother's strong arms. The wolves, both companions and mounts to the orcs, had joined in with exultant howls. The sound shivered along Durotan's veins as the drumming did now, a deep, primal cry of salutation to the white orb who commanded the night skies. Durotan had glanced around to behold a sea of powerful beings raising their brown hands, silvered in the light, to the Pale Lady, all with one focus. If any ogre had been foolish enough to attack, it would have fallen in a matter of heartbeats beneath the weapons of this vast sea of single-minded warriors.

Then had come feasting. Dozens of beasts had been slain earlier in the season, before the winter had set in, and dried and smoked in preparation for the event. Bonfires had been kindled, their warm light merging with the fey, white glow of the Lady, and the drumming had begun and had not stopped since.

He, like all the other children—lying on his clefthoof pelt, Durotan sniffed dismissively at the term—had been permitted to stay up until he had eaten his fill and the shaman had departed. The shaman of every clan left, once the opening feast had been consumed, to climb Oshu'gun, which stood careful watch over their festivities, enter its caverns, and be advised by the spirits and their ancestors.

Oshu'gun was impressive even from a distance. Unlike other mountains, which were irregular and rough in their shape, Oshu'gun erupted from the ground with the precision and sharp point of a spearhead. It looked like a giant crystal set into the earth, so clean were its lines and so brightly did it glisten in the sun- and moonlight. Some legends told that it had fallen from the sky hundreds of years ago, and it was so unusual that Durotan thought those tales might be right.

Interesting though Oshu'gun might be, Durotan always thought it a bit unfair that the shaman had to stay there for the entire Kosh'harg festival. The poor shaman, he thought, missed all the fun. But then again, he suspected, so did the children.

During the day, there were hunts and game playing and retelling of the heroics of the ancestors. Each clan had its own stories, and so in addition to the familiar tales Durotan had heard as a youngling, there were new and exciting adventures to listen to.

Entertaining as these were, and as much as Durotan enjoyed them, he burned to know what the adults discussed after the children were drowsing in the sleeping tent, after their bellies were stretched full of good food and pipes had been smoked and various brews had been shared.

He could stand it no longer. Quietly, Durotan sat up, his ears straining for any sounds to indicate that anyone else was awake. He heard nothing, and after a long minute, he got to his feet and began to move slowly toward the entrance.

It was a long, slow progression in the darkened tent. Sleeping children of all ages and sizes were sprawled everywhere in the tent, and one wrong move could awaken them. His heart racing with excitement at his daring, Durotan stepped carefully between the only faintly glimpsed shapes, placing each large foot with the delicacy of the long-legged marsh birds.

It seemed to take an eternity before Durotan finally reached the flap. He stood, trying to calm his breathing, reached out—

And touched a large, smooth-skinned body standing right beside him. He jerked his hand back with a surprised hiss.

"What are you doing?" Durotan whispered.

"What are *you* doing?" the other orc shot back. Abruptly Durotan grinned at how foolish they sounded.

"Same thing you are," Durotan replied, his voice still soft. All about them, the others slept on. "We can either keep talking about it or do it."

Durotan could tell by the size of the faint shape in front of him that the orc was a large male, probably close to his own age. He couldn't place the scent or the voice, so it wasn't one of the Frostwolf clan. It was a daring thought—not only to do something so forbidden as to leave the sleeping tent without permission, but to do so in the company of an orc not of his own clan.

The other orc hesitated, the same thoughts no doubt running through his head. "Very well," he said at last. "Let's do it."

Durotan reached out again in the darkness, his fingers brushing the hide of the flap and curling around its edge. The two orc youths pulled back the flap and stepped out into the frosty night.

Durotan turned to look at his companion. The other orc was brawnier than he, and stood a bit taller. Durotan was the largest of his age in his clan, and unused to others being taller than he. It was a bit disquieting. His ally in mischief turned to look at him, and Durotan felt himself being assessed. The other nodded, apparently satisfied with what he saw.

They did not risk words. Durotan pointed to a large tree close to the tent, and silently the two headed for it. For a moment that was probably not as long as it felt, they were in the open, exposed to any adult who chose that instant to turn his head and see diem, but they were not spotted. Durotan felt as exposed as if he were in bright sunlight, so powerful was the moon's glow reflected off the crystalline snow. And surely the sound of the snow squeaking beneath their feet was as loud as the bellow of an enraged ogre. At last they reached the tree and sank down behind it. Durotan's breath misted as he finally exhaled. The other orc turned to him and grinned.

"I am Orgrim, line of Telkar Doomhammer, of the Blackrock clan," the youth said in a proud whisper,

Durotan was impressed. While the Doomhammer line was not the line of a chieftain, it was well known and honored.

"I am Durotan, line of Garad, of the Frostwolf clan," Durotan replied. Now it was Orgrim's turn to react to the fact that he was sitting with the heir to another clan. He nodded approvingly.

For a moment they simply sat, reveling in the glory of their daring. Durotan began to feel the cold and wetness seep through his thick hide cape, and got to his feet. Again, he pointed at the gathering, and Orgrim nodded. They carefully peered around the tree, straining to listen. Surely now they would hear the mysteries for which they both hungered. Over the crackling sound of the huge bonfire and the deep, steady beating of the drums, voices floated to them.

"The shaman have been kept busy this winter with the fever," Durotan's father, Garad, said. He reached down and petted the huge white wolf who was drowsing by the fire. The beast, its white coat distinguishing it as a Frostwolf, made a soft crooning sound of pleasure. "Soon as one of the younglings gets cured, another falls ill."

"I am ready for spring, myself," another male said, standing and tossing another log on the fire. "It's been harsh with the animals, too. When we were preparing for the festival, we had a hard time finding clefthooves."

"Klaga makes a delicious soup from the bones, but she refuses to tell us what herbs she uses," a third said, glaring at a female who was nursing an infant. The female in question, presumably Klaga, chuckled.

"The only one who'll get that recipe is this little one when she comes of age," Klaga replied, and grinned.

Durotan's jaw dropped. He turned his head to stare at Orgrim, who wore a similar expression of stunned dismay. *This* was what was so important, so secret that the children were forbidden to leave the tent to listen to it? Discussions of fevers and soups?

In the bright light of the moon, Durotan had no trouble seeing Orgrim's face clearly. The other youth's brows drew together in a frown.

"You and I can come up with something more interesting than this, Durotan," he said in a low, gruff voice.

Durotan grinned and nodded. He was certain of it.

The festival lasted for two more days. During the daytime and at night, when the two would sneak out together, they challenged each other to different contests of skill. Racing, climbing, strength, sure-footedness— everything they could think of. And each defeated the other almost as if they had planned on taking turns. When, on the last day, Orgrim loudly called for a fifth challenge to break the stalemate, something inside Durotan made him speak.

"Let us not perform common, ordinary challenges," Durotan said, wondering where the words came from even as he uttered diem,

"Let us do something truly different in the history of our people."

Orgrim's bright gray eyes gleamed as he leaned forward. "What do you suggest?"

"Let us be friends, you and I."

Orgrim's heavily muscled jaw dropped. "But—we are not of the same clan!" he said, in a voice that indicated that Durotan might have proposed a friendship between the great black wolf and the mild talbuk.

Durotan waved a dismissive hand. "We are not enemies," he said. "Look around you. The clans come together twice a year and there is no harm in it."

"But . . . my father says it is precisely *because* we come together so seldom that the peace is kept," Orgrim continued. His brow knotted with concern.

Disappointment colored Durotan's words with bitterness. "Very well. I thought you braver than the others, Orgrim of the Doomhammer line, but you are no better than they—timid and shy and unwilling to see beyond what has always been done to what is possible."

The words had come from his heart, but had Durotan calculated them and honed them for weeks, he could not have chosen better. Orgrim's brown face flushed and his eyes snapped.

"I am no coward!" he snarled. "I back down from no challenge, you upstart Frostwolf!"

He sprang on Durotan then, knocking the smaller orc off his feet, and the two pummeled each other until the shaman needed to be brought in for healing and lecturing on the inappropriateness of fighting in a sacred space.

"Impetuous boy," scolded the head shaman of the Frostwolves, an ancient orc female they called "Mother" Kashur. "You are not too old to be beaten as a disobedient child, young Durotan!"

The shaman who tended Orgrim muttered similar displeased sounds. But even as blood streamed freely from his nose, and as he watched the shaman heal a wicked gash on Orgrim's brown torso, Durotan grinned. Orgrim caught his gaze and grinned back.

The challenge had begun, the final challenge, so much more important than races or lifting stones, and neither was willing to admit defeat ... to say that a friendship between two youths of different clans was wrong. Durotan had a feeling that this particular challenge would end only when one of them was dead ... and perhaps not even then.

TWO

I remember when we first encountered the tauren. I remember Cairne Bloodhoof's deep voice and calm face. I remember sitting out the ground in a tent that could be broken down and erected with startling speed, and feeling oddly at home. We smoked pipes, shared food and drink, felt the drumming in our bones, and talked. The tauren seemed to me bestial at first, but there was wisdom and humor in them, and by the time the first round of negotiations had been conducted, I knew that the ores had a rare ally in these half-bovine beings.

Night had fallen while we spoke, a soft night befitting this beautiful land. We left the tent and gazed up at stars too numerous to count, a sweet wind caressing our faces. I turned to Drek'Thar, to ask for his wisdom. To my astonishment I saw tears on his face, glinting in the moon's light.

"This is how we used to be, my chieftain," he said in a broken voice. He lifted his arms and tilted his head back, calling the wind to embrace him and dry the tears on his strong green face. "Close to the earth. Close to the spirits. Strong in the hunt, gentle with the younglings, knowing our place in the world to be right and just. Understanding the balance of taking and giving. The only magic the tauren practice is the good, clean magic of the earth, and the land reflects that, the way Draenor once reflected our connection."

I thought of the tauren's request for aid infighting their enemy, the vile, filthy centaur.

"Yes . . . I feel for them. It will be good to be able to help them," I said.

Drek'Thar laughed, turning his blind eyes to me and seeing me more clearly than anyone with sight could.

"Oh, my young Thrall," he said, chuckling still, "you do not yet understand. They will help us."

Durotan ran as fast as his powerful young legs could carry him. His breath came fast, and sweat dappled his reddish-brown skin, but he forced himself to keep going. It was summer, and his large, flat feet were bare. The grass was soft beneath him as he ran, and occasionally he would step on the bright purple blossom of a dassanflower. The scent from the bruised plant traditionally cultivated for healing wafted up like a blessing, inspiring him to run even farther, even faster.

Now he was on the fringe of the Terokkar forest, pushing forward into its cool, gray-green depths. He had to watch out for the twining roots of the elegant trees lest he trip over them, and his pace perforce slowed. Soft lights glowed in the green heart of this forest, and the calm it exuded was at sharp odds with Durotan's need for triumph. He increased his pace, leaping over fallen tree trunks covered with moss, ducking under low-slung branches with the grace of a talbuk. His black hair, long and thick and spilling all the way to the middle of his back, flew behind him. His lungs burned and his legs cried out for him to cease, but he ground his teeth and ignored the pleas from his body. He was a Frostwolf, the heir to clan chieftaincy, and no Blackrock would possibly—Durotan heard a fair approximation of a war cry behind him and his heart sank. Orgrim's voice, like Durotan's, was still sinking toward the deep bellow that marked an adult male, but even Durotan had to admit it was already impressive. He willed his legs to pump even harder, but they felt as heavy and unmoving as if they had been carved of stone. He watched in dismay out of the corner of his eye as Orgrim came into his field of vision and then, with a final spurt of energy, raced past him.

The Blackrock orc extended his arm and lunged, managing to hit the tree trunk in the clearing that they had decided represented the goal of the race right before Durotan did. Orgrim kept going for several more strides, as if his powerful legs, once put into motion, were reluctant to stop. Durotan's legs had no such problems, and the heir to the Frostwolf clan fell forward, barely catching himself. He lay facedown in the cool, sweet-smelling mossy earth, gasping for air, knowing he should sit up, knowing he should challenge Orgrim again, but too exhausted to do anything other than lie on the forest floor and recover.

Beside him, he heard Orgrim doing likewise, and then the other orc youth rolled over on his back and began to laugh. Durotan joined in. The birds and small animals that inhabited the Terokkar forest were silent as two ores uttered sounds of mirth that, Durotan thought as his lips curled past his still-forming tusks, probably sounded more than a little like the fierce war cries that presaged a hunt.

"Ha," grunted Orgrim, sitting up and punching Durotan in a playful manner. "It is little effort to beat a stripling like you. Durotan."

"You have so much muscle your brain is starved," Durotan retorted. "Skill is as important as power. But the Blackrock clan wouldn't know about such things."

There was no malice in their banter. Their clans had been troubled at first by the friendship between the two youths, but Durotan's stubborn argument—that just because something had never been done before did not mean it could not be done—amused and impressed the leaders of both clans. It helped that both the Frostwolves and the Blackrocks were both traditionally even-tempered

orc clans. Had Durotan proposed such a friendship with a Warsong clan member or a Bonechewer, for example, known for their intense clan pride and distrust of others, the little flame of friendship would have died quickly. So the elders watched. and waited for the novelty to fade and for each youth to return to his rightful place and keep the familiar order that had been established for... as long as anyone could recall.

They were disappointed.

The frost of late winter had given way to spring and now the full blowsy warmth of summer, and the friendship continued.

Durotan knew that they were watched, but as long as no one interfered, he did not object.

Durotan closed his eyes and let his fingers spread over the moss. The shaman said that all things had a life, a power, a spirit. They were deeply involved with the spirits of the elements—earth, air, fire, and water—and the Spirit of the Wilds—and claimed they could sense the life force in earth and even seemingly dead stone. All Durotan could feel was the cool, slightly moist sensation of moss and soil beneath his palms.

The earth shuddered. His eyes snapped open.

He bolted upright, his hand automatically going for the spiked club that he constantly carried. Orgrim preferred a heavy metal and wood hammer, the traditional weapon of the Blackrocks and a simplified version of the legendary hammer that would one day come to him. The two boys exchanged glances. They did not need to speak to communicate. Was the thing that made the earth shake so an enormous clefthoof, with its shaggy pelt that made magnificent blankets and rich red flesh that could feed almost the whole clan, or was it something more dangerous?

What *did* live in the Terokk forest, anyway? They had been here only once before....

They got to their feet in unison, their small dark eyes peering into the now ominous-seeming dark corners of the close-growing trees, searching for whatever had made the noise.

Boom. The earth shuddered again. Durotan's heart started to beat faster. If it was a small clefthoof, maybe they could take it down together and share the spoils with both clans. He glanced over at Orgrim and saw the other's eyes gleam with excitement.

Boom.

Boom.

Crash.

Both youths gasped and then retreated as the noise came closer. A tree only a few yards away from them seemed to splinter before their eyes. The thing that had made the noise and so casually dispatched an ancient tree suddenly came into view.

It was enormous, it carried a club as big as they were, and it was most definitely not a clefthoof.

And it had seen them.

It opened its mouth and bellowed something that was vaguely intelligible, but Durotan wasn't about to waste time figuring out what it had said.

Their thoughts as one, the two boys turned and fled.

Now Durotan wished desperately that they had not decided to challenge one another to a race earlier, for his legs had not hilly recovered. Yet still they moved when he asked it of them, the need for survival lending him energy.

How had they wandered so far into ogre territory? And where were the gronn? Durotan imagined one of the ogre's masters forcing its way through the trees as the ogre had—towering over ordinary ogres as ogres towered over the orcs, even more hideous than an ogre, more of the earth than of flesh and yet so terribly wrong, its one eye bloodshot and staring as it pointed at Durotan and Orgrim and directed the ogre toward it.

He and Orgrim were not yet of the season where they would be initiated into adulthood and permitted to go with the warriors of the clans to hunt the ogres and, on rare occasions, the gronn themselves. They had gone on hunts that their clans had perceived as less dangerous, for talbuk and other easy prey, but Durotan had always yearned for the day when he would be allowed to tackle these fearsome creatures, winning honor for himself and his clan.

Now, he wasn't so sure. The earth continued to tremble, and the shouts of the ogre were coming more clearly now.

"Crush little ores! Me smash!" The roar that followed this almost made his ears bleed.

The thing was gaining on them. Despite his brain's panicked orders to his body to run faster, *faster curse you*, he could not put any distance between him and the monstrous being that loomed so close that its vast shadow almost blotted out what little light filtered through the tree branches.

The trees thinned and the light grew brighter. They were close to the edge of the forest now. Durotan kept running and burst into the open space of the meadow, his feet falling again on soft grass, Orgrim was ahead of him, but not by much. Despair washed through Durotan, followed hard by a black wave of fury.

They were not yet adults! They had not gone on their first real hunt, they had not danced by the fire with the females, they had not bathed their faces in the steaming blood of their first solo kills. There was so much they had not done. To die a glorious death in battle was one thing, but They were so overpowered by the hideous creature as to make their deaths humorous rather than honorable.

Knowing it could cost him precious seconds, but unable to resist the impulse, Durotan turned his head to scream a curse at the ogre before it smashed him as flat as a graincake with its club.

What he saw made his jaw drop.

Their rescuers did not utter a sound. They moved in silence, a quiet tide of blue and white and silver that seemingly sprang out of the very air. Durotan heard the familiar whine of arrows shrieking through the air and a heartbeat later the ogre's cries were tinged not with rage but with pain. Dozens of arrows, tiny things on that massive pale body, sprouted from it, and it halted its deadly progress. It yelled and tried to brush the irritations from its skin.

A clear voice rang out. Even though he did not understand the language, Durotan recognized words of power when he heard them, and his skin prickled. Suddenly the sky was filled with lightning. But this was unlike any lightning Durotan had seen invoked by a shaman. Blue and white and silver energy crackled around the ogre, swirling about it and closing in on it like a net. The monster bellowed again and fell. The earth shook.

Now the draenei, their bodies covered in some sort of metallic plating that reflected the cool hues of the magical energies in a display that dazzled Durotan's eyes, dismounted and descended upon the fallen ogre. Blades flashed, more words of power and command were uttered, and Durotan was forced to shut his eyes or be driven mad by the display.

At last silence fell. Durotan opened his eyes again to see that the ogre was dead. Its eyes still stared, its tongue protruded from its parted lips, and its body was covered with red blood and black burn marks.

So great was the silence that Durotan could hear his own ragged breathing and that of Orgrim. The two looked at each other, stunned by what they had just witnessed.

Both had seen the draenei before, of course, but only at a distance. They came now and then to each clan, ready to trade their carefully crafted tools and weapons and decorative pieces of carved stone in exchange for the thick pelts of the forest animals, brightly woven blankets, and raw materials the ores culled from land and stone. It had always been an occasion of interest in the clans, but the exchanges only lasted a few hours. The draenei—blue-skinned, soft-spoken, eerily arresting—did not invite closeness, and no clan leader had ever asked them to stay and share their hospitality. Relationships were cordial but aloof, and everyone involved seemed to want it that way.

Now the leader of the group that had arrived so unexpectedly strode over to Durotan. From his position on the earth, Durotan saw what he had never noticed when he had regarded the draenei from a distance.

Their legs did not go straight from their torsos to the earth. They curved backward, like . . . like a talbuk's, and ended in cloven hooves that were encased in metal from the shiny blue hoof upward. And . . . yes, it was most definitely a thick, hairless tail that swished back and forth. Now their owner was bending over him, offering a strong blue hand. Durotan blinked, staring a moment longer at the unexpected shape of the draenei's feet and the reptilian tail, then got to his feet unaided. He looked into a face that bore strange plating on its head, like armor that had grown there. Black hair and a beard flowed over a colorful tabard, and the piercing, glowing eyes were the color of a winter lake. "You are injured?" the draenei asked in halting common Orcish, his tongue obviously having trouble wrapping itself around the guttural syllables.

"Only my pride," Durotan heard Orgrim mutter in his clan dialect. He, too, was somewhat stung. The draenei had obviously saved both their lives, and he was grateful of course. But they had seen two proud orc youths running from danger. Granted, that danger had been very real—one blow from that gigantic club would have squashed him and Orgrim into two small, crumpled piles—but still.

The draenei may or may not have heard or understood Orgrim; Durotan thought he saw the lips curve in a smile. The draenei glanced skyward, and to his dismay, Durotan realized that the sun was low on the horizon.

"You two have wandered far from home, and the sun settles to sleep," he said. "Which clan do you hail from?"

"I am Durotan. of the Frostwolf clan, and this is Orgrim of the Blackrock clan."

The draenei looked startled. "Two different clans? Were you challenging one another, that you wandered so far from your respective homes?"

Durotan and Orgrim exchanged glances. "Yes . . . and no," Durotan said. "We are friends."

The draenei's eyes widened. "Friends . . . from two different clans?"

Orgrim nodded. "Yes." He added, somewhat defensively, "It is not traditional, but it is not forbidden."

The draenei nodded, but he still looked surprised. He regarded both of them for a moment, then turned to two of his companions and murmured something in his native tongue. Durotan thought the language profoundly musical, like the sound of a stream meandering over stones, or a bird's call. The other two draenei listened intently, then nodded. One took a waterskin from his belt, drank deeply, and then began to run with a gait nearly as smooth and swift as a talbuk's, heading southwest where the Frostwolf lands were. The second raced toward the east, to the Blackrock clan.

The draenei who had been speaking with them turned. "They will notify your families that you are well and safe. You will return home tomorrow. In the meantime, I am happy to offer you the hospitality of the draenei. My name is Restalaan. I am the leader of the guards of Telmor, the town with which both your clans regularly trade. I regret to say I do not remember either of you, but then, the orc younglings seem a bit leery of us when We come to your territory."

Orgrim bristled. "I am afraid of no one and nothing."

Restalaan smiled a bit. "You ran from the ogre."

Orgrim's brown face darkened and his eyes glinted angrily. Durotan lowered his head slightly. As he had feared, Restalaan and the others had borne witness to their shame, and now they would be mocked.

"That," Restalaan continued calmly, as if he had not noticed the effect his words had had on the two. "is wisdom. If you had not fled, we would be sending two corpses home to your families tomorrow instead of two healthy, strong orc youths. There is no shame in fear, Orgrim and Durotan. Only in letting fear prevent you from doing the right thing. And in your case, running was definitely the right thing."

Durotan stuck out his chin. "One day, we will be strong and our full size. Then, it will be the ogres who fear us."

Restalaan turned a mild face to him, and to Durotan's surprise, he nodded. "I completely agree," he said. "Ores are powerful hunters."

Orgrim narrowed his eyes, looking for the taunt, but there was none.

"Come," Restalaan said. "There are dangers in the Terokkar forest at night that not even the guards of Telmor would willingly face. Let us go."

Though exhausted, Durotan found the strength to keep up a steady running pace; he would not twice be shamed in one day. They ran for some time, and the sun eventually dipped below the horizon in a glorious display of crimson, gold, and finally purple. He glanced up now and then, trying not to appear rude, but curious indeed at seeing these strangers at more than several yards' distance. He kept waiting for the signs of a city—roads made by countless feet traveling the same path, fire cairns lighting a path, the shadows of buildings against the darkening sky. He saw nothing. And as they continued, he felt a quick stab of fear.

What if the draenei were not planning to help him and Orgrim after all? What if they were going to capture them, to hold them for ransom? What if they were going to do something worse—sacrifice them to some dark god, or—

"Here we are," Restalaan said. He dismounted and knelt on the ground, moving aside some leaves and pine needles. Orgrim and Durotan exchanged confused glances. They were still in the middle of a forest. No city, no roads, nothing at all. Both ores gathered themselves. They were severely outnumbered, but they would not die without a fight. Still kneeling on the pine-needle carpet, Restalaan uncovered a beautiful green crystal. It had been carefully hidden beneath the everyday detritus of the forest. Durotan stared, enraptured at the beauty of the thing. It would fit into the palm of his hand, and he ached to touch it, to feel that smoothness, that strange pulsing, against his skin. Somehow he knew it would exude a calm the likes of which he had never experienced. Restalaan uttered a string of syllables that branded themselves on Durotan's brain.

"Kehla men samir, solay amaa kahl."

The forest began to shimmer as if it were a reflection caught by a once-still lake into which a stone had been tossed. Despite himself, Durotan gasped. The shimmering increased, and then suddenly there was no forest, no trees, only a large, paved road that led up the side of the mountains to a place that contained images Durotan had never even conceived.

"We are in the heart of ogre country, though it was not so when the city was built so long ago," Restalaan said, rising. "If the ogres cannot see us, they cannot attack us."

Durotan found his tongue. "But... how?"

"A simple illusion, nothing more. A trick of... the light."

There was something in the way he said this that made Durotan's skin prickle. Seeing the ore's confused expression, Restalaan continued. "The eye cannot always be trusted. We think what we see is always real, that the light always reveals what is there the same way at all times. But light and shadow can be manipulated, directed, by those that understand it. In the speaking of these words and the touching of the crystal, I have altered how the light falls on the rocks, the trees, the landscape. And so your eye perceives something entirely different from what you thought was there."

Durotan knew he still stared stupidly. Restalaan chuckled slightly. "Come, my new friends. Come where none of your people have ever been before. Walk down the roads of my home."

THREE

Drek'Thar had not seen the cities of the draenei when they were at peace. He only saw them when... well, I am getting ahead of myself. But he told me that my father had walked the shining roads of the draenei, had eaten their food, slept in their buildings, spoken with them fairly. Had caught a glimpse of a world so unlike our own that even today, it is hard to wrap one's mind around it. Even the lands of the kaldorei are not so alien to me as what I have learned of the draenei. Drek'Thar said that Durotan did not have the words to describe what he saw; perhaps today, living in this land that bears his name and seeing what I have seen, he would. Regret is a bitter taste. ...

Durotan couldn't move. It was as if the mysterious net of shining energy had flung itself about him as it had the ogre, and he was as helpless to resist. He stared, his mouth slightly open, trying to make sense of what his eyes showed him. The draenei city was glorious! Woven into the side of the mountain as if it had sprung from it, to Durotan's eyes it was a union of stone and metal, of nature and artifice. He did not know exactly what he was seeing, but he knew it to be harmonious. With its concealing spell dissolved, the city was revealed in its tranquil magnificence. Everything he saw drew the eye upward. Massive stone steps, wide and blunt at the base and tapering toward the top, led to spherical dwellings. One reminded Durotan of a snail shell; another, of a mushroom. The combination was striking. Bathed in the hues of the setting sun, the bold lines of the steps were softened, and the domes seemed even more invitingly rounded.

He turned to see a similar expression of awe on Orgrim's face, and then saw the slight smile curving Restalaan's blue lips.

"You are welcome here, Durotan and Orgrim," Restalaan said. The words seemed to break the spell, and Durotan moved forward awkwardly. The stone of the roads had been smoothed, by time or draenei hands, he could not say. As they drew closer, Durotan could see that the city continued up the mountain. The architectural pattern of wide, bold steps leading to a softly curved structure was repeated here. There were long roads, made of the same white stone that somehow did not seem to get dirty although at least ten generations of ores had lived and died since the draenei had arrived. Instead of the skins and horns of animals slain in the hunt, the draenei seemingly utilized the gifts of the

earth. Gleaming gems were everywhere, and there was that curious overabundance of light brown metal unlike any Durotan had ever seen. The ores knew metal; they worked it to serve them. Durotan himself had helped in the hunt with axe and sword. But this...

"What is your city made of?" Orgrim asked. It was the first thing he had said since the two began their odd journey in the company of the draenei.

"Many things," Restalaan said amiably. They were passing through the gates now, and receiving curious, but not hostile, looks from the denizens of this place. "We are travelers, fairly new to your world."

"New?" Durotan said. "It was over two hundred summers ago that your people came here. We were not as we are now."

"No, you are not," Restalaan agreed smoothly. "We have watched the ores grow in strength and skill and talent. You have impressed us."

Durotan knew it was meant as a compliment, but somehow the comment stung. As if... as if the draenei thought they were somehow better than the ores. The thought came and went, fleeting as a brush from a butterfly's wings. He kept looking around, and to his shame, wondered if that was not indeed the case. No orc dwelling was this ornate, this complicated. But then... the ores were not draenei. They did not need, or choose, to live like the draenei.

"To answer your question, Orgrim, when we arrived here, we utilized everything we had brought with us. I know your people build boats, to travel the rivers and lakes. Well, we came on a boat that could travel in the sky... a boat that brought us here. It was made of metal and... other things. Once we realized that this was to be our new home, we took part of the boat and used it in our architecture,"

So that was the giant, muted, swirling metal that seemed at once to be made of copper and skin. Durotan's breath caught.

Beside him, Orgrim scowled.

"You lie! Metal cannot float!"

An orc would have growled and boxed Orgrim's ears—hard—for such insolence. The draenei merely chuckled.

"So one would think. But one would think that it would not be possible to summon the elements to fight an ogre if one did not know better."

"That is different," sniffed Orgrim. "That is magic."

"So is this, of a sort," Restalaan said. He beckoned to one of his men and said something in his native tongue. The other draenei nodded and hurried ahead.

"There is someone I would like you to meet, if he is not too busy," Restalaan said, then fell silent. Durotan had a thousand questions but did not dare voice them, fearing that he would make himself look foolish. Orgrim seemed to have accepted Restalaan's comment about magic, but both youths still craned their necks looking around.

They passed many draenei in the street, and once

saw a female who looked about their age. She was delicately built, but tall, and when Durotan met her gaze, she seemed startled. Then a soft smile curved her lips and she ducked her head shyly.

Durotan felt himself smiling in return. Without thinking, he said, "In our encampment you would find many children. Where are the draenei children?"

"We do not have many," Restalaan said. "Our people are very long-lived, and because of that we do not often have children."

"How long-lived?" asked Orgrim.

"Very," was all Restalaan would say. "Suffice it to say that I remember our arrival here."

Orgrim stared openly at their companion. Durotan wanted to elbow him, but he was too far away. He suddenly realized that the young-seeming female they had just seen was probably nowhere near his age after all. At that moment, the scout that Restalaan had dispatched returned and spoke quickly. Restalaan looked pleased at whatever the scout had to say, then turned, smiling, to the two ores.

"The one who brought us to this world, our prophet, Velen, is staying here for several days. I thought he might wish to see you. It is not often we get such visitors." Restalaan's smile widened. "I am very pleased to say that not only has Velen agreed to meet you, he has invited you to stay with him this evening. You are to dine with him and sleep in the magister's house. This is a very high honor indeed." Both boys were struck dumb. Dinner with the Prophet, the leader of all the draenei?

Durotan was beginning to think it might have been better if he had been squashed flat by the ogre's club.

They followed dutifully as Restalaan led them down the winding, climbing streets up through the foothills and to the large building that sat highest on the mountain. The steps, perfectly square and solid, seemed to go on forever, and Durotan's breath came quickly as they climbed. He reached the top and was regarding the snail-shell structure with interest when Restalaan said, "Look back."

Durotan and Orgrim obeyed, and Durotan's breath caught in his throat. Below them, spread out like jewels on a meadow, was the draenei city. The last bit of sunset painted them in flaming colors, then the sun settled over the horizon and all was bathed in shades of purple and gray. Lights came on in the houses, and Durotan thought of the stars in the sky settling on the earth.

"I do not mean to brag, but I am proud of my people and our city," Restalaan said. "We have worked hard here. We love Draenor. And I never thought to have the chance to share it with an ore. The ways of destiny are strange indeed."

As he said this, a deep, almost ancient sorrow seemed to settle on his strong blue features. He shook off the mood and smiled. "Come in, and you will be attended to,"

Silent, shocked almost beyond the ability to speak, their young minds wide open to all the sights and sounds and smells of this thoroughly alien place, Durotan and Orgrim entered the magister's scat. They were shown into rooms that while ornate and beautiful made them feel oddly penned in. The curving walls, so attractive from the outside and no less lovely here, seemed to confine rather than embrace them. Fruits sat in bowls ready for consumption, strange clothes were set out for them to wear, and a tub of water so hot that it steamed sat in the middle of the room.

"That water is too hot to drink and is too much for steeping leaves," Durotan said.

"It is for bathing," the draenei replied.

"Bathing?"

"To wash the dirt from one's body," Restalaan said. Orgrim shot him a look, but Restalaan seemed to be quite serious.

"We do not bathe," Orgrim growled.

"We swim in the rivers in summer," Durotan said. "Perhaps this is similar."

"You do not need to do anything you feel uncomfortable with," said Restalaan. "The bath, the food, the clothes are here for your pleasure. Prophet Velen will expect to see you in an hour. I will come for you then. Is there anything you need?"

They shook their heads. Restalaan nodded and closed the door. Durotan turned to Orgrim.

"Do you think we are in danger?" Orgrim eyed the strange materials and the hot water. "No," he said. "But... I feel like I am in a cave. I would rather be in a tent."

"Me, too." Durotan went to the wall and tentatively touched the curving surface. It felt cool and smooth beneath his fingers; he realized that he had expected it to feel warm and ... somehow alive.

Durotan turned and pointed at the water. "Do you want to try it?"

"No," Orgrim said. Both ores started laughing, and both eventually splashed their faces and found the warm water to be more pleasant than anticipated. They ate the fruit, drank the water, and decided that the cloth vests laid out for their use were acceptable to wear in place of their soiled, sweat-stiff tunics, but that they would keep their leather breeches.

The time passed more swiftly than they anticipated, and dicy were engaged in a challenge to bend one of the metal legs of a chair when there came a soft knock on the door. They jumped guiltily; Orgrim had managed to twist the chair leg somewhat and it stood a bit crookedly now.

"The Prophet is ready to see you now." said Restalaan.

He is an Elder, was the first thing Durotan thought as his eyes met those of Prophet Velen.

Seeing the other draenei up close had been startling enough. To behold Velen was something else again.

The Draenei Prophet was half a head taller than the tallest of the city guards Durotan had seen, but not as powerful-seeming physically. His body, clad in soft, swirling, light tan robes, seemed less muscular than theirs. And his skin! It was a warm

alabaster hue. His eyes, deep set and wise, glowed a brilliant blue, and were encircled by deeply etched wrinkles, speaking of one who was not just an Elder, but possibly even ancient. His silver hair did not flow down his back, as was the case with the others, but was ornately braided and looped, exposing his pale skull. His beard flowed like a silver wave almost to his waist. *Not Elder. Not even ancient*, Durotan thought as those intense blue, glowing eyes settled upon him and seemed to bore into his very soul. *Almost . . . outside of time altogether.*

He thought about Restalaan's comment, that he himself was over two hundred summers.

Velen was a good deal older than that.

"Welcome," Velen said in a mellow voice as he rose and inclined his head. The braids danced with the movement. "I am Velen. I am glad that my people found you today, though I doubt not that in a few years you would be more than capable of handling an ogre and even a gronn or two by yourselves."

Again, Durotan did not know how he knew this, but this was no idle compliment. Orgrim sensed it too, for he stood up even straighter and met the draenei's eyes evenly. Velen waved them to sit and they did so. Durotan felt awkward and ungainly, sitting at the lavish table in the ornately carved chairs. When the food came out, he relaxed inwardly. Haunch of talbuk, roasted whitefish, large rounds of bread, and plates heaped high with vegetables—this was food he knew and understood. Somehow, he had expected something entirely different. But why? Their buildings and way of life might be vastly different from that of the orcs, but like the orcs, the draenei lived off what the land could provide. The preparation was slightly unusual—the ores tended to either boil their food or cook over an open flame, when they cooked at all; frequently flesh was eaten raw—but overall, food was food, and this food was delicious.

Velen was an excellent host. He asked questions and seemed genuinely interested in the responses: How old would the boys be before they could hunt ogres? Choose a mate? What was their favorite thing to eat? Their favorite weapon? Orgrim, even more than Durotan, warmed to the conversation and began talking of his prowess. To his credit, he did not need to embellish his stories. "When my father passes, I will inherit the Doomhammer." Orgrim said proudly. "It is an old and honorable weapon, passed down from father to eldest child."

"You will swing it well. Orgrim," said Velen. "But I trust that it will be many years before you take on the name of Doomhammer."

The fact that his father would have to die before he

would become Orgrim Doomhammer seemed to have momentarily escaped the young ore, and he abruptly grew solemn. Velen smiled, with. Durotan thought, a hint of sorrow. At the movement, fine cracks appeared in Velen's face, the subtlest of spiderwebs on that smooth white surface.

"But describe this hammer to me. It must be a mighty weapon."

Orgrim brightened again. "It is enormous! The stone is black and blunt and powerful, and the shaft is made of carefully crafted wood. Over the years, the shaft has had to be replaced, but the stone itself has not a chip on it. It is called the Doomhammer because when its owner takes it into battle, it spells doom for the enemy."

"I see," said Velen, still smiling.

Orgrim was warming to his task. "But there is also another prophecy," he continued. "It is said that the last of the Doomhammer line will use it to bring first salvation and then doom to the orc people. Then it will pass into the hands of one who is not of the Blackrock clan, all will change again, and it will once again be used in the cause of justice."

"That is a powerful prophecy," said Velen. He said no more, but Durotan felt a shiver. This man was dubbed "Prophet" by his people. Did he know if the Doomhammer prophecy would come true? Did Durotan dare to ask?

Orgrim continued, describing the Doomhammer in loving detail. Durotan, who had seen the weapon in question, ceased listening to Orgrim's chatter and focused on Velen, Why was this being so interested in them?

Durotan was a sensitive youth, he knew. He had overheard some snippets of conversation from his parents, who were worried about such sensitivity, and from Mother Kashur, who scoffed at them and told them to worry about important things and to "leave the boy to his fate." Durotan knew feigned interest when he saw it, and felt that he'd recognize it even in a draenei. But Velen's brilliant blue eyes were bright and focused, his kind if ugly face open, his questions sincere. He wanted to hear about the ores. And the more he heard, the sadder he seemed to become.

I wish Mother Kashur could be here instead of me, Durotan thought suddenly. *She would appreciate this opportunity more than Orgrim or I could.*

When Orgrim had finished describing the Doomhammer, Durotan asked, "Can you tell us of your people, Prophet? We know so little. In the last few hours I have learned more than any of my people have over the last hundred years, I think."

Velen turned glowing blue eyes to Durotan. Durotan wanted to quail from that gaze, not because he was afraid of it, but because he had never before felt so...seen.

"The draenei have never withheld information, young Durotan. But... I believe you may be the first who has ever asked. What do you wish to know?"

Everything, Durotan wanted to say, but instead focused his question. "The ores had never met the draenei until two hundred summers past. Restalaan said you came here in a great vessel that can travel the skies. Tell me more of this."

Velen took a sip of the beverage that tasted like summer to Durotan and smiled. "To begin with, 'draenei' is not our true name. It is a term that means ... 'exiled ones.'

Durotan gaped.

"We disagreed with others in our world. We chose not to sell our people into slavery, and for that we were exiled. We have spent much time finding a suitable place to dwell—a place to call our own. We fell in love with this land, and we call it Dracnor."

Durotan nodded. He had heard the term before. He liked how it sat on his tongue when he spoke it, and the ores did not have a name for this place other than "world."

"It is our term, we have not the arrogance to think the ores would use it as well. But such we have dubbed it, and we love Dracnor deeply. It is a beautiful world, and we have seen many,"

Orgrim gasped. "You have seen other worlds?"

"Indeed We have. And We have met many people."

"People like the ores?"

Velen smiled gently. "There is no one like the ores," he said, respect resonant in his voice. "You are unique in our travels."

Durotan and Orgrim looked at each other and sat up a little straighter in their chairs.

"But yes, we had been traveling for some time before we found this land. Here we are. and here we will stay."

Durotan burned to ask more—to ask how long they had been traveling, what their homeland had been like, why they had left it.

But there was something in Velen's timeless face that told him that although he had been invited to inquire, the draenei leader would not tell him that particular tale.

So instead he asked about how they had tamed the nature of their weapons and magic. "Our magic comes from the earth." Durotan said. "From the shaman and the ancestors."

"Our magic comes from a different source." Velen said. "I do not think you will understand it if I explained it."

Orgrim said indignantly, "We are not stupid!"

"Forgive me, I did not mean to imply that," Velen said at once. It was a graceful and sincere apology, and again Durotan was impressed. "Your people are wise and you two are obviously bright. But... I am not sure I have the words in your language. I have no doubt that if I had the time and vocabulary you would understand."

Even in the explanation he seemed to grope for the words. Durotan thought of the sort of magic that could disguise a city, thought of the soft, uncanny metal somehow melded with gems of the earth and

solid stone, and realized that Velen was right. There did not breathe an orc who could have grasped all of this in a single evening, though he suspected Mother Kashur would have an intrinsic comprehension, and he again wondered why it was that the two races did not interact more.

The conversation turned to more mundane topics. The two youths learned that deep in the Terokkar forest was a spot, sacred to the draenei, called Auchindoun. Here, the dead were laid to rest, placed in the ground instead of being burned on pyres. Privately, Durotan thought this odd, but held his tongue. Telmor was the closest town to this "city of the dead," and Velen had come on a sad mission, to lay to rest some who had died fighting the same ogre that had almost claimed Orgrim and Durotan earlier that day. Normally, Velen explained, he lived in a beautiful place called the Temple of Karabor. There were other draenei towns, but the largest was to the north, a place called Shattrath.

At last, the meal was over. Velen sighed, and his eyes rested on his empty plate, but Durotan felt certain the Prophet did not see it.

"You will excuse me." Velen said, rising. "It has been a long day, and I must meditate before I sleep. It has been an honor to meet you, Durotan of the Frostwolf clan, and Orgrim. of the Blackrock clan. I trust you will sleep well and deeply, safe within these walls, where none of your people has been before." Durotan and Orgrim rose with the others and bowed. Velen smiled with, Durotan thought, a hint of that strange sorrow he had glimpsed in the draenei leader earlier.

"We will meet again, young ones. Good night." The two ores left shortly afterward. They were escorted to their rooms and indeed slept well, though Durotan had a dream of an old orc sitting quietly by his side, and wondered what it meant.

"Bring him," the old orc said to Mother Kashur.

Mother Kashur, the eldest shaman of the Frostwolf clan, slept deeply. Because of her high position of honor, her tent was second in lavishness only to that of Garad, the clan leader. Thick rugs of clefthoof fur kept her old bones from the cold of the earth, and a loyal and loving granddaughter tended to her needs, cooking and cleaning and keeping the fire stoked on cold days for the clan's "mother." Mother Kashur's duty was to listen to the wind and water and fire and grass, and drink the bitter herbal beverage each night that opened her mind to visits from the ancestors. She gathered information for her clan the way the others gathered fruits and firewood, and this gift nourished them as deeply.

The old orc was not present, and yet she knew he was real. He was in her dream, and that was enough for her. In this dream state, she was young and vibrant, could see her ruddy skin glowing with health, knew her form to be sleek and knotted with muscle. The old orc was the age at which he had died, the age at which his wisdom had been at its height. His name had been Tal'kraa in life, but now, although he was many generations distant from her, she called him only Grandfather.

"You received the message," Grandfather told the young, vibrant dream-Kashur. She nodded, her dark hair flowing with the movement.

"He and the Blackrock boy are with the draenei," she said. "They will be safe. I can feel it."

Grandfather Tal'kraa nodded, his thick jowls shaking with the movement. His tusks were yellowed with age and one had been broken off in a battle long since forgotten.

"Yes, they are safe. Bring him."

It was the second time he had said this, and Kashur was not certain as to what he meant.

"He will come to the mountain in a few months, when the trees shed their leaves to sleep," she said. "So yes, I will bring him."

Tal'kraa shook his head fiercely, his brown eyes narrowed in annoyance, Kashur smothered a smile; of all the spirits that honored her with their presence. Grandfather Tal'kraa was one of the least patient.

"No, no," Tal'kraa growled. "Bring him to us. Bring him to the caverns of Oshu'gun. I would look upon him there."

Kashur inhaled swiftly. "You ... wish me to take him to meet the ancestors?" "is that not what I just said? Foolish girl! What has happened to the shaman these days?"

It was a rant he went on frequently and it troubled Kashur not in the slightest. She was too stunned by the import of what he had just said. Sometimes the ancestors had wanted to see a child before; it was infrequent, but it had occurred. Usually it meant that the child in question was destined for the shamanic path. She had not thought Durotan's feet would walk that road; it was rare that a shaman led a clan. There would be too much pulling him in each direction for him to be an effective leader. To both listen to and honor the spirits and to guide one's people well were more than most ores could manage. One who could do both would be a remarkable orc indeed.

When Kashur did not reply, Grandfather growled and slammed his staff on the ground. Kashur jumped slightly.

"I will bring him on his initiation day," Kashur assured her ancestor.

"At last, you understand," Tal'kraa said, shaking his staff at her. 'And if you fail me, I will take my staff to your head instead of the innocent earth."

He could not completely hide a smile as he said it, and Kashur smiled back as her dream-self closed her eyes. For all his bluster and short temper, Tal'kraa was wise and kind and loved her deeply. She wished she had known him when he was alive, but he had died almost a hundred years ago.

Kashur's eyelids fluttered open, and she sighed as her spirit returned to her current, real body ... as old as Tal'kraa had been when he died, hands and feet curled up with joint pain, body weak, hair stark white. She knew in her heart that the time would soon come when she would be able to leave this body, this shell, for the final time and be with the ancestors in the sacred mountain. Drek'Thar, her apprentice, would then be the advisor to Garad and the rest of the Frostwolf clan. She had every confidence in him, and actually looked forward to the day when she would be pure spiritual energy.

Although, she mused as the sunlight trickled in and the birdsong caressed her ears, she would miss the things that being alive granted her, the simple things like birdsong and hot food and the loving touch of her granddaughter.

Bring him, Grandfather had said.

And so she would.

FOUR

Last night, with the moon full overhead and the stars gleaming as if in approval, a young male was initiated into adulthood. It was the first time I have had the chance to be part of this ritual, the Om'rigger. In my earlier years, I was cut off from the rites and traditions of my people; and truth be told, all ores had been cut off from such rites for too long. And once I had set my feet on my destiny's path, I had become embroiled in battle. War consumed me. Ironically, the need to protect my people from the Burning Legion and to give them a place where our traditions could again flourish took me far away from these things.

But now, Durotar and Orgrimmar are established. Now, there is a peace, tenuous though it might be. Now there are shaman reclaiming the ancient ways, young males and females coming of age who, if the spirits will it, may never know the ashy taste of war.

Last night, I participated in a timeless ritual that had been denied an entire generation.

Last night, my heart was filled with joy and the sense of connection for which I had always longed.

Durotan's heart hammered in his chest as he stared at the talbuk. It was a mighty beast, worthy prey, its horns not for mere decoration but sharp and dangerous. Durotan had seen at least one warrior gored to death, impaled upon the twelve prongs as surely as if upon a spear.

And he was to take it down with only a single weapon and no armor.

There had been the whispers, of course. *Any mature talbuk will do to satisfy the needs of the ritual*, he had heard someone murmur in his ear as he sat blindfolded in the waiting tent. *They are all fierce fighters, but at this season, the males have shed their horns.*

Other whispers: *You may only carry one weapon, Durotan, son of Garad; but you could hide armor in the wilderness where no one would know.*

And, most shameful of all: *The shaman will determine if you are successful by tasting the blood upon your face; the blood from a long-dead talbuk tastes exactly like that of one freshly slain.*

He ignored all the temptations. Perhaps there **had** been other ores who had succumbed to them, but he would not be among them. Durotan would seek out a female, who was quite well equipped with horns at this time of year; he would take the one weapon he was permitted, and it would be the blood of the beast he killed, steaming in the cold air, that would anoint his checks.

And now, standing in the early, unexpected fall of snow, his axe growing ever heavier in his hand, Durotan shivered. But he never faltered.

He had been tracking the talbuk herd for two days now, surviving only on what he could gather, creating meager fires in the twilight that bathed the snow in a rich lavender hue and sleeping in what shelter he stumbled upon. Orgrim had already completed his rite of passage. Durotan envied the fact that his friend had been born in summer. He had thought it would still not be too difficult in early autumn, but winter had decided to come ahead of time and the weather was bitter.

It seemed as if the talbuk herd, too, was taunting him. He could come upon their tracks and droppings easily enough, see where they had scraped the snow for dried grass or pulled bark from the trees. But they always seemed to elude him. It was late afternoon on the third day when it appeared as though the ancestors had decided to reward his determination. Twilight was coming, and Durotan had thought with a sinking heart that he would have to again seek shelter to mark the end of a fruitless day. Then he realized that the small pellets of dung were not frozen hard, but fresh.

They were close.

He began to run, the snow squeaking beneath his fur boots, a new warmth filling him. He followed the tracks as he had been taught, cleared a rise—

And beheld a herd of the glorious creatures.

Immediately he crouched behind a large boulder and peered around to gaze at the beasts. They were still dark brown against the white snow, their winter coats not yet upon them. There were at least two dozen, maybe more, mostly females. It was good that he had found the herd, but now he had another problem. How would he take down just one? Talbuk, unlike many prey animals, would protect others in their herd. If he attacked one, the rest would come to defend it.

Shaman accompanied the hunters in order to distract the animals. Durotan was alone, and suddenly he felt very vulnerable.

He frowned and rallied himself. He had been searching for these creatures for almost three days, and now here they were.

Nightfall would see a fresh haunch of meat devoured by a hungry orc youth, or it would see a stiffening orc corpse in the snow.

He watched them for a while, aware that the shadows were lengthening, but not wanting to hurry and make a fatal mistake. The talbuk were diurnal creatures, and they were busy digging hollows in the snow in which to curl up. He knew they did such a thing, but now he watched in dismay as they settled in tightly against one another. How would he separate one?

Movement caught his eye. One of the females, young and healthy from a gentle summer spent feasting on sweet grass and berries, seemed to be in a feisty mood. She stamped and tossed her head—crowned with a glorious set of horns—and almost danced

around the others. She did not seem inclined to join them, but like one or two others, opted to sleep on the outside of the cluster of furry bodies.

Durotan began to grin. What an offering from the spirits! It was a good omen. The liveliest, healthiest doc in the herd, the one who did not need to follow mindlessly, but chose her own path. While that choice would likely be her death, it would also give Durotan a chance to win his honor and right to be treated as an adult. The spirits understood the balance of such things. At least, he was told they did.

Durotan waited. Twilight came and went, and the sun sank below the mountains. With the sun went even the feeble warmth it had hitherto provided. Durotan waited with the patience of the predator. Finally, even the edgiest of the herd tucked up its long legs and bedded down with its fellows.

At last, Durotan moved. His limbs were stiff and he almost stumbled. He crept slowly from his hiding place behind the boulder and went down the slope, his eyes on the drowsing female. Her head drooped on its long neck, and her breathing was regular. He could see small white puffs appearing in front of her muzzle.

Slowly, placing his feet as carefully as he could, he moved toward his quarry. He did not feel the cold; the heat of anticipation, the powerful focus, drove any sensations of discomfort away. Closer still he came, and still the talbukdoc dreamed.

He lifted his axe. He swung it down.

Her eyes opened.

She tried to scramble to her feet, but the death blow **had** already come. Durotan wanted to scream the battle cry he had heard his father utter so many times, but he bit it back. It would not do to slay the talbuk only to be slain himself by a dozen of her herd in retaliation. He had sharpened the blade to shocking keenness, and it sliced through the thick neck and vertebrae as if slicing through cheese. Blood spurted, the warm sticky fluid splattering Durotan gently, and he smiled fiercely. Anointing himself with the blood of his first solo kill was part of the ritual; the talbuk doc had done it for him. Another good omen.

Silent though he had tried to be, he heard the sounds of the awakening herd. He whirled, breathing heavily, and let loose with the blood-chilling battle cry his throat had been aching to utter. He held his axe, the gleam of its metal blade now obscured with crimson blood, and bellowed again.

The talbuk hesitated. He had been told that if it was a clean kill, they would flee rather than attack, intuiting on some primal level that they could no longer help their fallen sister. He hoped this was true; he might be able to take down one or two, but would fall beneath their padded feet if they chose to attack.

Moving as one, they began to back away, and then finally whirled and turned to run. He watched them gallop over the rise to disappear, their pawprints in the pristine snow the only evidence that they had been here.

Durotan lowered his axe, panting with exertion. He raised it again and let out a cry of triumph. His empty belly would be full tonight; the spirit of the talbuk would enter his dreams. And on the morrow he would return to his people an adult male, ready to take his place in serving the clan.

Ready to one day become its leader.

"Why do we not ride?" Durotan asked petulantly, glowering like a child.

"Because that is not the way it is done," Mother Kashur said curtly. Irritated, she cuffcd the boy. Durotan was young and fit; the lengthy hike to the sacred mountain of the ancestors was as nothing to him. She, on the other hand, would have deeply appreciated being able to ride atop her great black wolf Dracamwalkcr. But the traditions were ancient and specific, and as long as she was able to walk, walk she would. Durotan bowed his head in acknowledgment as Theycontinued on.

Despite the fact that each trip exhausted her more than the previous one, Mother Kashur felt a sense of excitement that helped temper the pain and weariness. She had taken many a youngling—both male and female, for each was as valued as the other—on this final part of their rite of adulthood. But never before had she been asked to bring one before the ancestors. She was not too old to be curious.

It was less than a few hours for the young, about a day for the older bones to make the trip. Evening was coming and they were almost there. Mother Kashur looked up at the familiar shape of the mountain and smiled. Unlike other mountain ranges, whose angles seemed to be random. Oshu'gun's spire was a perfect triangle. Gleaming like crystal, its facets catching the sun. it resembled the surrounding terrain not at all. It had come from the heavens, long ago, and the spirits had been drawn to it. It was for this reason the ores had settled here, in its sacred shadow. Whatever squabbles and petty differences they had as living beings, they were as one here, inside this mountain. She would go there again soon, she knew, but not as a hobbling, elderly woman. This was her last visit in such a broken vessel. The next time Kashur approached Oshu'gun, she would come as a spirit, floating in the air as the birds did, her heart light and clean and made new.

"What's wrong, Mother?" Durotan asked, concern in his young voice. She blinked, coming out of her reverie, and smiled at him.

"Not a thing," she assured him truthfully.

The shadows had chased away the sunlight by the time they reached the foot of the mountain. They would sleep here tonight and begin their ascent at dawn. Durotan fell asleep first, wrapped in the hide of the talbuk doc he himself had slain not too long ago, and Mother Kashur watched him fondly as he slept the deep sleep of the innocent. She herself would have no dreams; her mind needed to be clear if she was to be ready to receive visions on the morrow.

The climb was a long, tiring one, harder by far than the simple hike to reach the mountain, and Kashur was grateful both for her sturdy staff and Durotan's strong hand. But today, Kashur's feet seemed to move more surely her lungs work more efficiently as she and her young charge climbed. She felt as if the ancestors were pulling her forward, aiding her physical body with the power of their spirit ones.

They paused at the entrance of the sacred cave. It was a perfect oval in the smooth surface of the mountain, and as always, Kashur felt as though she were entering the womb of the earth. Durotan tried to look brave, but succeeded only in looking slightly nervous. Mother Kashur did not smile at him. He *should* be nervous. He was about to enter sacred space at the specific request of one of his long-dead ancestors. Even she was not unmoved.

She lit a bundle of dried grasses that gave off a sweet, pungent scent, and waved the smoke over him to purify him. Then she marked him with the blood his own father had shed for this moment, kept carefully in a small stoppered leather bag. Kashur placed her withered hand upon his smooth, low brow, murmured her blessing, and then nodded.

"You well know that few are called before the ancestors who do not walk the path of the shaman," she said gravely. Brown eyes wide, Durotan nodded. "I do not know what will happen. Maybe nothing. But if something occurs, you know to behave with honor and respect to the beloved dead."

Durotan swallowed and nodded again. Then he took a deep breath and stood straight and tall, and in the yet-unmolded body of the boy, Kashur saw a hint of the clan chieftain to come.

Together, they went inside, Mother Kashur going first to light the torches that lined the walls. The orange illumination showed them the downward twining path, worn smooth by years of bare or booted orc feet. Here and there steps had been carved, to make those pilgrim's feet more secure. It was always cool inside this tunnel, warmer than it was outside in winter. Kashur let her hand brush the sides of the wall, remembering the first time she had come here long ago, the blood of her mother wet on her own face, her eyes wide, her heart racing.

Finally, the long, gentle downward slope cased. There were no more torches on the wall to light, and Durotan looked at her, puzzled.

"We will not need to bring fire to come before the ancestors," Kashur said. They continued on a level surface, traveling into darkness. Durotan was not frightened, but he did look confused as they left the comfort of fire behind.

Now it was completely dark. Kashur reached out a hand and grasped Durotan's to guide him. His strong, stubby fingers folded gently around hers. *Even now, when he might be expected to clutch my hand, he remembers how it aches*, she thought. The next Frostwolf chieftain would have a considerate heart.

They continued without speaking. And then ... subtly, like the arrival of dawn after a long, dark night, light began to grow around them. Now Kashur could dimly see the shape of the youth who stood beside her, so much younger than she and yet already walking in the body of a grown male. She watched him as they moved forward; the miracle of the cave of the ancestors was familiar to her, but Durotan's reaction was not.

His eyes widened and he inhaled swiftly as he looked around. The glow emanated from a pool in the center of the cavern, casting a soft white light over everything. All was smooth and soft and dimly radiant; there were no sharp angles or rough places, and Kashur felt the familiar sensation of deep peace wash over her. She let Durotan look his fill in silence. The cavern was huge, larger than the main drumming and dancing area at the Kosh'harg festival, and branching tunnels led to places that Kashur had never dared explore. It would have to be so large, would it not, to be able to host the spirit of every orc who had lived and died? She walked to the water and he followed her, watching her closely. She removed the pack she carried and gestured that he do likewise. Carefully, Kashur removed several waterskins, opened them, and with a soft prayer added their water to the glowing liquid.

"You asked about the waterskins as we departed," she said quietly to Durotan, "The water in here is not native to this place. Long ago, we began offering blessed water to the spirits. Every time we come, we contribute to the sacred pool. And even so, I know not how, the water does not dissipate as it would in an ordinary hollow. Such is the power of the Mountain of Spirits."

Once she had emptied the waterskins, she sat down with a soft grunt and peered into the luminous depths. Durotan emulated her. She knew the angle at which she could see her reflection and made sure they were both positioned correctly. At first, all she could see was her own face and that of Durotan. Their features looked spectral themselves, reflected in a white pool rather than a dark one.

Then a third figure joined them, as if Grandfather Tal'kraa were standing right beside her shoulder, his reflection as clear as theirs. Their eyes met, and Kashur smiled.

She craned her neck to look up at him, but Durotan continued to gaze into the water as if searching for the answers there. Kashur's heart sank a little, but immediately she reprimanded herself. If Durotan was not of the shamanic path, then he was not of the shamanic path. Surely his destiny would be an honorable one regardless, born to lead his clan as he had been.

"My many times great granddaughter," Tal'kraa said with more gentleness than Kashur had ever heard from him before. "You have brought him, as I asked." Leaning heavily on a staff as insubstantial as he, the spirit of the Grandfather moved in a slow circle around Durotan as the young orc continued to look into the water. Kashur watched both Frostwolf males closely. Durotan shivered and looked about, no doubt wondering where the sudden chill came from. Kashur smiled to herself. He could not see his ancestor's spirit, but he knew, somehow, that Tal'kraa was there.

"You cannot see him," she said a bit sadly,

Durotan's head came up and his nostrils flared. Swiftly, he got to his feet. In the eerie light, his tusks looked blue and his skin had a green cast to it.

"No, Mother. I cannot. But ... is an ancestor present?"

"Indeed he is," Kashur said. She turned her attention to the ghost. "I did bring him here, as you requested. How do you find him?" Durotan swallowed hard, but remained standing straight and tall as the spirit circled him thoughtfully.

"I sensed . . . something," Tal'kraa said. "I had thought he would be a shaman, but if he cannot see me now, then he never will. But although he will not see spirits or summon the elements, he is born to a great destiny. He will be an important asset to the Frostwolf clan ... indeed, to all his people."

"He will be ... a hero?" Kashur asked, her breath catching. All orcs strove to uphold a code of courage and honor, but only a few were powerful enough to have their names engraved upon the memory of their descendants. At her words Durotan inhaled swiftly, and she could see the wanting on his face.

"I cannot tell," said Tal'kraa, frowning a little. "Teach him well, Kashur, for one thing is certain: From his line will come salvation."

In a gesture of tenderness the likes of which Kashur had never seen, Tal'kraa reached out and brushed an insubstantial finger across Durotan's cheek, Durotan's eyes went wide and Kashur could see he had to fight the natural instinct to draw back, but Durotan did not quail beneath the spectral caress.

Then, like mist on a hot day, Tal'kraa was gone. Kashur stumbled a little; she always forgot how the energy of the spirits fed her. Durotan stepped forward quickly to catch her arm, and she was grateful for his youthful strength.

"Mother, are you all right?" he asked. She gripped his arm and nodded. His first concern was for her, not for what the ancestor might or might not have said about him. Even as she pondered the words, she decided not to tell Durotan of them. Level-headed and great-hearted though he was, such a prophecy could corrupt even the truest of orcish hearts.

From *his line will come salvation*.

"I am all right," she reassured him, "But these bones are no longer young, and the energy of the spirits is powerful,"

"I wish I could have seen him," Durotan said a bit wistfully. "But. . . but I know I felt him." "You did, and that is more than most are honored with." Kashur said.

"Mother . . . can you tell me what he said? About— about me being a hero?"

He was trying to act calm and mature, but a note of pleading crept in. She did not blame him. All wanted to live on in glorious memory, through tales told of their adventures. He would not be an orc if he did not share that desire.

"Grandfather Tal'kraa said it was uncertain," she said bluntly. He nodded and hid his disappointment well. That much was all she had planned to say, but something moved her to add, "You have a destiny to fulfill, Durotan, son of Garad. Be not a fool in **battle** and die before you can fulfill it."

He chuckled then. "A fool does not serve his clan well, and that is what I wish to do."

"Then, future chieftain," said Kashur, chuckling also, "you had best be about finding a mate."

And she laughed out loud as, for the first time on their journey together, Durotan looked completely unnerved.

Five

Upon reflection, so Drek'Tliar tells me, this time in our history was as a perfect day in early summer. We ores had everything we truly needed: a hospitable world, the ancestors to guide us, the elements to aid us as they saw fit. Food was plentiful, our enemies were fierce but not invincible, and we were rich with blessings. If the draenei were not necessarily our allies, neither were they foe. They shared their knowledge and their bounty whenever they were asked; it was we, the orcs, who always held back. And it is we, the orcs, who would unwittingly be twisted to serve another's end.

Hate is powerful. Hate can be eternal. Hate can be manipulated.

And hate can be created.

In the darkness visible, ageless, timeless, Kil'jaeden dwelt. The power surged and throbbed through him, better than blood now, more nourishing than meat or drink, heady and calming at the same time. He was not omnipotent, not yet, or else worlds would fall before him with a thought rather than through battle and destruction, and on the whole, he was content with this.

But they yet lived, die exiles. Kil'jaeden could sense them, though centuries had passed according to those to whom time still mattered. They were lying low, Velen and the rest of the fools. Too cowardly to face him and Archimonde, who had worked as his friend and ally through the . . . changes . . . as he had when they were simple beings.

He, Archimonde, and the others no longer thought of themselves as "credar." Velen would call them "man'ari," but they called themselves the Burning Legion. Sargeras's army. The chosen ones.

He extended a scarlet hand, long and elegant and clawed, into the nothingness that was everything and felt it ripple beneath his inquiry. Scouts had been dispatched the moment the enemy had escaped, scouts who reported nothing but failure. Archimonde wanted them to die for their lack of success, but Kil'jaeden opted otherwise. Those who feared, fled, he had good cause to know. Those who sniffed reward and their lord's approval stayed, hungering for it. So while Kil'jaeden made his disapproval known, those who had failed him usually got a second chance. Or third, if he believed them to be doing all they could and not simply coasting on his goodwill.

Archimonde disagreed on this obsession that occupied Kil'jaeden.

"There are worlds aplenty to conquer and devour, in service to our master Sargeras," Archimonde rumbled. The blackness glowed around them as his voice pierced it. "Let the fool go. We would sense it if he used his talents on any level that would pose a threat. Let him rot on some world, bereft of everything that mattered to him."

Kil'jaeden slowly turned his massive head to regard the other demon lord.

"It is not about rendering him powerless," Kil'jaeden hissed. "It is about destroying him and those foolish enough to have followed him. It is about crushing him for his lack of faith. For his stubbornness. For his refusal to think about what was best for all of us."

The large, clawed hand turned into a fist and the sharp nails dug into the palm. Molten fire poured forth, then the flow stopped as it hit what passed for air, leaving a thick ridge like a scar. Kil'jaeden's body was covered with many such welts; he took pride in them.

Archimonde was powerful, elegant, smooth, intelligent. But he lacked the burning desire for utter obliteration that Kil'jaeden nursed. He had explained it time and again, and now simply sighed and opted not to discuss the matter further. For centuries now, they had had this argument; no doubt they would continue to have it for centuries more . . . or until Kil'jaeden succeeded in the destruction of the being who had once been his closest friend. Perhaps that was it. Kil'jaeden mused with a sudden enlightenment. Archimonde had never had particular feelings for Velen other than as a fellow leader of the eredar. Kil'jaeden had loved Velen as a brother, closer than that, loved him almost as another aspect of himself

And then . . .

Again the huge hand clenched, and again unholy fire poured forth in lieu of blood.

No.

It would not be enough to think of Velen sitting on some backwater world, nursing his hurt pride, living off the land in some cave. Kil'jaeden once would have said he wanted blood. But blood, powerful in its own way as it was, would not satisfy him now. He wanted the essence of shame, of utter and complete humiliation. That would be even sweeter than the coppery taste of life flowing from Velen and his stupid followers.

Archimonde tilted his head, a gesture Kil'jaeden recognized. One of his own servants was speaking to him. Archimonde had his own schemes and machinations, all, like Kil'jaeden's, in service to their dark master and his ultimate conquest. Without a word Archimonde rose to his full, imposing height and departed, his movements lithe and sleek, belying his size.

At that moment as well, Kil'jaeden felt a slight scratching inside his head. He recognized it as once: it was Talgath, ever his right hand, seeking contact. And the sensation emanating from the thought was one of cautious hope.

What is it, my friend? Speak! Kil'jaeden commanded in his mind.

My great lord, I do not wish to plant false hope, but... I may have found them.

Tempered delight rose inside Kil'jaeden. Like the being he hunted, Talgath was ever the cautious one of his minions. Only a little lower in rank than Kil'jaeden himself, he had proved his loyalty over the centuries. He would not say even this guarded statement without good cause.

Where? And what makes you sense this?

There is a small world, primitive and insignificant. And I have sensed their peculiar brand of magic Minting the area. It is possible that they may have come and gone. Such, alas, has happened before.

Kil'jaeden nodded, even though Talgath was not present to see the gesture. Some things from his past yet lingered, he thought, smiling a little at the ancient movement that betokened agreement in nearly every sentient species he had encountered.

You speak truly, he acknowledged. Many times before, Kil'jaeden's forces had arrived on some world or other, lured by the sweet essence of eredar magic, only to find that somehow Velen and his wretched followers had gotten wind of the approach and escaped. *But I remain hopeful. I will find them and twist them to my purposes, and I have eternity in wnicJi to do so.*

A thought occurred to him. So often before, Kil'jaeden's forces had descended upon a world where Velen was thought to be. Only to have him escape. Kil'jaeden had nursed his insulted pride by destroying such worlds, but the slaughter of primitive races—though pleasant—did not slake his demonic thirst for complete and total revenge.

He would not behave that way this time. He would not send Talgath at the head of the Burning Legion. Velen had once been the strongest of them, the wisest, the most attuned to magic and science. Kil'jaeden could not imagine that his old friend would have dropped his guard, not after such a relatively brief time. Velen would be constantly on the alert, ready to flee in the face of so obvious a threat.

But... what about a less obvious threat?

Talgath... I want you to investigate this world for me.

My lord? Talgath's mental voice was smooth and poised, but puzzled.

We have descended upon worlds in force before, and to no avail. Perhaps this time, only one is sent. One only, but one who can be trusted completely.

Kil'jaeden sensed unease and pride warring in Talgath's thoughts.

There are more ways to destroy one's enemy than with an army. Sometimes, those ways are better.

You—you wish me to find such a better way, then?

Precisely. Visit this place on your own. Learn about it. Investigate. Tell me if the exiles are truly there, and if so, what their state is.

Tell me what they live on, if they are fat and settled like tamed livestock or lean and edgy, like prey animals.

Tell me what their world is like, what other peoples live there, what creatures, what seasons. Investigate, Talgath. Do nothing without express orders from me.

Of course, my lord. I shall prepare at once. Still puzzled, but obedient and intelligent, Talgath had served the man'ari master well in the past. Now he would serve well again.

Kil'jaeden's face, though it little resembled what it had been before he had cast his lot with the great lord Sargeras, was still able to twist into the facsimile of a smile.

Durotan, like all his people, had been ready to begin training with weapons at the age of six. His body was already tall and filling out, and the usage of weaponry came naturally to his people. At twelve, he had gone with the hunting parties. And now, after the rite that marked him as an adult, he had been able to join in the hunt for the ogres and their obscene, twisted masters, the gronn.

This year, as the autumn Kosh'harg came, he joined the adults in the circle after the children had been sent to bed. And as he and Orgrim had learned years before, being an adult and being able to attend the fireside circle was not very interesting.

However, the one thing he did find interesting, as he watched with observant brown eyes, was interacting with those whose names he had known for many years, but who never spoke much to him because of his youth. Mother Kashur, of course, was from his own clan. He knew she had high standing among the shaman of the other clans, and he took pride in that fact. He noticed her huddled by the fire on this first night, a woven blanket wrapped around a frame that seemed to him little more than bone and skin. He knew, without knowing how he knew, that this would be her last Kosh'harg celebration, and the thought saddened him more than he had expected.

Next to her, younger than she but older still than Durotan's parents, was Kashur's apprentice Drek'Thar. Durotan had not spoken much with Drek'Thar, but the older one's sharp tongue and sharp eyes were deserving of much respect. Durotan's brown eyes continued to roam over the assembled company. Tomorrow, the shaman would be gone, departing for their meetings with the ancestors in the cavern of the sacred mountain. Durotan shivered as he again recalled his visit there, and the cold breeze that felt like a draft, but was nothing so ordinary.

Over there was Grom Hellscream, the young and slightly manic chieftain of the Warsong clan. Only a few years older than Durotan and Orgrim, he was new to his position. There had been mutterings about the mysterious circumstances under which the former chieftain had died, but the Warsong clan did not challenge Grom's leadership. Durotan thought it no wonder. Though youthful, Grom was intimidating. The dancing, flickering light of the fire only served to make

him look more menacing. Thick black hair flowed down his back. Upon his ascension to chieftainship, Grom's jaw had been tattooed a uniform shade of black. Around his neck hung a necklace of bones. Durotan knew their meaning: Among the Warsong, it was tradition that a young warrior wear the bones of his first kill, inscribed with his personal runes.

Beside Grom was the enormous, imposing Blackhand of the Blackrock clan. Next to Blackhand, munching in silence, was the chieftain of the Shattered Hand clan, Kargath Bladefist. In lieu of a hand, he had a scythe embedded in his wrist, and even now as

an adult Durotan found himself unsettled as the blade glinted in the firelight. Next to him was Kilrogg Dcadyc, chieftain of the Bleeding Hollow clan. The name was not a familial one. but one he had taken for himself. One eye flitted over the assembled company; the other sat, mangled and dead in truth, in its socket. If Grom was young for a chieftain, then Kilrogg was old for one. but it was clear to Durotan that despite his years and grizzled appearance, Kilrogg was far from done with either life or leadership. Uneasily Durotan turned his attention elsewhere.

On Drek'Thar's left was the famous Ner'zhul of the Shadowmoon clan. For as long as Durotan could remember, Ner'zhul had led the shaman. Once. Durotan had been permitted to attend a hunt at which Ner'zhul had been present, and the mastery this shaman had over his skills was shocking. While others grunted and labored to contact the elements, directing them powerfully but without grace, Ner'zhul remained tranquil. The earth shook beneath him when he asked it; lightning came from the skies to strike where he directed. Fire, air, water, earth, and the elusive Spirit of the Wilds all called him companion and friend. He had not seen Ner'zhul interact with the ancestors, of course; no one but shaman were witness to such things. But it was clear to Durotan that if the ancestors had not favored Ner'zhul, he would not have serenely carried power all this time.

Ner'zhul's apprentice, however, Durotan did not like. Orgrim was sitting next to his boyhood friend, and, seeing where Durotan's gaze led, leaned over and whispered, "I think that Gul'dan would better serve his people if he were set out as bait." Durotan looked away so that no one else would see him smile. He did not know how experienced Gul'dan was as a shaman; surely he must have some ability or else Ner'zhul would not have taken him on to succeed him. But he was not a very prepossessing one. Shorter than many, softer than most, with a short, bushy beard, he did not exemplify the orc as a warrior. But Durotan supposed that one did not have to be a hero to contribute.

"Now that one, *she* is a warrior born."

Durotan looked in the direction that Orgrim had indicated and his eyes widened slightly. Orgrim had spoken the truth. Standing tall and straight, her muscles rippling beneath smooth brown skin in the firelight as she reached and sliced a chunk of meat off the roasting talbuk carcass, the female in question seemed to Durotan to be the epitome of all the ores valued. She moved with the feral grace of one of the black wolves, and her tusks were small but sharpened to deadly points. Her long black hair was pulled back in an efficient but attractive braid.

"Who—who is she?" Durotan murmured, his heart already sinking. Surely this magnificent female was a member of another clan. He would have noticed if such a beauty—strong, supple, graceful—had been in his own clan.

Orgrim guffawed and slapped Durotan on the back. The sound and gesture caused several heads to turn in their direction, including, Durotan realized, that of the lovely female. Orgrim leaned in to whisper the words that made Durotan's spirits rise.

"You unobservant dog! She is a Frostwolf! I'd have claimed her for myself if she were of my own clan."

A Frostwolf? How in the world had Durotan failed to notice such a treasure in his own clan? He turned his gaze from Orgrim's grinning visage to look at her again. He found her staring directly at him. Their gazes locked.

"Draka!"

The female started and turned away. Durotan blinked, as if returning to himself.

"Draka," he said quietly. No wonder he had not recognized her. "No, Orgrim. She was not a warrior born. She is a warrior made." Draka had been born sickly, her skin a pale fawn color rather than the healthy tree-bark brown that marked most ores. For most of his childhood. Durotan remembered the adults speaking of her in low whispers, as of one already on the way to joining the ancestors. His own parents once spoke of her sadly, wondering what her family had done that the spirits would curse them with such a frail child.

It was soon after that. Durotan realized, putting the pieces together, that Draka's family had moved to the outskirts of the encampment. He had not seen much of her, busy as he was with his own duties.

Draka had sliced off several chunks of meat and brought them back to her family. Durotan noticed two younglings sitting with the ores who presumably were her parents. Both looked fit and healthy. Feeling her gaze upon him. Draka turned her head and met his eyes steadily. Her nostrils flared and she sat up straighter. as if daring Durotan to look upon her with pity and compassion rather than admiration and respect.

No, this one did not need any pity. By the grace of the spirits, the healing of the shaman, and the power of the will he could see burning in her brown eyes, she had cast off her childhood frailty to mature into this ... this vision of female orc perfection.

His breath escaped him in a whoosh as Orgrim elbowed him. Durotan glared at his childhood friend.

"Stop gaping, it makes me want to put something in your mouth to shut it," Orgrim grumbled.

Durotan realized he had indeed been gaping, and that more than one knowing, grinning glance was coming his way. He returned his attention to the feast, and did not glance at Draka again for the rest of the night.

But he dreamed of her. And when he awoke, he knew that she would be his. He was heir to the chieftaincy of one of the proudest of orc clans.

What female could deny him?

"No," Draka said.

Durotan was stunned. He had approached Draka the next morning and invited her to go hunting with him the following day.

Alone. Both knew what that meant; male and female hunting in a pair was a courtship ritual. And she had rebuffed him.

It was so unexpected he did not know how to react. She watched him almost contemptuously, her lips curving around her perfect tusks in a smirk.

"Why not?" Durotan managed.

"I am not yet of age." she replied. The way she phrased it made it sound more like an excuse than a reason.

But Durotan would not be put off so easily. "I had intended this to be a courting hunt, that much is true," he said bluntly. "But if you are not of age I will respect that. Still. I would like your company. Let this be a hunt shared by two proud warriors, nothing more." Now it was her turn to be startled. Durotan guessed that Draka had expected him to either push the point or leave in anger. She paused, her eyes wide. Then she grinned. "I will come on such a hunt, Durotan. son of Garad, leader of the Frostwolf clan." Durotan thought he had never been happier. This was vastly different from the usual hunt. He and Draka had set a brisk, loping pace. All his challenges with Orgrim had given Durotan stamina, and for a moment he worried that he was going too fast. But

Draka, born so fragile and now so strong, kept up with him. They did not speak much; there was little to say. They were on a hunt, they would find prey, kill it, and bring it back to their clan. The silence was easy and comfortable.

He slowed as they moved into open territory and began to scan the ground. There was no snow on the earth, so tracking was not the simple job it was in the winter months. But Durotan knew what to look for: disturbed grass, broken bush twigs, an indentation, however slight, on the soil.

"Clcftthoovcs," he said. He rose and scanned the horizon in the direction they had gone. Draka still crouched on the earth, her fingers delicately moving aside the foliage.

"One is injured," she announced.

Durotan turned to her. "I saw no blood."

She shook her head. "No blood, but the pattern of the prints tells me this." She pointed where he had looked. He saw nothing to alert him to an injured beast and shook his head, puzzled.

"No, no. not this print . . . the next. And the one after that."

She moved along, careful where she placed her feet, and suddenly Durotan saw what she had: The indentations of one hoof were slightly less deep than the other three.

The beast was limping.

He turned admiring eyes on her, and she flushed slightly. "It is easy to read." she said. "You would have found it yourself."

"No," he admitted honestly. "I did not. I saw the prints, but I did not take the time to observe them in full detail. You did. You will make an excellent hunter one day."

She straightened and looked at him proudly. Something warm and simultaneously strengthening and weakening rushed through him. He was not one to pray, but now as he looked at Draka standing before him, he sent a quick prayer to the spirits: *Let this female look agreeably upon me.*

They followed the trail like wolves on the scent. Durotan had stopped leading; this female was his equal in tracking. They complemented one another well. He had the sharper eyes, but she looked more deeply at what he found. He wondered what it would be like to fight beside her. Their eyes on the earth before them, they loped around a sharp turn. He wondered what it would be like to—

The great black wolf, crouched snarling over the same animal they had been tracking, whirled. For an endless instant, three predators regarded one another. But even before the mighty beast had gathered itself to spring, Durotan had charged.

The axe felt as nothing in his arms as he lifted and struck- It sank deep into the creature's torso, but Durotan felt the retaliatory bite from yellowed teeth crunch down on his arm. Pain, white hot and shocking, coursed through him. He tore his arm free. It was harder this time to lift the axe with his arm pumping blood, but he did. The wolf had turned its attention fully upon Durotan, its yellow eyes boring into his, its mouth open in a roar. Its hot breath stank of rancid meat.

At that instant, before the great jaws could close upon his face, Durotan heard a war cry. There was a flurry of movement in the corner of his eye. Draka sprang upon the beast, her long, ornamented spear preceding her. The wolf's head snapped back as the spear pierced its midsection. In the instant of inattention, Durotan hefted his axe again and brought it down as hard as he could. He felt it cut through the animal's body, down, down, striking earth, going deep, lodging so firmly he could not pull it out immediately.

He stepped back, panting. Draka stood beside him.

He felt her warmth, her energy, her passion for the hunt as powerful as his. Together they stared at the mighty beast they had slain. They had been taken unawares by an animal that usually required several seasoned ores to bring it down, and they were still alive. Their foe lay dead, blood pooling beneath it, sliced in two by Durotan's axe, Draka's spear protruding from its heart. Durotan realized he would never be able to tell which of them had struck the true killing blow, and the thought made him ridiculously happy.

He sat down hard.

Draka was there, quickly washing the blood from his lacerated arm, only to mutter under her breath as more came. She tended him with healing salves and tightly wrapped bandages, along with some bitter-tasting herbs she added to the water and ordered him to drink. After a few moments, the dizziness went away.

"Thank you," he said quietly.

She nodded, not looking at him. Then a smile quirked one corner of her mouth.

"What is so funny? That I was not able to stand?"

His voice was harsher than he had intended and she looked up quickly, surprised at his tone,

"Not at all. You fought well, Durotan. Many would have dropped their axe after such a blow,"

He felt oddly pleased by her comment, delivered as a factual statement rather than flattery. "Then . . . what amuses you?" She grinned, meeting his eyes evenly. "I know something, and you do not know it. But . . . after this ... I think I will tell you."

He felt himself smiling too. "I am honored."

"I told you yesterday that I was not of age for a courtship hunt."

"True."

"Well... when I said that, I knew I would soon come

fir age.

"I see," he said, though he didn't, not quite. "Well... when will you come of age?"

Her smile broadened. "Today," she said simply.

He looked at her for a long moment, then, with no word, pulled her to him and kissed her.

Talgath had been observing the ores for some time. Now, he withdrew from them, their bestial nature offending him. Being a man'ari was better. Except for the female creatures with the leathery wings and tail, man'ari slaked their lust with violence, not coupling. He preferred it that way. He would, in fact, have preferred to have slain the two on the spot, but his master had been quite clear about intervening. There would be questions asked if these two did not return to their clan, and though they were as

unimportant as flics to him, flics could become a nuisance. Kil'jaeden wanted him only to observe and report back, nothing more. And so Talgath would.

Revenge, mused Kil'jaeden, like fruit on a tree, was sweetest when allowed to fully ripen. There had been moments over the long stretch of years when he had harbored doubts about being able to locate the renegade eredar. The more Talgath shared with him, however, the more confident and delighted Kil'jaeden grew.

Talgath had served him well. He had observed the pathetic, so-called "cities" the once-mighty Velen and his little handful of eredar had created. He had observed how they lived, hunting like the creatures who called themselves "ores," putting grain in the ground with their own hands. He had watched them trade with the hulking, barely verbal creatures, treating them with a courtesy that was positively laughable. Talgath sensed some echoes of former grandeur in their buildings and limited technology, but overall, Talgath felt that Kil'jaeden would be pleased with how low his former friend had fallen.

"Draenei," they called themselves now. The exiles. And they had named the world Dracnor.

Kil'jaeden realized that Talgath was perplexed when, rather than focusing on Velen himself, Kil'jaeden wanted to know more about the ores. How were they organized? What were some of their customs? Who were their leaders, and how were they chosen? What was important to them as a society, as individuals?

But Talgath's job was to report, not to evaluate, and he answered his master to the best of his ability. When at last Kil'jaeden had learned everything that Talgath had learned, right down to the names of the two beasts rutting after their kill together, he was satisfied—for the moment at least.

At long last, revenge would be his. Velen and his upstart companions would be punished. But not quickly, not with an army of enhanced eredar to rend them to pieces of bloody pulp. That would be too merciful. Kil'jaeden wanted them dead, yes. But he wanted them broken. Humiliated. Crushed as utterly and completely as an insect beneath a booted foot.

And now, he knew exactly how to do it.

SIX

The lessons from that time were bitter, bought with blood and death and torment. But ironically, the thing that nearly destroyed us was the thing that would redeem us later: a sense of unity. Each clan was loyal to itself, fiercely dedicated to its members, but not to others. What we united under, and against, was dreadfully wrong and for that, we are atoning still. Generations after me will still pay for those mistakes. But the unity itself was glorious. And it is that lesson I wish to recover from the ashes. It is that lesson that caused me to speak with the leaders of so many seemingly different peoples, to work together toward goals we can all be proud of.

Unity. Harmony. That is the good lesson of the past. I have learned it well.

Ner'zhul looked up into the twilight sky, content. The sunset was brilliant tonight. The ancestors must be pleased, he mused, taking a small amount of pride in the thought. Another Kosh'harg had come and gone. They seemed to him to come much harder on each other's heels than they had in the past, and each time the celebration occurred, there was something to rejoice in, and something to mourn.

His old friend, Kashur—he understood that her clan, the Frostwolves, had addressed her reverently as "Mother"—had passed to the ancestors. From what he had heard, she had died bravely. She had insisted on joining a hunt, something she had not done for years. The Frostwolves had hunted clcfthoovcs, and the ancient Mother had been in the vanguard of the charging warriors. She had been trampled to death before anyone could intervene to save her, and Ner'zhul knew that even as her clan mourned her, they celebrated her life and how she had chosen to depart it. Such was the way of the ores. He wondered if he would see her, and then chided himself for the thought. He would see her if she saw fit to reveal herself to him. Death was not the vast desert of sorrow to a shaman that it was to other orcs, for they had the privilege to again be in the presence of the beloved dead, learn their wisdom, feel their affection.

The Frostwolves had had a double tragedy, for the intervening time between Kosh'hargs had claimed their leader Garad as well. The Frostwolves had had the misfortune on one deceptively sunny day to stumble across no fewer than three ogres and one of their monstrous masters. The hideous creatures were stupid but fierce.

and the gronn was a cunning foe. The ores were victorious, but at a grave cost. Despite all the healers could do, Garad and several others died from their injuries that black day.

But in the sorrow of losing a leader, and one that Ner'zhul had known and respected, was the joy of seeing new blood come into its own. Kashur had spoken well of young Durotan, and from all Ner'zhul had seen, the youth would make a fine leader. He had watched as Durotan was named chieftain, and had noticed an attractive, fierce-looking female looking on with more than simple clan interest in the proceedings. Ner'zhul felt certain that by the next Kosh'harg, the lovely Draka would be the mate of the new Frostwolf chieftain.

He sighed, sifting through the images in his mind while filling his eyes with the delights of the glorious sunset. The years came and went, and gave their blessings, and demanded their sacrifices.

He went to his small hut, which he had once shared with a mate who had passed to the ancestors several years ago. Rulkan visited him from time to time, imparting no words of wisdom, but filling his heart with tenderness and opening him afresh to the needs of his people each time her spirit brushed his. He missed her rough laughter and her warmth beside him at night, but he was content. Perhaps, he mused, Rulkan would come to him in a vision tonight.

He prepared a potion, chanting over it softly, then drinking it slowly. It would not actually cause a vision; nothing would unless the ancestors willed it, and sometimes visions came upon him when he least expected them. But over many long years the shaman had learned that some herbs opened the mind while one slept, so that if one was indeed granted the gift of a vision, one would remember it more clearly the following morning.

Ner'zhul closed his eyes, and then opened them again almost immediately, although he knew he was fast asleep.

They were standing on a mountaintop, he and his beloved Rulkan. At first he thought they were observing the sunset together, then realized that the sun was rising, not descending into slumber for the night. The sky was glorious, but in a way that roused and moved him rather than calmed and comforted him. The colors were scarlet and purple and orange, almost violent, and Ner'zhul's heart lifted.

Rulkan turned to him, smiling, and for the first time since she had exhaled her final breath as a living being, she spoke to him.

"Ner'zhul, my mate, this is a new beginning,"

He gasped, trembling, overcome with love for her, flooded with a simmering excitement roused by the vibrant colors of the sunrise. A new beginning?

"You have led our people well," she said. "But the time has come to deepen the old ways, take them further, for the good of all."

Something rose inside his mind to nudge at his conscious thought. Rulkan had not been a shaman. She had not been a chieftain. She had only been her wonderful self, which had been more than enough for Ner'zhul, but she had held no position in life that would make it likely that she would speak so authoritatively. Annoyed at his lack of faith, Ner'zhul pushed the voice down. He was not a spirit. He was only flesh and blood and though he understood the spirit ways more than most, he also knew that there was much he would never understand until he stood with them. Why *wouldn't* Rulkan speak for the ancestors?

"I am listening," he said.

She smiled. "I knew you would," she said. "There are dark and dangerous times ahead for the ores. Hitherto, we have only come together at the Kosh'harg festivals. Such isolation must end if we are to survive as a race.

Rulkan looked into the sunrise, her face thoughtful **and** shadowed. Ner'zhul ached to hold her, to take her burdens as his own as he always had in life. But now, he knew he could not touch her, nor force her to speak. So he sat silently, drinking in her beauty, cars straining for her voice.

"There is upon this world a blight," Rulkan said quietly. "It must be eliminated."

"Say it, and it will be done," Ner'zhul swore fervently. "I will always honor the advice of the ancestors.

She turned to him then, her eyes searching his as the light grew brighter. "When it is eliminated, our people will stand proud and tall . . . even more than they are now. Power and strength will be ours. This world will be ours. And you . . . you, Ner'zhul, will lead them."

Something in the way she said the words made Ner'zhul's heart leap. He was already powerful. He was honored, perhaps even revered, by his own clan, the Shadowmoon dan. He was the leader of all the orcs, in fact if not in name. But now desire stirred in his heart for more. And fear stirred in him too, dark and unpleasant, but something that must be faced.

"What is this threat that must be eliminated before the ores can claim what is rightfully theirs?"

She told him.

"What does this mean?" Durotan asked.

He broke his fast with the two people in his clan he trusted most: Draka, his intended, whom he would wed with full ceremony at the next full moon, and Drek'Thar, the new head shaman of the clan.

Durotan, along with everyone else, had mourned the passing of Mother Kashur. Durotan knew in his bones that she had intended to die that day, and wished to make a good death. She would be missed, but Drek'Thar had proved himself a worthy successor. Fighting back his personal grief, he had stepped in as the primary healer of the hunt then and subsequently. Kashur would have been proud. Now the three sat and ate in the chieftain's tent, where Durotan, chieftain since his father's death in battle against the gronn and their ogres, now dwelt.

Durotan was referring to the letter that had recently arrived, borne by a long, lean courier on a long, lean black wolf. He again perused its contents as he ate porridge made from blood and grain.

Unto Durotan, Chieftain of the Frostwolf clan, the shaman Ner'zhul gives greetings. I have been granted visions by the ancestors that concern us all, as orcs, rather than as individual clan members. I would speak with the leaders of all the clans on the twelfth day of this moon, as well as every shaman of every clan. You are to come to the foot of the sacred mountain. Meat and drink will be provided. If you cannot attend, I will take it as a sign that you do not care for the future of our people and act accordingly. Forgive my brusqueness, but this matter is of the utmost urgency. Please respond via my courier.

Durotan had made the courier wait while he discussed the matter. The courier seemed quite put out, but agreed to stay for a brief time. The aromatic smell of the porridge, wafting from a large cauldron, perhaps helped convince him.

"I do not know, other than that obviously Ner'zhul feels this is of extreme importance," Drek'Thar admitted. "Such a thing has never happened outside of the Kosh'harg ceremonies. Always the shaman have a meeting then, in the presence of the ancestors who wish to attend. But never outside of that. And I have never heard of anyone summoning the chieftains. But I have known Ner'zhul all my life. He is a wise and great shaman. If the spirits were to speak to any of us about something that threatens us all, they would speak through him."

Draka growled, "Summoning you like you are pets to come at his call." she muttered. "I dislike this. Durotan. It smacks of arrogance."

"I do not disagree with you," Durotan said. His hackles had risen at the tone of the letter and at first he had been inclined to refuse. But as he read it again, he looked past the haughty words to the intent of the letter. Something was definitely troubling the one orc everyone respected, and surely that was worth a few days' travel.

Draka watched him, her eyes narrowing. He looked at her and smiled.

"I will go, then. And all my shaman."

Draka frowned. "I will come with you."

"I think it would be best if—"

Draka snarled. "I am Draka, daughter of Kclkar, son of Rhakish. I am your intended, soon to be your life partner. You will not forbid me to accompany you!"

Durotan threw back his head and laughed, warm inside at the display of Draka's spirit. He had chosen well, all right. From one born weak had come strength and fire. The Frostwolf clan would flourish with her by his side.

"Call in the courier, then, if he has finished his meal," Durotan said, humor still lacing his deep voice. "Tell him that we will come to this strange meeting of Ner'zhul's, but we had best be assured of its necessity when we are there."

The Frostwolf leader and shaman were among the first to arrive. Ner'zhul himself greeted them, and the moment Durotan laid eyes on the shaman he knew that he had been right to come. While Ner'zhul was not a young ore, Durotan thought he had aged

years in the few months since the last Kosh'harg. He looked . . . thinner, almost wasted, as if he had not been eating for some while. And his eyes looked haunted. He grasped Durotan's broad shoulders with hands that trembled, and his thanks were sincere. This was no arrogant play for power, but a genuine feeling of threat. Durotan inclined his head, then left to see his people settled in.

Over the next few hours, as the sun sank toward the horizon, Durotan watched a steady stream of ores progress to the flat mcadowlands at the base of the sacred mountain, almost as if gathering there for the Kosh'harg festival. He saw the bright banners that announced every clan fluttering in the breeze, and he felt a smile curve his face when he saw the symbol of the Blackrock clan—Orgrim's clan. Since they had become adults, the two boyhood friends had found their time together limited, and while Orgrim had attended Durotan's chieftain ceremony, they had not seen one another since, Durotan was pleased but not altogether surprised to see that Orgrim marched only a step behind Blackhand, the hulking and intimidating leader of the Blackrock clan. Durotan's old friend was now second in command, then.

Draka followed her future mate's gaze and grunted, also pleased. She got along very well with Orgrim, for which Durotan was grateful. He was fortunate that the two people who mattered the most to him could be friends with one another.

While Blackhand was speaking with Ner'zhul, Orgrim threw Durotan a glance and a wink. Durotan grinned back. He was troubled by Ner'zhul's appearance, but at the very least, this gathering would give him a chance to visit with Orgrim. Even as Durotan had that thought, however, Blackhand turned away with a snort and waved for Orgrim to follow. Durotan felt the smile on his face ebb; if Blackhand demanded that Orgrim attend him throughout this meeting, then even that pleasure would be denied him.

Draka, who knew him so well, reached for his hand and squeezed it. She said nothing, she did not have to. Durotan looked down at her and smiled.

Word came from the same long, lean courier that Ner'zhul would not hold the meeting until tomorrow, as various clans would still be trickling in through the night. The Frostwolf encampment was smaller than most but more harmonious than many. They had brought traveling tents and furs, and the courier had seen to it that they had been given plenty of meat, fish, and fruit. A haunch of talbuk now turned slowly over the fire, its tantalizing scent keeping the appetite sharp even as the ores feasted on raw fish. There were a total of eleven—Durotan, Draka, Drek'Thar, and eight of his shaman. Some of them looked very young to Durotan, but while shaman certainly could grow in skill over time, once the ancestors had appeared to them in visions they were all accorded equal honor and respect.

A shadowy form appeared beyond the ring of the fire's illumination. Durotan got to his feet and drew himself to his full imposing height, just in case the visitor had had too much to drink and had come with belligerent intent. Then the wind shifted and he laughed as he caught Orgrim's scent.

"Welcome, my old friend," he cried as he went to roughly embrace the other ore. Tall as Durotan was, Orgrim was still bigger, as he had been in their youth. As he regarded the Blackrock second in command, Durotan privately marveled how he had been able to best Orgrim in anything.

Orgrim grunted and clapped Durotan on the shoulder. "Your gathering is small, but it smells the best of any of them," he said, looking at the roasting meat and sniffing appreciatively.

"Then tear off a hunk of talbuk and leave your duties behind for a while," Draka said. "Would that I could," Orgrim sighed, "but I do not have much time. If the Frostwolf chieftain would walk with me a bit, I would be honored."

"Let us walk, then," Durotan replied.

They left the encampment and walked in silence for a time, until the campfires were small, twinkling lights in the distance and they were assured that there were no prying eyes or ears to witness them. Both ores sniffed the wind as well. Orgrim stood silently for a while, and Durotan waited with the patience of the true hunter.

At last, Orgrim spoke. "Blackhand did not want us to come," he said. "He thought it demeaning, that Ner'zhul would summon us like we were pets to his call."

"Draka and I had that reaction as well, but I am glad we did. You saw Ner'zhul's face. One look at him was all I needed to determine that we had been right to come."

Orgrim snorted derisively. "For myself as well, but when I left the camp, Blackhand was still raging against the shaman. He does not see what you and I do."

It was not Durotan's place to speak ill of another clan leader, but neither was it any secret what most ores thought of Blackhand. He was certainly a powerful ore, fully in his prime, bigger and stronger than any orc Durotan had ever seen. And he was also certainly not stupid. But there was an air about him that raised Durotan's hackles. Durotan decided to hold his tongue.

"I see your struggle even in the darkness, my old friend," Orgrim said quietly. "You do not have to speak for me to know what you would say. He is my chieftain, I have sworn loyalty to him and I will not break that oath. But even I have my misgivings."

The admission startled Durotan. "You do?"

Orgrim nodded. "I am torn, Durotan; torn between my loyalties and what my mind and heart tell me. May you never be put in such a position. As second, I can help moderate him somewhat, but not much. He is clan leader, and he has the power. I can only hope that he will listen to others tomorrow and not stubbornly sit on his wounded pride."

Durotan fervently shared that hope. If things were indeed as bad as Ner'zhul's expression seemed to indicate, the last thing he wanted to see was the leader of one of the most powerful clans behaving like a spoiled child.

His eye fell upon a dark shape on Orgrim's back. Pride and sorrow both flooded him as he spoke. "You carry the Doomhammer now. I did not know of your father's passing."

"He died bravely and well," Orgrim said. He hesitated, then said, "Do you remember that day long ago when We ran afoul of the ogre and the draenei saved us?"

"I could never forget it," Durotan said.

"Their prophet spoke of the time when I would receive the Doomhammer," Orgrim said. "I was so excited at the thought of wielding it in the hunt. That was the first time I understood—I mean really understood—that the day it became my weapon would be the day I would be fatherless."

He unstrapped the weapon from his back and hoisted it. It was like watching a dancer. Durotan thought—a balance of power and grace. The moon shone down upon Orgrim's strong body as he moved, crouched, sprang, swung. Finally, breathing heavily and sweating, Orgrim replaced the legendary weapon.

"It is a glorious thing." Orgrim said quietly. "A weapon of power. A weapon of prophecy. The pride of my lineage. And I would shatter it into a thousand pieces with my own hands if it would bring my father back."

Without another word, Orgrim strode back toward the small cluster of twinkling fires. Durotan made no move to follow. He sat for a long time, staring up at the stars, sensing deep within his soul that the world he would behold upon awakening tomorrow would be radically different than the one he had known all his life.

SEVEN

I know well that we lost more than we gained, we ores. At that point, our culture was unspoiled, innocent, pure. We were like children who had always been safe, loved, and protected. But children need to grow up, and we as a people were too easily manipulated.

There is a place for trust; no one can accuse me of not knowing this. But we must also be careful. Those who have fair faces can deceive, and even those whom we believe in with all our souls can beguiled.

It is the loss of our innocence that I lament when I think back to what those days must have been like. And it was our innocence that led to our downfall.

It was a long line of solemn faces that turned to look at the gathered leaders of the orc clans. Durotan stood next to Draka, his arm about her waist in a protective gesture, although he was not sure why he felt she needed defending. His eyes widened as they met Drek'Thar's and he saw in his friend and advisor's face something that chilled him to the bone.

He wished he could stand with Orgrim. They were of different clans and different traditions, but other than his intended, there was no one Durotan trusted more. But Orgrim, of course, stood beside his chieftain Blackhand, who looked around at the gathered shaman with thinly concealed annoyance.

"He has been too long away from the hunt, that one," Draka murmured, nodding in Blackhand's direction. "He is spoiling for a fight."

Durotan sighed. "He may well get it. Look at their faces."

"I have never seen Drek'Thar so, not even when Mother Kashur's body was broken," Draka said.

Durotan did not reply, merely nodded and continued to observe.

Ner'zhul strode forward into the center of the gathered crowd. Everyone moved back to give him room. He began to walk sunwise in a circle, murmuring. Then he paused and lifted his hands. Fire burst forth in front of him, leaping skyward in a display that brought soft sounds of appreciation even from those who had seen such things many times before. It stood, towering over them for a long moment, then subsided, settling down to become a traditional bonfire, albeit a magical one.

"As the darkness falls, in more ways than one, sit you beside the fire," Ner'zhul commanded. "Let each clan sit to itself, with its own shaman, and I will call you forth to speak when the time is right."

"Perhaps you wish us to fetch a slain beast for you, too," came a fierce, angry voice. "And lie obediently at your feet at night!"

Durotan knew that voice; he had heard it raised often enough at the Kosh'harg festivals in his youth, and had heard its owner utter cries to chill the blood during hunts. It was distinctive and unmistakable. He turned to look at Grom Hellscream, the youthful leader of the Warsong clan, and hoped that the outburst would not overly delay whatever it was Ner'zhul had to tell them all.

Hellscream stood in the front of his clan, more slender man most orcs, but still tall and imposing. The Warsong colors were red and black, and while Hellscream wore no armor, the simple learners in those strong hues served to send an imposing message nonetheless. He folded his arms and glared at Ner'zhul.

Ner'zhul did not rise to the bait, merely sighed deeply. "Many of you feel your honor is offended, this I know. Give me leave to speak, and you will be glad that you are here. Your children's children will be glad of it."

Hellscream growled and his eyes flashed, but he said no more. He stood for a moment longer, then with a shrug, as if to indicate that it was by his own will, he sat. His clan followed his lead.

Ner'zhul waited until there was quiet, and then began to speak. "I have had a vision," he said, "from one of the ancestors whom I trust more than I can possibly say. She has revealed to me a threat, lurking like a poisonous scorpion under a flowering bush. All the other shaman can attest to this, and the) will, once they have opportunity to speak. It grieves and infuriates me that we have been so duped."

Durotan hung on the shaman's words, his heart racing. Who was this mysterious enemy? How had so dark a foe escaped their notice?

Ner'zhul sighed, looking down on the ground, then shook himself. His voice was deep and confident, if laced with sorrow.

"The enemy of which I speak," he said heavily, "is the draenei."

Chaos erupted.

Durotan stared, disbelieving. He looked around, seeking Orgrim's gaze, and stared into his friend's wide, gray eyes, seeing there the same stunned shock that he himself felt. The draenei? Surely something was wrong. The gronn, yes, perhaps they had stumbled across some secret knowledge to use against the hated ores . . . but no. Not the draenei.

They were not even fighters on the level that the ores were. They hunted, yes, that was true, but they needed meat as much as any orc in order to survive. They could stand against the gronn, and sometimes had assisted a hunting party a time or two. Durotan's thoughts went back to the day when two young ore

children were fleeing before an ogre whose footsteps made the earth tremble, and the tall, blue figures that had appeared out of nowhere to save them.

Why would they risk themselves to save two boys if they were truly as methodically evil as Ner'zhul believed? It made no sense. Nothing about any of this made sense.

Ner'zhul was clamoring for silence, and not getting it. Blackhand was on his feet, veins standing out in his thick neck, while Orgrim was doing what he could to placate his chieftain. Then a terrible noise pierced the air, shattering the cars and almost

stopping the heart. Grom Hellscream stood as well, his head thrown back, his chest thrust forward and his black jaw open so wide it seemed almost to have unhinged itself like a snake's. Nothing could compete with Hellscream's war cry, and stunned silence ensued.

Grom opened his eyes and grinned at Ner'zhul, who seemed completely nonplussed at having a former antagonist become an ally so quickly.

"Let the shaman continue." Hellscream said. So utter was the silence after his outburst that the words were heard by all, even though they were spoken in a conversational tone. "I want to hear more of this new, old enemy."

Ner'zhul smiled gratefully. "I know this startles you. It shocked me as well. But the ancestors do *not* lie. These seemingly benevolent people have been waiting for years until the time is right to attack us. They sit safely behind their strange buildings made of materials we do not understand, and they harbor secrets that could benefit us greatly."

"But why?" Durotan spoke even before he himself realized he had. Heads turned to look at him, but he did not back down. "Why do they want to attack us? If they harbor such vast secrets, what do they need from us? And how could we possibly defeat them if this is true?"

Ner'zhul looked discomfited. "That, I do not know, but I do know that the ancestors are concerned."

"We outnumber them," Blackhand growled.

"Not by that much," Durotan shot back. "Not against their superior knowledge. They came here on a ship that sails between worlds. Blackhand. Think you they will fall to arrows and axes?"

Blackhand's heavy brows drew together. He opened his mouth to retort.

"This has been simmering like a stew on the fire for many decades," Ner'zhul interrupted, forestalling the argument. "Resolution and eventual victory will not come overnight. I do not ask you to go to war this moment, but simply to be aware. To prepare. To discuss with your shaman the right course of action. And to open your minds and hearts to a union that will ensure triumph."

He spread his hands imploringly. "We are separate clans, yes, each with its own traditions and heritage. I am not asking you to give up that proud history, merely asking you to open your minds to a unity that

takes clans that are strong alone and turns them into an unstoppable force. We are all orcs! Blackrock, Warsong, Thundcrlord, Dragonmaw . . . don't you see how little those distinctions matter? *We are the same people!* In the end, we want safe homes for our young, success in the hunt, mates who love us, honor among the ancestors. We are more alike than different."

Durotan knew this to be true and glanced over at his friend. Orgrim stood behind his chieftain, tall and imposing and solemn. Yet when he felt Durotan's gaze on him, he met that gaze and nodded.

There had been those who had protested this unusual friendship between two adventuresome and, Durotan had to admit, trouble-prone youths. But Durotan would not be who he was today if he had not drawn from Orgrim's steady strength; and he knew in his bones that Orgrim felt the same about him.

But the draenei...

"May I speak?"

The voice belonged to Drek'Thar, and Durotan turned, surprised. The question seemed to be addressed not only to his chieftain, but to the shaman who had been a mentor to all of them. Ner'zhul looked at Durotan, who nodded.

"My chieftain," Drek'Thar said, and to Durotan's shock his voice trembled, "my chieftain, what Ner'zhul has said is true. Mother Kashur confirmed it."

The other Frostwolf shaman nodded. Durotan stared at them. Mother Kashur? If there was anyone Durotan trusted, it was that wise old ore. His mind went back to the moment when he stood in the cavern, feeling the cold air that was not air on his face, listening and watching with every fiber of his being as Mother Kashur spoke to someone he could not see but who he knew was there,

"Mother Kashur said the draenei are our enemies?" he asked, hardly able to believe his ears,

Drek'Thar nodded.

"It is time for the clan chieftains to listen to their own shaman, as Durotan has done," said Ner'zhul. "We will reconvene at twilight, and the chieftains will tell me their thoughts. These are the people you know and trust. Ask them what they have seen," The gathered crowd began to disperse. Slowly, looking at one another cautiously, the Frostwolf clan wandered back to their own encampment. As one, they sat in a circle and turned their attention to Drek'Thar, who began to speak slowly and carefully.

"The draenei are not our friends," he said. "My chieftain . . . I know you and the Doomhammer Blackrock stayed with them one night, I know that you spoke well of them, I know that it appears that they saved your life. But let me ask you . . . did nothing strike you amiss?"

Durotan recalled the ogre bearing down on them, bellowing in fury, its club swinging. And with an uncomfortable sensation, he recalled how very, very quickly the draenei appeared to rescue him and Orgrim. How they could not return home as it was so conveniently close to twilight.

He frowned. It was an uncharitable thought, and yet...

"Your brow furrows, my chieftain. I take it, then, that your youthful faith in them is now starting to wane?"

Durotan did not answer, nor did he look at his clan's head shaman. He stared down at the earth, not wanting to feel this way, but unable to stop the doubt from creeping into his heart, like the cold fingers of a frosty morning.

In his memory, he again spoke to Restalaan, telling the tall blue draenei, "We were not as we are now."

"No, you are not," Restalaan had said. "We have watched the ores grow in strength and skill and talent. You have impressed us," He felt again a sharp sting, as if the compliment were a carefully crafted insult. As if the draenei thought they were superior . . . even with their strange, unnatural blue skin, their legs shaped like those of common talbuks, with long, reptilian tails and shiny blue hooves instead of decent feet like the ores had—

"Speak, my chieftain. What do you recall?"

Durotan told him in a rough and heavy voice of the fortuitous arrival of the draenei, of Restalaan's near arrogance, "And . . . and Velen, their prophet, asked many questions about us, and he was not making idle conversation. He truly seemed to want to know about the ores." "Of course he did," Drek'Thar said. "What an opportunity! They have been plotting against us since they arrived.

And to find two—forgive me. Durotan. but two young and naive children to tell them everything they wanted to know? It must have been quite an event."

The ancestors would not lie to them, especially about something so important. Durotan knew this. And now that he recalled the events of that day and night in this new light of knowledge, it was obvious how suspicious Velen's actions had been. And yet . . . was Velen such a master of deceit that the sensation of trust both Orgrim and Durotan had felt had been all a lie?

Durotan bowed his head.

"There is part of me that doubts yet, my friends," he said quietly. "And yet, I cannot stake the future of our people on such thin ice as my own personal doubts. Ner'zhul did not propose an assault tomorrow. He asked for us to train, and watch, and prepare, and draw closer as a people. This I will do, for the good of the Frostwolves and the good of the ores."

He looked at each worried face in turn, some merely friends, some, like Drek'Thar and Draka, known and loved.

"The Frostwolf clan will prepare for war."

EIGHT

How easily the mind can be turned to hate from a place of fear—an instinctive, natural, protective response. Instead of focusing on the things that unite us, we focus on what divides us. My skin is green; yours is pink. I have tusks; you have long ears. Mysfein is bare; yours is covered with fur. I breathe air; you do not. If we had dung to such things, the Burning Legion would not have been defeated, for I would never have wished to ally with Jaina Proudmoore, or fight alongside elves. My people would then not have survived to befriend the tauren, or the forsaken.

So it was with draenei. Our skin was reddish-brown then; theirs was blue. We had feet, they had hooves and a tail. We lived mostly in the open, they lived in enclosed spaces. We had a fairly short life span; no one knew how long-lived they were. Nevermind that they had shown us nothing but courtesy and openness. That they had traded with us, taught us, shared whatever they were asked to share. That had no bearing now. We had heard from the ancestors, and we saw with our own eyes how different they were.

My prayer, every day, is for wisdom to guide my people. And in that prayer is couched a plea, never to be blinded by such trivial differences.

The training began. It had always been custom among nearly every clan to begin training the younglings once they celebrated their sixth year, but previously, the training had been serious but relaxed. Weapons were for hunting animals, not sentient beings who had their own weapons and skills and technological advantages, and there were plenty of hunters who could easily bring down prey. A young orc learned at his or her own pace, and there was plenty of time for play and enjoying simply being young. No longer.

The plea for unity among the ores was answered. The couriers exhausted their beasts riding to and fro between clans carrying messages. At one point some bright fellow came up with the idea of training bloodhawks to carry the letters. It took some doing and did not happen overnight, but gradually, Durotan grew used to seeing the scarlet birds fluttering to Drek'Thar and others in the clan. He approved of the idea; every warm body was needed if battle plans were to be successful.

While spears, arrows, axes, and other weapons worked well against the animals of the fields and forests, they would need to be supplemented with other types of weapons if they were to be used against the draenei. Protection would be vital, and whereas before the smiths and leathercrafters focused on armor that would blunt attacks from claws and teeth, now they had to create things that would save the wearer if he were impaled or slashed by a sword. Those who understood the craft of smithing had been few previously; now, the master smiths found themselves teaching dozens at a time. The forges rang day and night with the sound of hammers and the hiss of hot metal being plunged into water barrels. Many spent long days swinging picks, forcing the earth to yield the necessary minerals for crafting weapons and metal armor. Hunts, which had been conducted as the need arose, now were daily events, as food needed to be dried and preserved and skins were required for armor. The younglings who lined up for training looked very young indeed to Durotan, who was one of many instructors. He recalled his father teaching him the ways of axe and spear. What would he think of these small ones, all but buckling beneath shiny metal armor, holding weapons that no orc had ever before borne?

Draka, with whom he had joined in a quick, quiet ritual as he did not want to take time or resources away from war training, touched his back gently. Always, she knew what he was thinking.

"It would be better if we had been born in a time of peace," she agreed. "Even the most bloodthirsty knows the truth of that. But we are where we are, my mate, and I know you will not shirk this task."

He smiled sadly at her. "Nay, I will not. We are warriors. We thrive on the hunt, on the challenge, on the spilling of blood and the cries of victory. They are small, but they are not weak. They will learn. They are Frostwolves." He paused, then added fiercely, "They are *ores*."

"Time is passing," said Rulkan.

"I know . . . but you would not have our people go into battle unprepared," Ner'zhul replied. "The draenei are vastly superior as it stands now."

Rulkan grunted unhappily, then smiled. Ner'zhul looked at her. Was it his imagination, or did the smile seem forced?

"We are training as fast as we can," Ner'zhul added quickly, not wishing to offend the spirit who had been his lifemate.

Rulkan was silent. Clearly, it was not fast enough.

"Perhaps you can help us," he said. He was aware that he was babbling. "Perhaps there is knowledge you have that. . . that..."

Rulkan frowned, then cocked her head. "I have told you all I know," she said, "but there are other powers . . . other beings . . . that the living do not know of."

Ner'zhul almost stumbled at her words. "There are the elements, and there are the ancestral spirits," he managed. "What other beings are there?"

She smiled at him. "You yet breathe, my mate. You are not ready to treat with them. They are the ones who have been aiding us, so that we may aid you, the beloved ones we left behind."

"No!" Ner'zhul realized he was pleading, but he could not help it. "Please . . . We need aid if we are to protect the future generations from the draenei's insidious plots."

He did not say that he was enjoying being the center of attention from every single orc in every single clan. He did not say that her earlier promise of power had made him think on such things, and begin to desire them. But even more than that, she had instilled such terror of the monstrous draenei that this sudden holding back on her part unnerved him totally.

Rulkan looked at him appraisingly. "Perhaps you are right," she said. "I will see if they will speak to you. There is one whom I trust the most, whose concern for our people is deep and abiding. I will ask him."

He nodded, almost ridiculously pleased at her words, then blinked awake. A smile stretched his lips.

Soon. He would see this mysterious spirit, this benefactor, very soon.

Gul'dan smiled at him as he brought in fruit and fish to break his master's fast. "Another vision, my master?" He bowed low as he presented the food and cup of steaming herbal tea. Upon Rulkan's advice, Ner'zhul had begun drinking a tincture of certain herbs brewed to a precise strength. Rulkan assured him that it would continue to ensure that his mind and spirit remained open to visions. Ner'zhul had found the concoction unpleasant at first, but had showed no sign of his dislike. Now, he found he enjoyed the beverage first thing in the morning and three more times throughout the day. He accepted the cup and sipped it as he nodded in response to Gul'dan's question.

"Indeed . . . and I have learned something important. Gul'dan, for as long as there have been orcs, there have been shamans. And the shamans work with the elements and with the ancestors,"

Gul'dan's face wore an expression of puzzlement. "Yes ... of course ..."

Ner'zhul couldn't stifle a grin that stretched his lips wide over his tusks. "And that is still true. But there is more than we know of. More than the ancestors can see, but we as living beings cannot. Rulkan has told me she has been in contact with such beings. They have wisdom and knowledge even beyond that of the ancestors, and they will come to us to aid us. Rulkan says there is one in particular who has chosen to take the ores under his wing. And soon . . . soon he will show himself to me!"

Gul'dan's eyes sparkled. "And ... to me too, perhaps, master?"

Ner'zhul smiled. "You are a strong one, Gul'dan," he said. "I would not have chosen you as my apprentice if that were not the case. Yes, I think so. When he has deemed you worthy, as he has deemed me."

Gul'dan lowered his head. "May it be so," he said. "I am so honored to serve. This is a time of great glory for the ores. We are blessed to live to see it."

The Blackrock clan, with Blackhand himself in the vanguard, had begged for the honor of being the first to strike. There had been some resentment and grumbling, but the hunting skills of the Blackrock were legendary, and they were logical first choice as they also lived fairly near Telmor, one of the smaller, more isolated cities. They had been given the first efforts at armor, swords, metal-tipped arrows, and other weapons of war that would bring down the draenei.

Orgrim, the Doomhammer strapped across his back and clad from head to foot in metal that made him chafe and feel confined, rode at his chieftain's side. The wolf beneath him seemed to have an equal dislike of the heavy armor, and now and then turned his massive head to snap at Orgrim's leg, as if at some insect that annoyed him. He also seemed to be laboring a bit as he bore his rider across the soft meadow grass, panting more than usual, pink tongue lolling.

Orgrim muttered under his breath. It had sounded so simple: go to war against this new, insidious foe. But when they had all, including Orgrim, stood and cheered the decision, no one had stopped to think of how difficult it would be simply to prepare. They would need to breed the wolves for size even more now, if the animals were to carry armor as well as orc bodies already heavy with dense bone and powerful muscle.

The weapons were not untried. Several times already they had attacked the ogres, rationalizing that although they were lumbering and stupid and the draenei were quick and intelligent, fighting them was more akin to fighting the new enemy than killing talbuk would be. They had lost a few, at first, who were burned on a pyre with due ceremony for their honorable sacrifice. The weapons felt alien in their hands, the armor slowed them down, but each time, the attacks went more smoothly. The last time, they had faced not only a pair of ogres but one of their masters, a gronn who had the ferocity of the ogres it dominated and a vile cleverness that made it a much more challenging foe. Two brave Blackrock soldiers fell before Orgrim got in the final blow, swinging his hammer of prophecy and bringing doom upon the bellowing gronn.

Blackhand stood beside him, panting and sweating, blood, his own and that of the creature they had just slain, spattering his face. He wiped his face with his mailed hand and licked the blood, grunting.

"Two ogres and their master," he muttered, reaching out a hand to clap Orgrim on the shoulder. "The pitiful draenei do not stand a chance against our might!"

Standing sweating in the sun, its bright light glinting off the metal plate and almost blinding his eyes, Orgrim agreed. Bloodlust rose high in him. He trusted Ner'zhul and the shaman of his clan. Further, he had spoken with Durotan, and they both agreed that though they had been treated fairly by the draenei on that long-ago day when they had been rescued by the blucskins, there had been something peculiar about them. The spirits had never guided them falsely before. Why would they do so now?

But as he rode alongside his lord to where a small hunting party had been reported, Orgrim had misgivings. What if the draenei had been odd? Surely the ores must have seemed odd to them when they first arrived. Was death truly an appropriate punishment for being different? When had there been a single attack on an orc by the draenei? A single insult or offense, even? Now eighteen Blackrock warriors, armed to the teeth, their bodies coated in protective metal, were riding to slaughter a group of the blucskins who were doing nothing more threatening than gathering food for their people. Unexpected and unwanted, an image rose in Orgrim's mind of the young draenei girl who had smiled shyly at them. Was it her father or mother who would die here on this gloriously sunny day?

"You look lost in thought Orgrim," said Blackhand in his gravelly voice, startling Orgrim momentarily. "What fills your mind, my second?"

The face of an orphan, thought Orgrim, but did not say. Instead, he said gruffly, "I was wondering what color draenei blood was." Blackhand threw back his oversized head and laughed heartily. Orgrim heard a harsh caw and the sound of frantic wingbeats as the very crows took flight at the noise of the Blackrock chieftain's laughter.

"I will make sure your face is painted in it," Blackhand said, chuckling.

Orgrim's jaw tightened and he said nothing. *The ancestors do not lie*, he thought grimly. *A child is innocent, always, but its parents have earned death, if they are plotting against us as the spirits have said.*

They came upon them with ridiculous ease, not bothering to hide their approach. The scout had said the hunting party numbered eleven, six males and five females, and they had encountered a herd of cleft-hooves. While the great, shaggy beasts were strong and difficult to bring down, they did not have the aggressiveness of a roused herd of talbuks, and the draenei hunting party had already managed to isolate a young bull. It roared, pawing the earth and lowering its head, aiming its single horn at its attackers, but the outcome was assured.

Or it would have been, had it not been for the arrival of the ores.

Blackhand drew his company to a halt on a ridge. Orgrim could smell the excitement from his kinsmen. Their bodies quivered with anticipation in their newly crafted armor, their hands clenched and unclenched, wanting to curl about the weapons that were only now becoming familiar. Blackhand held up a mailed fist, his small eyes fastened on the activity below, waiting for the right moment to swoop down like a hawk on a meadow rat.

The Blackrock chieftain turned to his shaman, who were in the back. They, too, wore armor, but carried no weapons; they did not need to. They would heal their brethren as they fell, and also direct the immense power of the elements toward their foe. "You are ready?" he asked.

The eldest among them nodded. His eyes glowed fiercely and his lips were curved in a smile. He, too, wanted to see draenei blood shed this day.

Blackhand grunted and brought his fist down. The Blackrock warriors charged.

They uttered their battle cries as they came, and the blueskins turned, startled. At first, only surprise registered on those faces. No doubt they merely wondered why such a great number of mounted orc warriors were coming to aid them in the kill. It was only when Blackhand, atop his monstrous wolf, brought his two-handed broadsword down in a smooth blow that severed their leader in half that the draenei realized that the ores had come not for the cleft-hoof, but for them.

To their credit, they did not stare in stunned horror at the sight, but sprang immediately into action. Voices that held only the faintest tremor of fear uttered words in a liquid-sounding, alien tongue. Although Orgrim did not recognize the words—Durotan had the gift of recall for such things, not he—the sound was familiar. He knew what to expect from that long-ago day when the draenei had rescued him and Durotan, and had prepared his kinsmen. So when the sky crackled with unnatural blue and silver lightning, the shaman were ready. They blasted the strange bolts of light with lightning of their own. The brightness was almost blinding, and Orgrim looked down quickly, his focus on the draenei warrior in front of him wielding a staff that glowed and sparked. He roared and lifted the Doomhammer over his head and brought it crashing down upon his enemy. The armor the draenei warrior wore could not withstand such an attack and crumpled like a thin tin bracelet. Blood and brains splattered the ground.

Orgrim looked up, searching for his next target. Some of the Blackrocks were held in the magical netting created by the draenei's foul, unnatural lightning. They were proud and strong warriors, but they screamed in agony as the netting burned its way into their skin. The acrid odor of burning flesh mixed with the reek of blood and fear in Orgrim's nostrils. It was an intoxicating smell. He felt a wind brush his face, chasing away the scents of battle and infusing his lungs with energy. Orgrim selected the one he would next kill and raced toward the warrior, a female who had no weapon but who was wreathed in pulsating blue energy. Orgrim grunted in surprise as the Doomhammer struck the field and bounced off, the shock shivering up the weapon into his arms and jarring him to the bone. One

of the shaman stepped in, the crackling sound of lightning vying with the mysterious, magical energies of the draenei, and Orgrim cheered as he saw the good, natural lightning beat back that blue field. He swung again, and this time the Doomhammer crunched down on the blueskin's skull most satisfactorily.

It was all but over now. Only two remained standing, and in a heartbeat they had fallen beneath a mass of armored brown bodies. A few more shouts and grunts and the unmistakable sound of bladed weapons sinking into flesh, and then all was silent. The cornered cleft-hoof had escaped.

Orgrim caught his breath, his blood singing in his ears, aflame with the excitement of the kill. He had always enjoyed the hunts, but this ... he had never experienced anything like this. Sometimes the beasts he attacked fought back, but prey such as the draenei—intelligent, powerful, who fought in the same way he did and not with tooth and claw—was new to him. He threw back his head and laughed, and wondered if somehow he had become drunk on the sensation.

The cheers and rough, deep bellows of laughter from the victorious ores were the only sound in the glade. Blackhand strode to Orgrim and embraced him as best he could through the armor they both wore.

"I saw the Doomhammer, but it was so fast it was only a blur to my eyes," the Blackrock chieftain rumbled, grinning. "You fought well today, Orgrim. I was wise to name you my second." He stooped over the mage that had been Orgrim's last kill and removed his mailed gloves. The skull had been completely shattered, and blue blood was everywhere. Blackhand dipped his fingers in the slain draenei's life-fluid and carefully painted Orgrim's face with it. Deep inside, something shifted in the ore. He remembered doing this himself at his first kill, the **blood red** and warm; he remembered having this done to him when he went to the sacred mountain as part of the *Om 'rigger* ritual, with his father's blood on his face. And now, his leader had anointed him again, with the blood of the beings that were their enemy.

A bit of the dark blue liquid trickled down his cheek into the corner of his mouth. Orgrim extended his tongue, tasted the fluid, and found it sweet.

The bloodhawk settled on its master's arm, its talons digging deep into the protective leather. Ner'zhul paced while the hawkmaster unrolled the message and delivered it to him. Quickly, he scanned the small piece of parchment.

So easy. It had been so easy. Not a single casualty, although some had been injured, of course. Their first foray and the ores had been completely victorious. Blackhand spoke contemptuously of how swiftly they had descended upon the party and broken their skulls. It was all unfolding as Rulkan had promised him. Surely, surely now the being with whom Rulkan had allied would appear. The orcs, led by Ner'zhul,

had certainly proven their worth with this decisive triumph.

He again read the missive. Blackhand and the Blackrock ores had indeed been the right choice to send against the draenei. They were powerful and violent, but unlike the Warsong or some other clans, they were completely under the control of their chieftain. That night, he had a victory feast prepared for the Shadowmoon clan, and they ate and drank and laughed and sang until at last Ner'zhul trundled to his bed and fell into a deep, profound sleep.

And the being came.

It was glorious, radiant, so bright that even with his vision-eyes Ner'zhul could not bear to look upon it at first. He fell to his knees, shaking with the joy and awe that washed through him.

"You have come," he whispered, feeling tears well up in his eyes and slip down his face. "I knew that if we pleased you, you would come."

"Indeed you have, Ner'zhul, shaman, soul-tender of the ores." The voice rumbled through his bones and Ner'zhul closed his eyes, almost giddy at the sensation. "I have seen your masterful handling of your people, how you brought disparate clans together with a common purpose, a glorious goal."

"One that was inspired by you. Great One," murmured Ner'zhul. He thought of Rulkan and briefly wondered why she was no longer appearing to him, then dismissed the thought of her. This great entity was far superior to even the shade of his beloved mate. Ner'zhul craved more words from this magnificent being,

"You came to us and revealed the truth." Ner'zhul continued. "We did what was needed."

"You did indeed, and I am well pleased with you. Glory and honor and sweet victory will continue to be yours if you do as I say."

"Of course I will, but... Great One. this humble petitioner would beg a favor."

Ner'zhul risked a glance up at the being. It was enormous, radiant and red, with a powerful torso and legs that ended in cloven hooves and curved backward like a talbuk's. . .

... or a draenei's. . . .

Nerzhul blinked. There was silence for a moment after he voiced his request and he thought he felt a sudden chill. Then the voice spoke again in his mind and in his ears, and it was still smooth and sweet as honey.

'Ask, and I will decide if you are worthy.'

Suddenly Ner'zhul's mouth was dry and the words would not form. With an effort, he spoke. "Great One ... do you have a name by which we may call you-

A chuckle rumbled through Ner'zhul's blood. "A simple favor, easily granted. Yes, I have a name. You may call me . . .

Kil'jaeden."

NINE

It is easy to understand why so many of my contemporaries prefer to let this history die. Let it sink into oblivion silently, slipping beneath the waters of time until the surface of the lake is once again unruffled, and no one knows of the shame lurking in the depths. I, too, feel that shame, though I was not alive when this occurred. I see it in Drek'Thar's face as he recounts his part of the tale in a shaking voice. I saw the weight of it on Orgrim Doomhammer. Grom Helbcream, friend and traitor and friend again, was ravaged by it.

But to pretend it did not exist is to forget how dreadful the impact was. To make ourselves into victims, rather than claiming our participation in our own destruction. We chose this path, we ores. We chose it right up until it was too late to turn back. And having made that choice once, we can, with the knowledge that we have of the end of that dark and shameful road, choose not to take it.

So I wish to hear the testimony of those who placed one foot in front of the other on a road that spelled near obliteration of our kind. I want to understand why they took each step, what had to happen for it to seem logical and good and right.

I want to know this so when I see it unfolding again, I will recognize it.

Humatis have two sayings that are wise beyond imagining.

The first is, "Those who do not learn from history are condemned to repeat it."

And the second is . . . "Know your enemy."

Velen was deep in meditation when Restalaan reluctantly approached him. He sat in the central courtyard of the Temple of Karabor, not on the comfortable benches that flanked the rectangular pool, but on the hard stone. The air was filled with the scent of the flowering bushes of the lush garden, and the water murmured softly as it circulated. Trees, their leaves moving in the wind, added their own quiet sounds. It was a tranquil scene, but Velen's attention was inward.

Long, long had the draenei and the Naaru trusted one another. The luminous beings who so seldom opted to take solid form had been first caretakers of the exiled eredar, then teachers, and then friends. They had traveled together and beheld many worlds.

Each time the Naaru, particularly the one that called itself K'ure, had been instrumental in helping the draenei flee when the man'ari uncovered their hiding place. And each time, Kil'jaeden and the monstrous creatures who had once been eredar had come closer

to capturing them. Velen grieved every time he and his people had to depart a world to save themselves, knowing that any beings they left behind would be as changed as the eredar had been. Kil'jaeden, always eager for more to join the Legion he was creating for his dark master Sargeras, would overlook no possible recruit.

K'ure, as sorrowful as Velen, grieved with him. But it spoke in Velen's mind with the unalterable logic that Kil'jaeden, Archimonde, and Sargeras would have destroyed another world in the same amount of time. All worlds, all beings, all races were horrifically equal in Sargeras's eyes. They all needed to be obliterated in a ghastly festival of carnage and fire, Velen's death at the hands of beings who had once been his dearest friends would save none of the luckless innocents, whereas his life possibly would one day.

"How?" Velen had raged once, "How is my life more important, worthier, than theirs?"

The gathering is slow, K'ure had admitted. But it continues. There are other Naaru like me, who are reaching out to the younger races. When they are ready, they will all be brought together. Sargeras will eventually fall beneath the will of those who yet believe in what is good and true and harmonious, what is the timeless balance of this universe.

Velen had no choice but to either believe this being who had become his friend, or turn his back on those who had trusted him and be twisted into man'ari. He chose to believe. Now, though, he was confused. The ores had begun attacking lone hunting parties. There seemed to be no reason for the aggression; none of the shaken guards to whom Velen had spoken reported anything out of the ordinary. And yet, three hunting parties had been killed down to the last draenei. Restalaan, who had investigated the slaughter, had reported that the bodies were not simply killed ... they were butchered.

So Velen had come to the temple, created in the earliest years of the draenei on this world. Here, surrounded by four of the seven ata'mal crystals that had sprung into being so very long ago, he could hear the faint voice of his friend in his mind, but as yet, K'ure had no answers for him.

There would be no flight for them this time if things went wrong. K'ure was dying, trapped in the very vessel that it had provided when it had crashed into this world two hundred years past.

"Great Prophet," said Restalaan, his voice soft and weary-sounding. "There has been another attack."

Slowly, Velen opened his ancient eyes and regarded his friend sorrowfully. "I know," he said. "I felt it."

Restalaan ran a thick-fingered hand through his black hair. "What do We do? Each attack seems more violent than the last.

Examination of the injuries done to the bodies seems to indicate that they are improving their weapons."

Velen sighed deeply and shook his head. The white braids swung gently with the movement. "I cannot hear K'ure," he said quietly. "At least, not as well as I used to. I fear its time is not much longer."

Restalaan lowered his gaze, pain evident on his face. The Naaru had effectively sacrificed itself for them; all the draenei knew and understood this. Strange and mysterious as the being was, the draenei had grown to care for it. It had been trapped and slowly dying for two centuries. Somehow, Velen had thought it would take longer than that for the being to die ... if it did die, as he understood such things.

He rose with purpose, his light tan robes fluttering behind him. "It yet has wisdom to impart to me, but I have not the skill to hear it anymore. I must go to it. Perhaps proximity will help it communicate better."

"You—you mean to go to the ship?" Restalaan asked.

Velen nodded. "I must."

"Great Prophet ... I do not mean to question your wisdom, but—"

"But you do anyway," Velen said, laughing, his startling blue eyes crinkling at the corners with genuine good humor. "Continue, my old friend. Your questioning always has value to me."

Restalaan sighed. "The ores have adopted the vessel as their sacred mountain," he said.

"I know this," Velen replied.

"Then why antagonize them by venturing there?" Restalaan asked. "They would surely see this as an act of aggression at any time, particularly now. You would be giving them a reason to continue their attacks against us."

Velen nodded. "I have thought of this. Thought long and hard on it. But perhaps it is time to reveal who we are, and what their sacred mountain is. They believe their ancestors dwell there; and they may very well be right. If K'ure does not have much longer, should we not utilize its wisdom and its powers while we can? If anyone or anything can broker peace between the ores and ourselves, this being, greater far than any of us, has that ability. This may be our only hope. K'ure spoke of finding other races, other beings, to join in its quest for balance and harmony. To stand against Sargeris and this vast, unholy force he has created."

Velen placed a white hand on his friend's armor-plated shoulder. "One thing for certain has been revealed to me in my meditations. And that is that things can no longer continue as they used to. orc and draenei can no longer live in distant familiarity with one another. There's no returning to that, my old friend. There is either war or peace. They will either become our allies or our enemies. And I would never forgive myself if I did not explore every avenue to peace I could. Do you understand now?"

Restalaan searched Velen's face unhappily, then nodded. "Yes. Yes, I suppose I do. But I like it not. At least let me send you with an armored guard, for I know they will attack before they will listen."

Velen shook his head. "No. No weapons. Nothing to provoke them. In their hearts, they are honorable beings. I was able to glimpse the souls of the two young orcs who stayed with us a few years ago. There is nothing cowardly or evil in there, only caution and now, for some reason, fear. They attacked hunting parties, not civilians."

"Yes," Restalaan shot back. "Parties that were greatly outnumbered."

"We found blood that was not our own spilled at those sites," Velen reminded him. "They took the bodies back for ritual burning, but there was orcish blood enough on the soil. And with our knowledge, a handful of draenei can easily stand against many ores. No. I will risk all on this. They will not slay me where I stand, if I state my intentions honorably and I come without the blatant ability to defend myself."

"I wish I had your confidence, my Prophet," said Restalaan resignedly, bowing deeply. "I will assemble a small escort party, then. And they will not be armed."

The Great One, Kil'jaeden, began to visit Ner'zhul with more frequency. First it was only in the dream state, as with the ancestors. He would come in the night while Ner'zhul slept deeply, his body heavy with the drug that opened his mind to Kil'jaeden's voice, and whisper his praise and congratulations and plans for further orc victory.

Ner'zhul was in ecstasy. Each letter that arrived by bloodhawk from the various clans was read with eagerness and delight. *We came across two scouts far from aid, the Shattered Hand clan chieftain wrote. It was ease itself to dispatch them, outnumbered as they were.*

The Bleeding Hollow clan is proud to report to the great Ner'zhul that we have obeyed him in all things, said another letter. We have joined with the Laughing Skull clan, more than doubling the number of armed warriors to send against this devious foe. It is our understanding that the Thunderlord clan seeks allies. We will send a courier to them tomorrow.

"Yes." smiled Kil'jaeden. "Do you see how they are coming together in a just cause? Before, these clans would be challenging one another if they crossed paths. Now. they are sharing knowledge, sharing resources, working as one to overcome a foe who would see you all destroyed."

Ner'zhul nodded, but he felt a sudden pang. It had been glorious to finally behold this beautiful, powerful entity, despite the fact that he looked so much like the hated draenei, but ... he had stopped seeing Rulkan. He found he missed her. He wondered why she was no longer seeking him out.

Hesitantly, he spoke. "Rulkan—"

"Rulkan has done her part in bringing you to me, Ner'zhul," soothed Kil'jaeden. "You know she is well and happy—you have seen her. We do not need her as an intermediary anymore. Not now that I have been convinced of your worthiness to be my voice among your people."

And as before, Ner'zhul's heart flooded with joy. But this time, despite the comforting and exciting words of Kil'jaeden, he felt a sad little jerk in his heart as it beat, and still wished he could speak with his mate.

Ner'zhul was deep in thought when Gul'dan brought the missive to him. The apprentice bowed and handed his master a piece of parchment, stiff with blue liquid.

"What is this?" Ner'zhul asked, taking the parchment.

"It was taken off a draenei approaching from the south," Gul'dan replied.

"A party?"

"A single courier. No arms, not even a mount. The fool was *walking*." Gul'dan's lips twisted into a smile and he chuckled.

Ner'zhul looked down at the parchment, realizing now that the blue stains were the courier's blood. What had possessed the idiot, walking alone, unarmed, into the heart of Shadowmoon territory?

He unfolded it carefully, trying not to tear it, and quickly began to read. Even as his brown eyes darted over the words, the room was suddenly filled with radiance and both shaman prostrated themselves.

"Read it aloud, great Ner'zhul," came Kil'jaeden's smooth voice. "Share it with me and your loyal apprentice."

"Yes, please, my master," said Gul'dan eagerly.

As he read it, for the first time since he had spoken with his beloved Rulkan, Ner'zhul tasted doubt- *Unto Ner'zhul, Shaman, of the Shadowmoon clan, the Prophet Velen of the draenei sends greetings.*

Recently, many of our people have come under attack from the ores. I do not understand why this is. For generations, your people and mine have lived in peace and tolerance, a state that has benefitted us both. We have never lifted a weapon toward an ore, and indeed, once we were instrumental in saving the lives of two young ones who unwittingly placed themselves in danger.

"Ah," Gul'dan interrupted. "I remember . . . Durotan, who is currently the Frostwolf chieftain, and Orgrim Doomhammer."

Ner'zhul nodded absently, his thoughts distracted for a moment, then resumed reading.

We can only assume there is a terrible misunderstanding, and wish to speak with you so that no more lives—ore or draenei—are lost in such a tragic fashion.

It is my understanding that the mountain you call Oshu'gun is sacred to your people, that this is where the wise spirits of your ancestors dwell. While this place has long had deep meaning for the draenei as well, we have always respected your decision to claim it as your holy site. However, the time has come for us to recognize that there is more that we share than that divides us. I am called the Prophet among my people,

because at times I am granted wisdom and insight. I seek to lead well and peacefully, as I am sure you and the leaders of the various clans do your own people.

Let us meet peaceably, at the place that holds so much meaning for both our races. On the third day of the fifth month, I and a small party will be moving in pilgrimage to enter the heart of the mountain. No one in the group will bear arms. I invite you and any others who feel so moved to join me, as we enter the deep place of magic and power, and ask the wisdom of beings much wiser than we how we can heal this rift between us.

In Light and blessings, I bid you peace.

Gul'dan was the first to speak. Or, more accurately, to laugh.

"Such arrogance! My lord, great Kil'jaeden, this is an opportunity not to be missed. Their leader comes like a clefthoof calf to the slaughter, unarmed and stupidly thinking that we know nothing of his evil intentions. And he thinks to violate Oshu'gun! He will die before he sets a vile blue hoof upon even the root of our holy mountain!"

"What you say pleases me, Gul'dan," Kil'jaeden rumbled in that smooth-as-water voice. "Ner'zhul, your apprentice speaks wisdom."

But Ner'zhul found words stuck in his throat. He opened his mouth twice to speak, and finally words rasped forth on the third attempt. "I do not disagree that the draenei are dangerous," he said haltingly, "But. . . we are not gronn, to kill unarmed foes."

"The courier was slain," Gul'dan pointed out. "He was unarmed and even unmounted."

"And I regret that!" Ner'zhul snapped. "He should have been taken into custody and brought to me at once, not killed!"

Kil'jaeden said nothing. The scarlet radiance bathed Ner'zhul as he continued, groping his way to a solution.

"He will not be permitted to defile our sacred place," the shaman continued. "Have no worries about that, Gul'dan. But I will not have him killed without having the chance to speak to him. Who knows but that we might learn something."

"Yes," said Kil'jaeden, his voice rich and warm. "When one is in pain, one will reveal all he knows."

The words started Ner'zhul, but he did not reveal his surprise. This magnificent being wanted him to torture Velen? Something inside him was excited at the prospect. But something else inside him recoiled. Not yet. He would not do such a thing yet.

"We will be waiting for him," he assured both his great lord and his apprentice. "He will not escape."

"Lord," said Gul'dan slowly, "a suggestion, if I may?"

"What is it?"

"The closest clan to the mountain is the Frostwolf clan," Gul'dan pointed out. "Let us have them take

Velen and his party and bring them to us. Their leader once tasted draenei hospitality. And although he has not hindered our efforts, I do not recall hearing that he has led any attacks against the draenei. We shall kill two birds with one stone: take the draenei leader captive, and make Durotan of the Frostwolves prove his loyalty to our cause."

Ner'zhul felt two pairs of eyes boring into his—die small, dark ones of his apprentice, and the glowing orbs of his master Kil'jaeden. What Gul'dan had suggested sounded like wisdom. Then why was Ner'zhul so reluctant to agree?

The heartbeats ticked away and perspiration sprouted on Ner'zhul's low brow. Finally, he spoke, and was relieved to hear his voice sounded sure and strong.

"Agreed. It is a good plan. Find me pen and parchment, and I shall notify Durotan as to his duty."

TEN

I have never been so proud of my father as when Drek'Thar told me of this incident. I have good cause to know how hard it is to make the right decision at times. He had much to lose and nothing to gain by making the choices he did.

No, that is not right.

He retained his honor. And there can be no price high enough to sacrifice that.

The letter brooked no disagreement. Durotan stared at it, and then with a deep sigh passed it to his mate. Draka read it quickly, her eyes darting over the words, and growled soft and low in her throat.

"Ner'zhul is cowardly, to lay this at your feet," she said softly, so as not to be overheard by the courier who waited outside. "The request comes to him, not you."

"I have promised to obey." Durotan said, his voice equally soft, "Ner'zhul speaks for the ancestors."

Draka cocked her head thoughtfully. A stray beam of sunlight penetrating the tent from a gap in the seams caught her face, throwing her strong jaw and high cheekbones into sharp relief. Durotan's breath caught in his throat as he looked at his beloved. For a moment the chaos—madness, even—that seemed to have suddenly descended upon himself and his people, he was grateful for her. He touched her brown face lightly with a sharp-clawed finger, and she smiled briefly.

"My mate ... I do not know that I trust Ner'zhul," she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

He nodded. "But we both trust Drek'Thar, and he has confirmed what Ner'zhul has said. The draenei have been plotting against us. Ner'zhul says that Velen has even insisted on entering Oshu'gun."

Again, the chieftain of the Frostwolf clan regarded the letter. "I am pleased that Ner'zhul has not asked me to slay Velen. Perhaps, once we have him in our power, we can convince him to change his ways, have him explain why they are so bent on harming us. Perhaps we can negotiate a peace."

The thought seized his heart and squeezed it hard. As glorious as his life with Draka was. as proud as he was of his clan, how much happier would he be simply doing as his father had done—hunting the beasts of the woods and fields, dancing in the moonlight at Kosh'harg festivals, listening to the old tales and basking in the loving warmth of the ancestors. He had not said anything to Draka, but he was secretly glad that they had not yet conceived a child. This was not a time that was easy on the young ones. Their childhood had been stolen from them; adult duties had been placed on shoulders still not quite broad enough to bear them. If Draka were to bear a child. Durotan would not hesitate to have his son or daughter trained as other children were. He would ask nothing of other parents that he would not do himself, but he was glad that he was not faced with that decision quite yet.

Draka watched him with intense, narrowed eyes. It was as if she could read his thoughts.

"You have met Velen before," she said. "I watched you try to reconcile your memories of that encounter with the news that they were trying to destroy us all. It was not easy for you."

"Nor is it now," he replied. "Perhaps it is just as well that I am assigned this task. Velen will remember that night, of that I am certain. He may be willing to treat with me, whereas he might not be so willing to treat with Ner'zhul. I wish I had seen the letter he had sent."

Draka sighed and got to her feet. "I think that would have been most enlightening," she said.

Durotan emulated her. "I will tell the courier that his master may rest content. I will not shirk my duty."

He felt her worried gaze boring into his back as he left.

Velen held the violet crystal close to his heart. The red and yellow ones rested at his side as he sat in meditation, casting a soft glow upon his alabaster skin. The four others were placed elsewhere in draenei territory, their great powers serving his people as needed. But the violet one never left him.

Its power opened the mind and spirit, and in a way, it was almost like being in direct communication with the Naaru. Velen always felt stronger, cleaner, his soul honed to a keen edge, when he meditated with the violet crystal. Although each of the seven crystals was precious and powerful, this was the one he treasured the most.

He strained to hear the soft whispers of K'ure. but he could not. Velen's heart ached. He bowed his head.

He heard voices and opened his eyes. Restalaan was speaking to one of the acolytes, and Velen waved him forward.

"What news, old friend?" Velen inquired. He indicated a pot of hot herbal tea.

Restalaan waved his hand, declining the offer. "Good and bad. my Prophet," he said. "I deeply regret to inform you that the courier you sent to the shaman leader Ner'zhul was killed by a group of ores."

Velen closed his eyes. The violet crystal grew warmer for a moment, as if trying to offer comfort.

"I sensed his death," Velen said heavily. "But I had hoped it was an accident. You are certain he was murdered?"

"Ner'zhul says so. and offers no apology." Restalaan's voice conveyed his anger and affront at the incident. He was kneeling beside Velen, next to the red crystal. Velen's dark blue eyes darted to the crystal as it pulsed once, briefly, responding to Restalaan's emotions.

"So much for your theory that they would not attack an unarmed man," Restalaan continued bitterly.

"I had so hoped for better," Velen said quietly. "But you said there was some good news to mitigate these sad tidings?"

Restalaan grimaced. "If you can call it that. Ner'zhul says that an orc contingency will meet with us at the base of the mountain."

"He ... is not coming?"

Restalaan dropped his gaze and shook his head. "No, my Prophet," he said quietly.

"Who does he send in his stead?"

"The letter does not say."

"Give it to me." Velen stretched out a white hand and Restalaan placed the parchment in his palm. Velen uncurled the parchment and read the letter quickly.

Your courier is dead. It is fortunate that those who slew him thought to search the body for his missive. I have read it, and I will agree to send a contingency of ores to speak with you. I guarantee nothing—not your safety, not a truce, nothing. But we will hear you out.

Velen sighed deeply. This was not the response his soul had longed for. What had happened to the ores?

Why in this world or any other were they suddenly so bent on harming the draenei, who had never opposed them in any fashion? *I guarantee nothing*, Ner'zhul had said, writing in a strong, bold hand.

"Very well," said Velen quietly. "Then nothing is guaranteed," He smiled at Restalaan. "Rather like life."

The day was inappropriately bright and cheerful, Durotan thought, squinting against the bright early summer light that danced down. Surely, on a day when his soul felt so bleak and unhappy, the weather ought to reflect it. Clouds, at the very least. More appropriately, a cold, drizzling rain. But the sun did not care about an ore's heavy hcait, or even the fate of an entire race of people. It shone down as merrily as if all was right every place its rays touched. Oshu'gun almost seemed to be on fire, so bright was the light that reflected off its multifaceted, crystalline surface.

Durotan had chosen a position of strength. From where he had positioned his warriors, he would be able to see Velen's traveling party long before they spotted the ores. He had decided to wait and let the Prophet of the draenei come directly to him, although he had strategically positioned his warriors so that if the draenei attempted to flee, no avenue of flight would be open to them. And all the ores who waited patiently on this offensively glorious day were armed to the teeth, with shaman at the ready. With her sharp eyes and superb fighting skills, Draka was highly useful to him as a scout. He had positioned her as one of the lookouts in the first group of warriors. The instant that Velen was visible, she would send word to her mate via a spell cast by Drek'Thar. Drek'Thar himself, though, was standing beside Durotan. As the most powerful shaman in the clan, his place was to protect the clan's leader. The two stood on a rock outcropping just above the entrance to the gleaming sacred mountain. Dozens of warriors waited with arrows, hand axes, and javelins at the ready. Others had spent days maneuvering large boulders into position. At a word from Durotan, a simple movement would send death in the form of huge stones crashing down upon the draenei.

The threat of death, in fact, was everywhere on this lovely mountain, on this beautiful sunny day.

A breeze stirred Durotan's black hair and a bird sang brightly. Drek'Thar looked at his chieftain with concern.

"My chieftain, you are doing what you have been told to do," Drek'Thar said earnestly. "These beings are our enemies."

Durotan nodded and wished he could believe it as easily as every other orc seemed to.

The breeze brushed his cheek again, more insistently, and this time he heard words on the wind. Draka's message, borne to him by Drek'Thar's bond with the elements. *They are coming. Five of them. None of them is wearing armor or carries any visible weapons. They walk serenely.*

The wind wafted her words away, and he knew it went to touch the ears of all the ores assembled. When the time was right, Drek'Thar would harness the wind to give orders to Durotan's troops. Durotan straightened, and his heart beat more swiftly. His hand gripped his battle-axe tightly.

"There they are," said Drek'Thar grimly. Durotan followed his gaze.

Draka's report had been accurate, right down to her interpretation of the manner in which the draenei approached. The five draenei did not wear the strange blue and silvery armor that Durotan remembered from his single encounter with them. They were dressed instead as they had been for the meal, in robes of beautiful hues that caught the breeze and fluttered behind them like banners.

Walking at the very front of the little group was Prophet Velen himself. He was unmistakable; his simple tan robes contrasted with those of his entourage, and of course his strange white skin was unique. Durotan grinned a little despite the dircness of the situation. The draenei were so garishly clad that only a blind orc would have failed to spot them from a great distance.

The smile faded at what that had to represent. They wanted to be spotted immediately. They wanted the ores to be confident that they carried no weapons and were on what Mother Kashur would have called a pilgrimage. Or was it all just an elaborate trick? Shaman needed no spears to destroy. Neither did the draenei. Durotan remembered the magical nets that scared and blackened flesh on contact—nets of energy, alien to the orcs, that had come from nowhere.

No, even unarmed, the draenei were far from harmless.

He had briefed his warriors and knew they would obey. They understood they were not to fire a warning shot—not to utter even an insult—without Durotan's express command. But they knew how the draenei fought, and would not be taken unawares.

Durotan could smell the tension emanating from those warriors closest to him; he wondered if the draenei could, too.

Durotan watched as the groups he had set farthest away came out of hiding to close ranks behind the draenei. They were far enough back so that Durotan hoped the draenei would not notice. If they did, they gave no sign, but merely continued with that steady, confident... serene . . . pace.

Durotan and Drek'Thar made no attempt to disguise themselves. After several long minutes, Velen lifted his head and looked up, right into Durotan's eyes. Durotan did not break the gaze, but stood waiting for his enemies to continue their approach. They reached the base of the mountain, but before they could continue farther, dozens of ores moved purposefully out of hiding to surround them.

Velen did not look in the least bit surprised. He glanced around, smiling a little, and then returned his gaze to Durotan. Slowly, Durotan descended until he stood face-to-face with the draenei prophet.

"Long has it been since you and I last stood so, Velen," Durotan said in a calm voice. He deliberately did not use the draenei's title.

"Long indeed, Durotan, son of Garad, chieftain of the Frostwolf clan," Velen said in that rich, smooth voice that Durotan remembered. "Are you friends with Orgrim still?"

"Indeed I am," Durotan replied. "He carries the Doomhammer now, and is second in his own clan."

Sorrow flitted across the pale face, a sorrow that was deep and unquestionably genuine. Again, Durotan remembered that night so long ago, when this being had sat with them and talked of orcish ways, of the Doomhammer and the cost at which Orgrim would buy it.

"I hope his father and yours passed with great honor," Velen said.

"We are not here today to speak of the past," Durotan said, more forcefully than he intended. He did not like to remember that night. "We are here because you have informed us that you dare trespass on our most sacred place."

There it is, then, he thought. Let us not mince words.

Velen held Durotan's gaze and nodded. "I had sent a missive to Ner'zhul, not to you, Durotan. He has declined to meet with me. I wonder . . . did he share this missive with you?"

"There was no need for me to read it." Durotan replied, "I was asked to come in his stead. And I have done so."

Durotan saw the broad shoulders slump a little. Velen sighed deeply. "I see," he said. "He may not have told you why I wished to come today."

"I do not need to know your purpose, draenei," Durotan said.

"But you do, or else this conversation will be for nothing." The voice was clear and crisp, and there was nothing old or frail about it despite Velen's obviously ancient age. Durotan raised an eyebrow. That Velen was a wise elder was immediately apparent. But now, for the first time, Durotan caught a glimpse of the sheer strength of will that had buoyed Velen for countless years.

"This mountain is sacred to your people. We know this, and we have respected it. But it is also sacred to us." Velen took a step forward, his gaze locked on Durotan's. The orc warriors around him shifted, murmured, but otherwise did not move.

"Deep inside the mountain is a being that has long cared for the draenei people," Velen continued. "It is older by far than anything either of our minds can grasp. And more powerful. But even old and powerful things can die, and it is dying now. There is wisdom and grace and reconciliation we can have from it. your people and mine. We—"

"Blasphemer!"

Durotan started. The bitter cry had sprung from the throat not of some short-tempered warrior in the crowd, but from the orc who stood beside him. Drek'Thar's eyes were wide and his body trembled with outrage. Veins stood out on his neck and he shook his fist at Velen. Durotan was so shocked by the outburst that he did not silence it as quickly as he should have, and Drek'Thar continued.

"Oshu'gun belongs to us! It is the home of the beloved dead, cradle of their spirits, and your hideous cloven feet are not fit to take one step up its blessed sides!"

Velen, too, seemed surprised at the outburst. He turned his attention to the shaman and stretched out a hand imploringly.

"Your spirits are housed within these walls, it is true, and I would never say it was not so." Velen cried. "But they are drawn there because of this being. It seeks to—"

It was exactly the wrong thing to say. Drek'Thar bellowed in outrage. Other cries went up, and before Durotan realized quite what was happening, he saw his warriors surge forward. Draka moved toward them, trying to stop the attack, but she might as well have been trying to hold back the incoming tide. Durotan spun and struck Drek'Thar hard across the face. The shaman whirled, snarling. "Protect them!" Durotan cried. "You will obey my orders, and we must take them alive. Protect them, curse you!"

Drek'Thar's eyes flashed in fury, but only for an instant. He lifted his hands and closed his eyes, and suddenly a huge circle of flame sprang up around the five draenei. A wind sprang up, whipping the fire even higher and physically buffeting the orcs. The warriors stepped back, and to Durotan's horror some of the archers began nocking arrows on their bowstrings.

"Hold!" bellowed Durotan, the wind taking his order and bearing it to his warriors' ears. "I will slay anyone who fires!"

Between his command and Drek'Thar's powerful, if reluctant, abilities, the draenei were unharmed. Durotan raced down the mountainside to his prisoners, for such they now were. Drek'Thar was at his heels.

"Dismiss fire," Durotan told Drek'Thar. At once, the sheets of flame that almost singed Durotan's eyebrows dissipated. He stood face-to-face now with Velen, and a wave of an emotion he could not properly name rose inside him as he realized that the draenei elder was still as calm and serene as he had been when they had simply been talking.

"Velen, you and your people are now prisoners of the Frostwolf clan," Durotan said in a soft, dangerous voice.

Velen smiled, sweetly, sadly. "I expected nothing less," he said.

He and the other four somehow maintained their composure while Durotan ordered them stripped and searched. Their glorious robes were taken and given to Durotan's top warriors, and the draenei were clad now in sweat-stiff tunics. His stomach turned at the jeers, insults, and spits that came their way at the humiliation, but he did not stop it. As long as no physical harm came to the prisoners—and Durotan watched closely to ensure that none would—he would let his warriors have their sport. Beside him, Draka looked angry at the behavior of her fellow Frostwolves and whispered, "My mate, can you not silence them?"

He shook his head. "I want to see how the draenei react. And . . . the warriors have stayed their hands when they might have been expected to kill. I will not silence their tongues as well."

Draka looked at him searchingly, then nodded and withdrew. He knew she did not approve, and he did not like what he was seeing either. But he was walking a delicate line, and he knew it.

"My chieftain!" cried Rokkar, Durotan's second in command. "Come see what they have brought us!"

Durotan went to Rokkar's side and peered into the sack he had opened. His eyes widened. Nestled inside, swathed in soft fabric, were two exquisitely beautiful stones. One was red, the other was yellow. Durotan ached to touch them, but did not. He looked up and met Velen's gaze. "Long ago, Restalaan showed us a crystal similar to this one," he said. "That one protected a city. What do these do?"

"Each has its own strength. They are part of our legacy. They were bequeathed to us by the being that dwells in the sacred mountain."

Durotan growled softly. "You would do well not to mention that again," he said. To Rokkar, he said, "Feed them, bind their hands, and put them on wolves, with shaman to guard them. Give the stones to Drek'Thar. We will take the draenei back with us and deliver them to Ner'zhul. He should have been here in my stead today."

He turned and stalked off, not wanting to look at Velen's odd, glowing blue eyes, not wanting to see the disapproval in Draka's. During the long ride back, Durotan wrestled with his emotions. On the one hand, he shared Drek'Thar's offense. Oshu'gun was sacred to the orcs. The idea that something other than the ancestors dwelt inside it, indeed, as Velen claimed, was so powerful that it *lured* the ancestors to it, struck him to the core. He could only imagine how the shaman felt about such a declaration. Everything seemed to point to Ner'zhul's being correct, that the draenei were a blight upon the world and should be eliminated.

What nagged at him was why. He would get an answer to that question tonight.

With everyone, including the five captives, mounted, they made good time. The sun was only starting to set when they returned. Durotan had sent outriders ahead with the good news, and the clan was waiting eagerly for their arrival. On his right were Drek'Thar and Rokkar, who shared the sentiments of the Frostwolves. On his left was Draka, who had been uncharacteristically silent throughout the entire event. Durotan knew that he did not want to hear what she had to say; he was already being pulled in too many directions as it was.

The prisoners were ungraciously shoved into two tents and an immediate guard was set up around them. Four seasoned warriors and Drek'Thar's most trusted shaman stood proudly, pleased with the duty entrusted to them. Durotan had ordered Velen isolated; he wanted to speak with the draenei prophet alone.

After the excitement had settled down somewhat, Durotan took a deep breath. He was not looking forward to this conversation, but it had to be done. He nodded to the guards and entered the small tent that hosted Prophet Velen.

Since he had ordered Velen bound, he expected to see the elder with his hands tied. Instead, he saw that whoever had carried out his order had done so with excessive zeal.

The tent had been erected around a sturdy tree, and Velen was now bound to the trunk. His arms had been yanked back at an awkward angle, the ropes around the white flesh of his wrists tied so tightly that even in the dim light of twilight Durotan could see that they were turning a darker shade. A rope tied, thankfully loosely, around his neck forced him to keep his head up or risk choking. A filthy cloth had been shoved in his mouth. He was on his knees, and his hooves, too, were bound behind him.

Durotan uttered a deep oath and drew a dagger. Velen gazed at him with no sign of fear in those deep blue eyes, but Durotan did notice that the draenei looked surprised when the orc used the weapon to cut the bonds rather than his throat. Velen made no sound, but a flicker of pain passed over his ghostly white face as blood returned to his limbs.

"I told them to bind you, not truss you up like a talbuk," Durotan muttered.

"Your people are very eager, it would seem."

Durotan passed the elder a waterskin and watched him closely while he drank. Sitting before him in filthy clothing, gulping at tepid water, his white flesh raw from the bonds, Velen did not look like much of a threat. How would he feel, he wondered, if he had gotten word of the draenei treating Mother Kashur so? Everything about this felt wrong. Yet Mother Kashur herself had assured Drek'Thar that the draenei were a threat so dire as to be almost unimaginable.

There was a bowl of cold blood porridge on the ground. With his right foot, Durotan shoved it toward the prisoner. Velen eyed it, but did not eat.

"Not quite the feast you served Orgrim and me when we dined in Telmor," Durotan said. "But it is nourishing."

Velen's lips curved in a smile. "That was a memorable evening."

"Did you get what you wanted from us that night?" Durotan demanded. He was angry, but not with Velen. He was angry that it had come to this, that one who had shown him nothing but courtesy was now his captive. And so he took it out on the Prophet.

"I do not understand. We merely wished to be good hosts to two adventuresome boys."

Durotan got to his feet and kicked over the bowl. Congealed porridge oozed onto the earth. "Do you expect me to believe this?"

Velen did not rise to the bait. He replied calmly, "It is the truth. It is your choice as to whether you believe it."

Durotan dropped to his knees and shoved his face into Velen's. "Why are you trying to destroy us? What have we ever done to you?"

"I might ask you the same question," said Velen. A flush had come to his white face. "We have never lifted a finger to harm you, and now over two dozen draenei are dead from your attacks!"

The truth of the comment made Durotan even angrier. "The ancestors do not lie to us," he snarled. "We have been warned that you are not what you would seem—that you are our enemies. Why did you bring those crystals if not to attack us?" "We thought it might help us better communicate with the being in the mountain." Velen spoke quickly, as if trying to get the words out before Durotan could silence him. "It is not an enemy to the orcs, nor are we. Durotan, you are intelligent and wise. I saw this in you that night so long ago. You are not one to blindly follow like an animal to slaughter. I know not why your leaders lie to you, but they do. We have ever sought to interact peaceably with you. You are better than this, son of Gar'ad. You are not like the others!"

Durotan's dark brown eyes narrowed. "You are wrong, draenei," he spat. "I am proud to be an orc. I embrace my heritage."

Velen looked exasperated. "You misunderstand. I do not malign your people. I merely—"

"Merely what? Merely tell us that the only reason we are seeing the beloved dead is because of your . . . your god trapped in the mountain?"

"It is not a god, it is an ally, and would be one to your people as well if you would permit it to be."

Durotan swore and rose, stalking about the tent, his hands clenching and unclenching. Then he uttered a long, deep sigh, the anger in him burning down to ashes.

"Velen, your words are but wood on the fire of our wrath," he said quietly. "Your claim is arrogant and offensive. It will support those who are already prepared to slay your people on the word of our ancestors. I do not understand myself—but you are asking to choose

between people I trust, traditions I have been raised on, and your word."

He turned and faced the draenei. "I will choose my people. You need to know this. If you and I come face-to-face on the field of battle, I will not stay my hand."

Velen looked only curious. "You . . . will not take me to Ner'zhul, then?"

Durotan shook his head. "No. If he wanted you, he should have come for you himself. He appointed me to treat with you, and I have carried out my duties as I saw fit."

"You were supposed to deliver a prisoner to him," Velen said.

"I was to meet with you and listen to your words," Durotan said. "Had I captured you in battle, stricken a weapon from your hands, and wrested you to the earth, then yes, you would be a prisoner. But there is no honor in binding a foe who extends his hands willingly for the rope. We are at an impasse, you and I. You insist that you have no ill will toward the orcs. My leaders and the ghosts of my ancestors tell me otherwise."

Again, Durotan knelt before the draenei. "They call you Prophet—do you know the future then? If so, then tell me what you and I can do to avert what I fear will unfold. I would not shed innocent life, Velen. Give me something, anything, I can take to Ner'zhul that will prove that what you say is true!"

He realized he was pleading, but the fact did not distress him. He loved his wife, his clan, his people. He hated what he was seeing: an entire generation rushing headlong to adulthood with only blind hate in their hearts. If begging before this strange being could change this, then beg he would.

The strange blue eyes held an unspeakable empathy. Velen extended a pale hand and placed it on Durotan's shoulder.

"The future is not like a book one can read," he said quietly. "It is ever changing, like the rush of water, or the swirl of sand. I am granted certain insights, but nothing more, I felt very strongly that I needed to come unarmed, and behold, I am greeted not by the orcs' greatest shaman, but by one who has slept safely under my roof. I do not think this an accident. Durotan. And if anything can be done to avert this, it lies with the orcs, not with the draenei. AH I can do is tell you what I have already said. The river's course can be changed. But you are the ones who must change it. That is all I know, and I pray it is enough to save my people."

The look on his ancient, oddly cracked face and the tone of his voice told Durotan what his words did not: that Velen did not, indeed, think it would be enough to save his people.

Durotan closed his eyes for a moment, then stepped back. "We will keep the stones," he said. "Whatever power they have, the shaman will learn how to harness."

Velen nodded sadly "Such I assumed," he said. "But I had to bring them. I had to trust that we could find a way past all of this."

Why was it, Durotan wondered, that he felt closer at this moment to one he had been told was an enemy than to the spiritual leader of his own people? Draka might know. She had known all along. She had said nothing, understanding with a wisdom he could not comprehend that he had to come to this moment on his own. But he would speak to her tonight, alone in their tent.

"Get up," he said, speaking roughly to hide his emotions, "You and your companions may leave safely." He grinned suddenly. "As safely as you might, in the darkness, with no weapons. If you come to your deaths this night when you are past our territory, it will not be on my head."

"That would be convenient for you," agreed Velen, getting to his feet. "But somehow. I think it is not what you want."

Durotan did not reply. He marched out of the tent and told the waiting guards. "Velen and his four companions are to be safely escorted to the borders of our lands. Then, they will be released, to return to their city. No harm is to befall them, is that clear?"

The guard looked as if he was about to protest, but another, wiser warrior shot him a fierce glance.

"Very clear, my chieftain," the first guard murmured. As they went to fetch the other draenei, Drek'Thar hurried up to Durotan.

"Durotan! What are you doing? Ner'zhul expects prisoners!" "Ner'zhul can take his prisoners himself," Durotan snarled. "I was in command, and this is my decision. Do you question it?"

Drek'Thar looked around and walked Durotan away from prying ears. "I do," he hissed. "You heard what he said! He claims the ancestors are—are like moths to a torch around this god of his! The arrogance! Ner'zhul is right. They must be eliminated. We have been told so!"

"if it is to be, then it will be," said Durotan. "But not this night, Drek'Thar. Not this night."

As he and his companions walked slowly over the dew-drenched grasses of the meadows, past the towering black silhouettes of the trees of Terokkar forest, toward the nearest city, Velen's heart was heavy.

Two of the ata'mal crystals were now in the possession of the orcs. He had no doubt but that Durotan's words were correct, and that their shaman would shortly unlock their secrets. But they had missed one.

They had missed it because it did not wish to be found, and when it came to the crystals, light obeyed its wishes and bent itself so that the violet crystal remained hidden from the view of the searching orcs. He held it close to his heart now, feeling its warmth seep into his ancient flesh.

He had gambled, and failed. Not completely; that he and his friends were alive and walking toward safety was testimony to that. But he had hoped the orcs

would listen, that they would at least accompany him into the heart of their own sacred mountain, and behold something that did not negate their faidi, not in the slightest, but had in fact given birth to it.

The outlook was grim. As he had walked into the camp, he had observed what was happening. Younglings were being trained so hard they were dropping from exhaustion. Forges were going even so late at night. For all that he was walking freely now, Velen knew that the incidents of today had done nothing to avert what would come. The orcs, even the ones led by the insightful, slow to anger Durotan, were not just preparing for the possibility of war. They were convinced of the certainty of it. When the sun showed her yellow head tomorrow morning, she would look upon the inevitable.

The crystal he held so close to his heart pulsed, sensing his thoughts. Velen turned to his companions and looked upon them sorrowfully.

"The orcs will not be dissuaded from this path," he said. "And therefore, if we are to survive . . . we, too, must walk the path to war."

Far in the distance, broken, dying, resting as peacefully as possible deep below the waters of the sacred pool, the being known as K'ure uttered a deep, agonized cry.

Velen started, recognizing the voice, and bowed his head. The Frostwolf orcs gasped at the sound and turned to regard the perfect triangle of Oshu'gun.

"The ancestors are angry with us!" a young shaman cried. "Angry for letting Velen go!"

Durotan shook his head. He ought to rebuke the youngster, and on the morrow, if such words were uttered again, he would. But now, his heart was full of sorrow. It was not a cry of anger that came from the sacred mountain. It was the wrenching sound of ultimate grief, and he shuddered inside as he wondered why the ancestors mourned so very, very deeply.

ELEVEN

Ner'zhul... Gul'dan. Two of the darkest names ever to sully the history of my people. And yet, Dreh'Thar tells me that once Ner'zhul was admired, even beloved, and truly cared for the people whose spiritual leader he was. It is hard to reconcile those words with what Ner'zhul has become, but I try. I try because I want to understand. And yet, try as I might... I do not.

"What?"

Ner'zhul's shriek of outrage made his apprentice Gul'dan wince, Durotan did not bat an eye.

"I released the Prophet Velen," the chieftain of the Frostwolf clan said calmly.

"Your orders were to take him and the others prisoner!" Ner'zhul's voice climbed with each word. It had been so plain, so easy. What had Durotan been thinking? To toss away this opportunity like bones when the meat had been devoured! How much information could they have extracted from Velen? What kind of bargaining power over the draenei would he have bought them? But that thought was dwarfed by the overwhelming horror of how Kil'jaeden would react. What would he do when he learned that Velen had not been captured? The beautiful being had been seemingly well pleased at the prospect, when Ner'zhul told him of the plan. Flushed with pride at his cleverness, thinking victory already assured. Ner'zhul had even dared to offer Velen to Kil'jaeden as a sort of present. Now what would happen? The realization that he felt fear rather than chagrin at bringing disappointing news was not lost on the shaman.

"You put me in charge of the capture, and capture them I did," Durotan replied. "But there is no honor in a prisoner taken willingly. You want us to be strong as a people, rather than as individual clans, and we cannot do that without a code of honor that is inviolable, that is—"

Durotan continued speaking in his gruff, deep voice, but Ner'zhul was no longer listening. At that instant, that frozen space in time. Ner'zhul had a sudden realization that Kil'jaeden might not be the benevolent spirit he presented himself as. Durotan, lost in his own voice speaking words to explain his decision, did not notice the shaman's shift in attention. But Ner'zhul felt Gul'dan's gaze upon him, and another fear welled up inside him that Gul'dan was bearing witness to his master's first hints of doubt.

What is the right thing to do? How can I best serve?

Why is Rulkan no longer coming to me?

He blinked and came back to himself when he realized that Durotan had ceased speaking. The large chieftain was regarding Ner'zhul intently, waiting for the shaman to speak.

How best to handle this? Durotan was well regarded among the clans. If Ner'zhul punished Durotan for his decision, there would be many who would respond with sympathy to the Frostwolf clan. It could cause a rift in the fabric Ner'zhul was trying to weave, the tightly knit fabric of a united orc nation ... a Horde, if you will. On the other hand, if he condoned Durotan's actions, it would be a severe and insulting blow to those who had fervently supported his previous position that the draenei must die.

He could not decide. He stared at Durotan, who began to frown slightly.

"My master is so overcome with rage that he cannot speak," came Gul'dan's smooth voice. Both Durotan and Ner'zhul turned to look at the younger shaman. "You have disobeyed a direct order from your spiritual leader. Return to your camp, Durotan, son of Garad. My master will send you a letter shortly conveying his decision."

Durotan glanced back at Ner'zhul, his dislike of Gul'dan plain on his broad face. Ner'zhul gathered himself and stood tall, and this time, when he reached for words, he found them. "Begone, Durotan. You have displeased me, and worse, you have displeased the being who has shown us such favor. You will hear from me soon enough."

Durotan bowed, but did not leave immediately. "There is one thing I do bring you," he said. He extended a small bundle to Ner'zhul. The shaman accepted it with hands that shook, and hoped desperately that both Durotan and Gul'dan would interpret the trembling as fury and not fear.

"We took these off the prisoners," Durotan continued. "Our shaman believe that they may hold power that we can use against the draenei."

He hesitated a moment longer, as if waiting for further word from Ner'zhul. When the silence stretched long and uncomfortably between them, he bowed again and left. For a long moment, neither master nor apprentice spoke.

"My master, please forgive me for interrupting. I saw you were so overcome that you could not speak, and I feared that the Frostwolf boy would misinterpret your anger as hesitancy."

Ner'zhul shot him a searching look. The words sounded sincere. Gul'dan's face looked sincere. And yet—There was once a time when Ner'zhul would have confessed his doubt to his apprentice. He had trusted and trained him for years. But now, at this moment, although battered by uncertainties as if by opposing winds, Ner'zhul knew one thing very clearly. He did not want Gul'dan to see any weakness in him.

"I was indeed overcome with rage," Ner'zhul lied. "Honor serves nothing if it hurts your people."

He realized he was clutching the bundle Durotan had given him. Gul'dan was staring at it almost hungrily.

"What did Durotan give you, to offset your anger with him?" Gul'dan inquired.

Ner'zhul looked at him with a superior air. "**I will** examine it first, and share it with Kil'jaeden, apprentice," he said coolly. He was looking for a reaction, and dreaded seeing it.

For the briefest of moments, anger flitted across Gul'dan's face. Then the younger orc bowed deeply and said contritely, "Of course, my master. It was arrogant of me to expect—I am merely curious, that is all, to see if the Frostwolf chieftain has contributed anything of worth."

Ner'zhul softened somewhat. Gul'dan had served him well and loyally for many years now, and indeed, would succeed Ner'zhul when the time came. He was jumping at shadows.

"Of course," Ner'zhul said, more gently. "I will let you know if I learn anything. After all, you are my apprentice, are you not?"

Gul'dan brightened. "I serve you in all things, my master." Looking happier, he bowed again and left Ner'zhul alone.

Ner'zhul sat heavily on the skins that served him for a bed. He cradled the bundle in his lap and said a prayer to the ancestors that if Durotan had failed to deliver the leader of the draenei, perhaps at least the Frostwolf chieftain had managed to obtain something of value.

He took a deep breath, unwrapped the bundle, and gasped. Nestled against soft fur were two glowing gems. Gingerly, Ner'zhul touched the red one and gasped again.

Energy, excitement, and a sense of power flowed through him. His hands wanted to grip a weapon, although he had had no need of one for years, and he yearned to swing it. Somehow he knew that if this crystal were on his person, his aim would be true. What a gift this was to the ores! He would have to see how he could turn this hot, red passion for fighting that lurked in the center of this stone to his purposes.

It took a great effort of will for him to release the red crystal. He breathed deeply, calming himself as his mind cleared.

The yellow one next.

Ner'zhul grasped it. This time, he had some idea of what to expect. Again, he felt it emanating warmth and a sensation of power. But this time, there was no excitement, no urgency. As he held the yellow crystal, his mind cleared and he realized that he had hitherto been seeing things as if in a fog-dense valley. He could not find the words to describe it, but there was a purity, a clarity, a precision to everything. It was, in fact, so keen, so clear that Ner'zhul began to perceive this opening of his mind as pain.

He dropped the crystal back into his lap. The brilliant clarity, knife-sharp, faded somewhat.

Ner'zhul smiled. If he did not have Velen himself to present to Kil'jaeden, at least he had these precious items to offer to appease the magnificent being.

Kil'jaeden was furious.

Ner'zhul quaked before that anger, prostrating himself on the earth, murmuring, "Forgive me ..." as Kil'jaeden raged. He squeezed his eyes shut, anticipating pain such as he had never experienced to suddenly start shooting along his body, when abruptly the raging ceased.

Cautiously, Ner'zhul risked a glance at his benefactor, Kil'jaeden was once more looking serene, poised, and calm and bathed in radiance.

"I am . . . disappointed," the Beautiful One murmured. He shifted his weight from one enormous cloven foot to the other. "But I know two things. The Frostwolf clan leader is the one responsible. And you will never, ever, trust him with an important task again."

Relief swept through Ner'zhul and he almost fainted from the sensation, so powerful was it. "Of course not, my lord. Never again. And . . . we did find these crystals for you."

"They are of little use to me," said Kil'jaeden. Ner'zhul winced. "But I think your people might find them helpful in your battle to crush the draenei. That *is* your battle, is it not?" Fear again clenched hard at Ner'zhul's heart. "Of course, lord! It is the ancestors' will."

Kil'jaeden looked at him for a moment, his brilliant eyes emanating flames. "It is my will," he said simply, and Ner'zhul nodded frantically.

"Of course, of course, it is your will, and I obey you in all things."

Kil'jaeden seemed satisfied by the response and nodded. Then he was gone, and Ner'zhul sank back, wiping a face greasy with the sweat of terror.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw a flash of something white. Gul'dan had seen everything.

We have been planning an attack for some time now, and last night, when the Pale Lady did not shine, we descended in force upon the sleeping little town. Not a one was left alive, not even the few children we found. Their supplies—food, armor, weapons, some strange items we know nothing of and shun—this bounty is now shared between the two unified clans. Their blood, blue and thick, dries now upon our faces, and we dance in celebration.

There was more to the missive, but Ner'zhul did not read it. He did not have to. Although the details might be different, the essence of the letters was always the same. A successful attack, glory in the killing, the ecstasy of blood spilled. Ner'zhul glanced at the pile of letters he had received just that morning: seven of them.

With each month that passed, even throughout the long, hard winter months, the ores grew more skilled at killing draenei. They had learned much about their foe with each victor). The stones that Durotan had given Ner'zhul proved to be valuable indeed, Ner'zhul worked with them, alone at first, and then in the company of other shaman. The red stone they dubbed the Heart of Fury, and they found that when the leader of a raid carried it, not only did he fight with more energy and skill, but everyone under his command benefited as well. The stone was passed from clan to clan at each new moon, and was highly coveted. Yet Ner'zhul knew no one would dare to steal it for himself.

The second stone he called the Brilliant Star, and he found that when a shaman carried the crystal, he or she experienced a profound focus and clarity. While the Heart of Fury roused the emotions, the Brilliant Star calmed them. The thought process was swifter and more precise, and concentration was not easily broken. The result was powerful magic, precisely controlled ... another key to an orcish victor). The delicious irony that they were using the draenei's own magic against them further improved morale among the ores.

But all these things did not hearten Ner'zhul. The sudden flash of doubt that had shuddered through him when he had spoken with Durotan had shaken him to the bone. He fought back the suspicions, terrified that somehow Kil'jaeden was able to read his thoughts. But they came, like maggots writhing from a corpse, to haunt his sleeping and waking thoughts. Kil'jaeden looked very, very similar to the draenei. Was it possible that they were somehow the same? And was he, Ner'zhul, being used in some sort of civil war?

One night, he found he could no longer bear it. Silently, he dressed and roused his wolf Skychascr, who stretched and blinked at him sleepily.

"Come, my friend." Ner'zhul said affectionately as he settled on the great creature's back. He had never before ridden to the sacred mountain. Always, he had walked, as was tradition. But he needed to return before he was missed, and he was certain that the urgency of his mission would mitigate his offense with the ancestors.

It was almost spring, almost time for the Kosh'harg festival, but spring seemed far away as the cold wind bit at Ner'zhul's ears and nose. He huddled down, grateful for the warmth of the massive wolf, and shielded himself as best he could from the wind and now snow.

The wolf pressed on through the drifts, making steady if not swift progress. At last, Ner'zhul looked up and saw the perfect triangle of the Mountain of Spirits, and a great weight suddenly lifted from his heart. For the first time in months, he truly felt as if he was doing the right thing.

Skychaser would have difficulty climbing, so with a command to "stay" he settled down, burrowing into a drift and curling up tightly. Ner'zhul did not imagine he would be more than a few hours, and hurried to climb the mountain with more alacrity than he had felt in a long time, his sack heavy with waterskins and his heart full of anticipation. He should have done this long ago. He should have gone right to the source of wisdom, as shaman before him had done. He had no idea why he had never thought of this before.

At last he came to the entrance and paused before the perfect oval. As anxious as he was to reach the ancestors, he knew the ritual must be honored. He lit the bundle of dried grasses he carried and let its sweet scent calm and purify his thoughts. Then he stepped forward, murmuring a spell to light the torches that lined the walk. Ner'zhul had walked this path more times than he could recall, and his feet moved steadily as if of their own accord. Down twined the smooth path, and Ner'zhul's heart raced with hope as he stepped forward into the darkness.

It seemed to take longer than usual for him to become aware of the increase in light. Ner'zhul stepped into the cavern, and thought that somehow, the light emanating from the sacred pool seemed dimmer than it had been in the past. The thought unsettled him. He took a deep breath and chided himself. He was bringing his own external fears to this sacred space, nothing more. He stepped to the pool, removed the waterskins from his pack, and poured out the contents. The soft splashing of water was the only sound, and it seemed to echo. His offering complete, Ner'zhul sat by the water's edge and waited, gazing into the radiant depths.

Nothing happened.

He did not panic. Sometimes the ancestors took their time about responding.

But when more time had passed, uncase began to stir in Ner'zhul's heart. Moved, he spoke aloud.

"Ancestors . . . beloved dead . . . I, Ner'zhul, shaman of the Shadowmoon clan, leader to your children, have come seeking . . . no, begging wisdom. I—I have lost my way to your light. The times are dark and fearful even as we grow stronger, more united as a people. I question the path I am on, and I beseech your guidance. Please, if ever you loved and cared for those who have followed in your footsteps, come to me now and advise me, that I may lead them well!"

His voice quavered. He knew he sounded lost and pathetic, and for a moment stubborn pride made him flush with shame. But then that feeling was chased away by the knowledge that he did care for his people, he did want to do what was right for them, and at this moment he had no idea what that might be.

The pool began to glow. Ner'zhul leaned forward eagerly, his eyes roaming the surface, and in the water, he saw a face looking back at him.

"Rulkan," he breathed. For a moment quick tears mercifully blurred her image. He blinked and his heart lurched with pain as he saw the look in her ghostly eyes.

It was hatred.

Ner'zhul recoiled as if struck. Other faces began to appear in the water, dozens of them. All of them had the same expression.

Nausea welled in him and he cried out, "Please! Help me! Grant me your wisdom that I may win favor again in your eyes!"

Rulkan's severe features softened somewhat, and it was with a trace of compassion in her voice that she spoke. "There is nothing you can do, not now, not in a hundred years, to win favor in our eyes. You are not a savior of your people, but their betrayer."

"No!" he shrieked. "No, tell me what to do and I will do it. It is not too late, surely it is not too late—"

"You are not strong enough," said another rumbling voice, this one male. "If you were, you would never have walked so far down this path. You would not have been so easily gulled into doing the will of one who bears no love for our people."

"But—I do not understand," Ner'zhul murmured. "Rulkan, you came to me! I heard you! You, Grekshar—you advised me!"

Kil'jaeden was the one you wanted me to embrace! The Great Friend to all the ores!

She said nothing in response to this; she did not have to. Even as the words tumbled from his lips he understood how profoundly he had been misled.

The ancestors had never appeared to him at all. It had all been a trick concocted by Kil'jaeden, whoever—whatever—he was.

They were right not to trust Ner'zhul now. Any shaman who would be so easily deceived could never be trusted to put things right again. All was an elaborate web of lies and deceit and manipulation. And he, Ner'zhul, had been the first foolish insect to become inextricably trapped in it.

Nearly a hundred draenei were dead. There was no turning back, no requesting aid from the ancestors. He could not trust any of his visions ever again, except to understand that they were likely to be lies. Worst of all, he had delivered his people into the hands of one who, despite his fair appearance and his honeyed words, did not have their best interests in whatever passed for his heart. Even as he stared into the ghostly eyes of his beloved, she turned away from him. One by one, the myriad faces reflected in the water followed suit.

Ner'zhul trembled with the horror of what he had done. There was nothing he could do to make it right. Nothing he could do except continue on this path that Kil'jaeden had so carefully contrived for him to walk, and pray to ancestors who no longer listened to him that somehow, some way, things would turn out all right. He buried his face in his hands and wept.

Crouching in the darkness in a bend in the tunnel, Gul'dan listened to the sound of his master sobbing, and smiled to himself.

Kil'jaeden would be grateful for the information.

TWELVE

We are all weak, in one way or another. It does not matter the species. Sometimes that weakness is a strength in disguise.

Sometimes it is our utter undoing. Sometimes it is both. The wise man understands his weakness and seeks to find a lesson from it.

The fool lets it control and destroy him.

And sometimes, the wise man is a fool.

As he rode back atop Skychaser, hands so cold that he wondered if he would ever be able to unclench them entwined in the thick black fur, Ner'zhul wished for the dark night to swallow him. How could he return to his people, knowing what he had done to

them? On the other hand, how could he **flee—and where** could he possibly go that Kil'jaeden would not find him? He longed bitterly for the courage to take the ritual knife he carried at all times and drive it into his heart, but knew that he could not. Suicide was not regarded with honor among his people; it was a coward's answer to the problems that came at him. He would not be permitted to live on as a spirit if he took that seductive way to escape the horrors that confronted him.

He could continue to pretend that he suspected nothing, and even perhaps subtly undercut Kil'jaeden. Despite his massive powers, there had been no evidence that the so-called "Beautiful One" had the ability to read thoughts. The thought brightened Ner'zhul somewhat. Yes ... he could mitigate the damage this interloper was trying to do to his people. That was how he could continue to serve.

Exhausted both physically and emotionally, Ner'zhul stumbled into his tent in that faint hour before dawn, looking forward to simply collapsing on the skins and sleeping in an effort to forget, for at least a brief while, the agony of what he had brought about.

Instead a bright light nearly blinded him and he fell to his knees.

"You would betray me, then?" said the Beautiful One.

Ner'zhul threw up his hands, trying vainly to protect his eyes from the awesome radiance. His stomach

roiled and he feared he was about to be sick in his terror. The light dimmed somewhat and he lowered his hands. Standing beside Kil'jaeden was Ner'zhul's apprentice, grinning darkly.

"Gul'dan," whispered Ner'zhul sickly. "What have you done?"

"I have informed Kil'jaeden of a rodent," Gul'dan said calmly. That dreadful smile never left his face. 'And he will decide what to do with the vermin who would so turn against him.'

There was still snow on Gul'dan's shoulders. Dully, Ner'zhul realized what had happened. His apprentice, hungry for power—how was it Ner'zhul had closed his eyes to the obvious for so long?—had followed him. Had heard the ancestors' words. And still he clung to Kil'jaeden, after hearing the same things Ner'zhul had heard? For a moment, his own fear and selfishness went away, and Ner'zhul felt only a wave of pity for an orc who had fallen so far.

"It wounds me," Kil'jaeden said. Ner'zhul looked at him, startled. "I chose you, Ner'zhul. I gave you my powers. I showed you what you need to do to advance your people and ensure that they are never second in this world."

Ner'zhul spoke without thinking. "You have deceived me. You have sent me false visions. You have maligned the ancestors and all they stood for. I don't know why you are doing this, but I know that it is not out of love for my people."

"And yet they flourish. They are united, for the first time in many centuries."

"United under a lie," Ner'zhul said. He was giddy in his rebellion. It felt good. Perhaps if he continued, Kil'jaeden would lose patience with him and slay him, and Ner'zhul's problem would be solved. But Kil'jaeden did not respond with deadly fury as Ner'zhul hoped he would. Instead the being sighed deeply and shook his head, like a parent disappointed in a wayward child.

"You may yet regain my favor, Ner'zhul," Kil'jaeden said, "I have a task for you. If you complete it, your lapse of faith will be overlooked."

Ner'zhul's lips moved. He wanted to shout out his rebellion again, but this time the words would not come. He realized that the moment had passed. He did not want to die, any more than any sane, living being wanted to die, and so he remained silent.

"What happened with the Frostwolf chieftain troubles me," Kil'jaeden continued. "Not least because he is not the only one who has murmured against what is happening. There are others—the one who wields the Doomhammer, some among the Bladewind and Redwalker clans as well. It would be one thing if these opposing voices belonged to those of no consequence, but many of them do not. There must be no risk to the success of my plan. Therefore, I will guarantee their obedience.

"It is not enough for them to swear loyalty," Kil'jaeden continued. He tapped his cheek with one long red finger thoughtfully.

"Too many seem enamored of changing what 'honor' and 'oath' mean. We must . . . ensure their cooperation, for now, and for all time."

Gul'dan's small eyes glinted. "What is it you suggest. Great One?"

Kil'jaeden smiled at Gul'dan. Already, Ner'zhul could see the bond between them—see how like Kil'jaeden Gul'dan was in a way that Ner'zhul had never been. Kil'jaeden had been forced to use seductive lies and trickery in order to pull Ner'zhul to his cause; with Gul'dan, he could speak openly.

"There is such a way," Kil'jaeden said, speaking to both orc shaman now. "A way to make them forever bound to us. Forever loyal."

Ner'zhul had thought that he had become inured to horror after what the ancestors had revealed to him, but now he realized that he was capable of experiencing an entirely new level of shock as he listened to Kil'jaeden outline the plan. *Forever bound. Forever loyal.*

Forever enslaved.

He looked up into Kil'jaeden's blazing eyes, and words would not come. A nod would suffice, he knew, but he could not even bring himself to do that. Instead he simply stared, transfixed, like a bird before a snake.

Kil'jaeden heaved a deep sigh. "You refuse your chance at redemption in my eyes, then?"

As he heard Kil'jaeden speak, it was as if a spell had been removed from Ner'zhul. The words that had been stuck in his throat came rushing out, and although he knew they would mean his doom, the shaman made no move to stop them.

"I refuse utterly to forever doom my people to a life of slavery," he cried. Kil'jaeden listened, then nodded his massive head. "This is your choice. You have also chosen the consequences. Know this, shaman. Your choice averts nothing. My desires will still be carried out. Your people will still be slaves. But instead of leading them and lingering in my favor, you will be forced to be a helpless observer. I think that will be sweeter than if I simply slew you."

Ner'zhul opened his mouth to speak, but he could not. Kil'jaeden narrowed his great eyes, and Ner'zhul could not even move.

Even his heart, slamming wildly in his chest, beat only by the will of Lord Kil'jaeden, and he knew it.

How had he been such a gullible fool? How had he not seen through the lies?

How could he have mistaken an illusion sent by this... this monster to be the spirit of his beloved mate? Tears welled in his eyes and slipped down his cheeks, only, he knew, because Kil'jaeden permitted it.

Kil'jaeden smiled at him, then slowly, deliberately turned his attention to Gul'dan. Even in his wretched state, Ner'zhul took the faintest comfort in the knowledge that he had not turned to Kil'jaeden with the expression Gul'dan now wore, that of a hungry pup eager for praise.

"There is no need to trap you with pretty lies, is there, my new tool?" said Kil'jaeden, speaking almost fondly to Gul'dan, "You do not shrink from the truth."

"Indeed, no, lord. I live to do your bidding."

Kil'jaeden chuckled. "If I will do away with lies, so

must you. You live for power. You hunger for it. You thirst for it. And over the last few months, your skill has grown to where I can make proper use of you. Ours is not a partnership of adoration or respect, but one of convenience and selfish benefit. Which means that it will likely last."

Various emotions flitted across Gul'dan's face. He did not seem to know how to react to the words, and Ner'zhul took pleasure in his former apprentice's discomfiture.

"As . . . you will." Gul'dan stammered finally, then with more confidence, "tell me what you would have me do, and I swear, it will be done."

"You have no doubt perceived that I wish to exterminate the draenei. Why I do so is no concern of yours. You need only know that I wish it. The orcs are doing moderately well in this, but they can do better. They *shall* do better. A warrior is only as good as his weapons, and, Gul'dan, I intend to give you and your people weapons such as you have never conceived. It will take a little time; you must be educated first, before you are fit to teach the others. Are you ready and willing?"

Gul'dan's eyes shone, "Begin the lessons. Glorious One. and you will see how apt a pupil of yours I am."

Kil'jaeden laughed.

Durotan was covered with blood, much of it his own. What had gone wrong? Everything had progressed as normal. They had found the hunting party, descended upon them, initiated the attack, and waited for the shaman to use their magic to fight the draenei.

They did not do so. Instead Frostwolf after Frostwolf fell beneath the shining blades and blue-white magics of the draenei. At one point, fighting for his very life, Durotan saw that Drek'Thar was fighting desperately, using nothing but his staff.

What had happened? Why had the shaman not come to his aid? What was Drek'Thar thinking? He could wield a staff hardly better than a child—why did he not use his magic?

The draenei fought furiously, seizing the opportunities the shaman's inexplicable inaction had given them. They pressed their attack harder than Durotan had ever seen, their eyes glinting as for perhaps the first time they sensed victory. The grass was slippery with blood, and Durotan's feet went out from under him. He fell, and his attacker raised his sword.

This was the moment, then. He would die in glorious battle. Except he did not feel that this *was* a glorious battle. By instinct alone, he raised his axe to parry the blow that would come, although his arm had been deeply cut at the joint of the armor and his limb quivered. He looked up into the eyes of the one who would slay him.

And recognized Restalaan.

At that moment, the draenei captain of the guard's own glowing blue eyes widened in recognition and he stayed his blow. Durotan gasped for breath, trying to summon the energy to rise and continue the fight. Restalaan uttered something in his ululating tongue, and every draenei halted almost in mid-swing.

As Durotan got to his feet, he realized that there were only a handful of his warriors left alive. Two more moments of battle and the draenei would have slaughtered the entire party, with only two or three casualties on their own side.

Restalaan whirled on Durotan. Various expressions warred on his ugly face: compassion, disgust, regret, determination. "For the act of compassion and honor you showed our prophet, Durotan, son of Garad, you and those of your clan who yet live have been spared. Treat your wounded and return to your homes. But do not think to receive such mercy from us again. Honor has been satisfied."

Durotan weaved as if he had had too much to drink as blood dripped from deep wounds. He forced himself to stay on his feet by sheer will as the draenei turned and disappeared over the horizon. Once they were out of sight, he could force his legs to hold him no longer and he fell to his knees. Several ribs had been cracked or broken, and each inhalation sent a stabbing pain through him. "Durotan!"

It was Draka. She, too, had been badly injured, but her voice was strong. Relief washed over Durotan. Thank the ancestors, she yet lived. Drek'Thar hurried up to him and placed his hands on Durotan's heart, murmuring under his breath. Warmth flooded Durotan and the pain eased. He took a deep, nourishing breath.

"At least they will let me heal," said Drek'Thar, so softly that Durotan was scarce certain he heard the words.

"Tend to the others, and then we will speak," Durotan said. Drek'Thar nodded, not meeting his chieftain's eyes. He and the other shaman hastened to magically heal what wounds they could, and treat with salves and bandages what they could not. Durotan still had injuries, but nothing life-threatening, and he assisted the shaman.

When Durotan had done all he could, he rose and looked around. No fewer than fifteen bodies were stiffening on the green grass, including Rokkar, his second. Durotan shook his head in stunned disbelief.

He would have to return with litters, to bear the fallen back to their lands. They would burn on a pyre, their bodies given to fire, their ashes to air, to be consumed by water and earth. Their spirits would go to Oshu'gun, and the shaman would converse with them on matters of profound importance.

Or would they? Something terrible had happened, and it was time he found out what.

Sudden anger flooded him at the waste. Despite what the ancestors had told him, something inside Durotan continued to whisper that this attack on the

draenei was a grave mistake. He whirled on Drek'Thar, and with a deep growl seized the smaller orc where he sat gulping water and hauled him to his feet.

"This was a slaughter!" Durotan cried, shaking him furiously. "Fifteen of our kin lie dead before us! The earth drinks deeply of their blood, and I never saw you or any of the others lend your skill to the fight!"

For a moment, Drek'Thar could not speak. The meadow was deathly silent as every Frostwolf watched the confrontation. Then, in a faint voice, Drek'Thar replied, "The elements—they would not come this time."

Durotan's eyes narrowed. Still clutching Drek'Thar by the front of his leather jerkin, he demanded of the wide-eyed, silent shaman, "Is this true? They would not lend their aid to the battle?"

Looking stunned and sick, the shaman nodded. One said in a quavering voice, "It is true, great chieftain. I asked all of them in turn. They said . . . they said it was out of balance, and they would no longer permit us to use their powers."

Durotan's shock was broken by an angry hiss. He turned to see Draka's scowling face. "This is more than a sign! This is a shout, a battle cry, that what We are doing is wrong!"

Slowly, trying to comprehend the magnitude of what had happened, Durotan nodded. If it were not for the mercy Restalaan had shown him, he and every last member of the war party would be lying on the earth. Their bodies growing colder by the moment. The elements had refused their assistance. They had condemned what the shaman were asking of them.

Durotan took a deep breath and shook his head, as if to physically shake away the dark thoughts. "Let us get the injured back to their homes as swiftly as we may. And then . . . then I will send out letters. If what I fear is true—that it is not only the shaman of the Frostwolf clan who are shunned by the elements for what we are doing to the draenei—then we must confront Ner'zhul."

THIRTEEN

How is it we did not see? It is easy to lay the blame on the charismatic Kil'jaeden, or the weak Ner'zhul, or the power-hungry Gul'dan for our fall. But they asked of each individual orc to pretend that hot was cold, that sweet was sour, and even when everything in us screamed against what we were being told, we followed. I was not there, I cannot say why. Perhaps I, too, would have obeyed like a whipped cur. Perhaps the fear was so great, or the respect for our leaders so ingrained. Perhaps. Or perhaps I, like my father and others, would start to see the flaws. I would like to think so.

Blackhand looked out from under his bushy eyebrows, frowning. He always looked like he was frowning, perhaps because he almost always was.

"I do not know about this. Gul'dan," he rumbled. His oversized hand went to the hilt of his sword, fondling it in an uneasy gesture. When Gul'dan had asked to meet with Blackhand a fortnight ago, and to bring his most promising shaman but to tell no one of what they were to be doing, he had agreed. Blackhand had always liked Gul'dan better than Ner'zhul, although he was not sure why. When Gul'dan sat down with him over a lavish meal and explained the current situation, Blackhand was very glad he had come. Now he knew why he liked Gul'dan so much; the former apprentice, now master, was like Blackhand himself. He had no use for ideals, only practicalities. And power, good food, lavish armor, and bloodshed were things both ores craved.

Blackhand was chieftain of the Blackrock ores. He could rise no higher. At least. . . not until now. When the clans were separate, the greatest glory was to lead one's clan. But now . . . now they were working together. Now Blackhand could see the glint of greed in Gul'dan's small eyes. He could almost smell the hunger wafting off the other ore, a hunger he shared.

"Ner'zhul is an honored and valued advisor," Gul'dan said as he chewed dried fruit, extending a claw to pick a chunk where it had gotten lodged between his teeth. "He has great wisdom. But . . . it has been decided that I would be a better choice to lead the ores from this point on."

Blackhand grinned savagely. Ner'zhul was nowhere to be seen.

"And a wise leader surrounds himself with trusted allies," Gul'dan continued. "Those who are strong and obedient. Who will fulfill their obligations. And who, for their loyalty, will be held in high regard and richly rewarded."

Blackhand had begun to bridle at the description "obedient," but was mollified when Gul'dan mentioned "high regard" and "richly rewarded." He glanced over at the eight shaman he had brought to Gul'dan. They were sitting huddled over a second fire some distance away, being attended to by Gul'dan's servants. They looked wretchedly unhappy, and were conveniently out of earshot. Blackhand said, "You asked for the shaman. I assume you know what is happening with them?"

Gul'dan sighed and reached for a talbuk leg. He bit deeply into it, the juices running down his face. He wiped his jutting jaw absently, chewed, swallowed, and answered.

"Yes, I have heard. The elements are no longer obeying them."

Blackhand watched him intently. "Some air beginning to mutter that it is because what we are doing is wrong."

"Do you think that?"

Blackhand shrugged his massive shoulders. "I don't know what to think. This is all new territory. The ancestors say one thing, but the elements won't come."

He was harboring a growing suspicion about the ancestors as well, but held his tongue. Blackhand knew that many thought him a fool; he preferred to let them think he was nothing more than a strong arm and a powerful sword. It gave him distinct advantages. Gul'dan perused him now. and Blackhand wondered if the new spiritual leader of the ores had sensed there was more to the orc leader than met the eye.

"We are a proud race." Gul'dan said. "It is sometimes painful to admit that We do not know everything. Kil'jaeden and the entities he leads . . . ah. Blackhand, the mysteries they harbor! The power they wield—power they are willing to share with *us!*"

Gul'dan's eyes sparkled now with excitement. Blackhand's own heart began to race. Gul'dan leaned forward and continued to speak in an awed whisper.

"We air as ignorant children before them. Even you—even I. But they are willing to teach us. Share with us some of their power. Power that is not dependent upon the whim of the spirits of air, earth, fire, and water." Gul'dan made a dismissive gesture. "Power such as that is feeble. It is not reliable. It can desert you in the middle of a battle and leave you helpless."

Blackhand's face hardened. He had witnessed this very thing, and it had taken all the strength of his warriors to snatch victory when the shaman had begun yelping in terror that the elements were no longer working with them.

"I am listening," he growled softly.

"Imagine what you could do if you led a group of shaman who controlled the source of their powers, in stead of begging and scraping for it," Gul'dan continued. "Imagine if these shaman had servants who could also fight on your side. Servants who could, say, send your enemies fleeing helplessly in terror. Suck their magic dry as the insects in the summer suck blood. Distract them so that their attention was not on battle."

Blackhand lifted a bushy eyebrow. "I can imagine success under those conditions. Success almost every time."

Gul'dan nodded, grinning. "Exactly."

"But how do you know this is true, and not some false promise whispered in your ear?"

Gul'dan's grin widened. "Because, my friend ... I have experienced this. And I will teach your shaman over there everything I know."

"Impressive," rumbled Blackhand.

"But that is not all that I can offer. The warriors—I know a way to make you and everyone who fights at your side more powerful, fiercer, deadlier. All this can be ours if we but claim it."

"Ours?"

"I cannot continue to waste my time speaking with every single leader of every single clan every time they have a complaint."

Gul'dan said, waving his hand imperiously. "There are those who are in agreement with what you and I think is the best way to proceed . . . and those who are not."

"Go on," said Blackhand.

But Gul'dan did not, at least not right away. He was silent, gathering his thoughts. Blackhand grasped a stick and poked at the fire. He knew well that most of the orcs, even those of his own clan, thought him hotheaded and impetuous, but he knew the value of patience.

"I envision two groups of leaders of the ores. One, a simple governing council to make decisions for the whole, its leader elected, its business conducted openly for all to see. The second ... a shadow of this group. Hidden. Secret. Powerful," Gul'dan said quietly. "This . . . this Shadow Council will be comprised of ores who share our vision, and who are willing to make the necessary sacrifices to obtain it."

Blackhand nodded. "Yes . . . yes, I see. A public leadership . . . and a private one."

Gul'dan's mouth stretched in a slow grin. Blackhand regarded him for a moment, then asked the question.

"And to which one shall I belong?"

"Both, my friend," Gul'dan answered smoothly. "You are a born leader. You have charisma, strength, and even your enemies know you are a master strategist. It will be case itself to have you elected as leader of the ores."

Blackhand's eyes flashed. "I am no puppet," he growled softly.

"Of course not," said Gul'dan. "Which is why I said you would belong to both. You would be the leader of this new breed of ore, this ... this Horde, if you will. And you will be on the Shadow Council as well. We cannot work together unless we can trust one another, can we?"

Blackhand gazed into Gul'dan's glinting, clever eyes

and smiled. He did not trust the shaman in the least bit, and he suspected that Gul'dan felt the same about him. It didn't matter.

They both wanted power. Blackhand knew he did not possess the talents and skills that would enable him to wield the sort of power for which Gul'dan lusted. And Gul'dan did not want the sort of power Blackhand craved. They were not in competition, but in league; what benefited one would benefit the other, not rob him of a thing.

Blackhand thought of his family—his mate, Urukai, his two sons, Rend and Maim, his daughter Griselda. He did not dote on them the way that the weak Durotan doted on his mate Draka, of course, but he cared for them. He wanted to see his mate bedecked in jewels, his sons and daughter revered, as befitted the children of Blackhand.

Out of the corner of his eye, he caught a movement. Turning, he beheld Ner'zhul, once the powerful and now the discarded, slipping out of the door of the tent.

"What about him?" Blackhand asked.

Gul'dan shrugged. "What about him? He means nothing now. The Beautiful One wishes him kept alive for the moment. He seems to have something . . . special in mind for Ner'zhul. He will still be a figurehead; love of Ner'zhul is too ingrained in the ores to cast him aside just yet. But do not worry, he is no threat to us."

"The Blackrock shaman . . . you say you will train them in these new magics? The magics that you yourself have studied? That they will be invincible?" "I will train them myself, and if they adapt well to the new arts. I will place them first among my new warlocks,"

Warlock. So that was the name of this new type of magic. It had an interesting sound to it. *Warlock.* And the Blackrock warlocks would be the first ones chosen.

"Blackhand, chieftain of the Blackrock clan, what say you to my proposal?"

Blackhand slowly turned toward Gul'dan. "I say, hail to the Horde—and hail to the Shadow Council."

It was an angry crowd that showed up at the foot of the sacred mountain. Durotan had sent out messages to others he trusted, and had received confirmation that the elements indeed had shunned the shaman. One particularly painful report came from the Bonechewer clan. Their entire party had fallen to the draenei, their annihilation remaining a mystery until a few days later when a shaman who had stayed behind tried to heal a sick child.

Now they were coming, the clan leaders and their shaman, to meet with Ner'zhul and demand an explanation.

Ner'zhul came out to greet them, waving his hands and asking for silence.

"I know why you have come today," he said. Durotan frowned. Ner'zhul was so far away that he seemed a mere speck, and yet Durotan could hear him perfectly. He knew that usually, Ner'zhul achieved this feat by asking the wind to bear his words so that all could hear him. Yet, if the elements had indeed refused the shaman, how was that possible? He exchanged glances with Draka, but both remained silent.

"It is indeed true that the elements no longer answer the shaman's call for aid." Ner'zhul kept speaking, but his words were drowned out by angry shouts. He looked down for a moment, and Durotan regarded him closely. The spiritual leader of the ores looked more frail, more downtrodden, than Durotan had ever seen. *Of course,* Durotan thought.

After a few moments, the shouting died down. The ores assembled were angry, but they wanted answers more than they wanted to vent their rage.

"Some of you have, upon discovering this, leaped to a conclusion that what we are doing is wrong. But that is incorrect. What We are doing is achieving power the likes of which We have never seen. My apprentice, the noble Gul'dan, has studied these powers. I will let him answer any questions you have."

Ner'zhul turned and, leaning heavily on his staff, stepped aside. Gul'dan bowed deeply to his master. Ner'zhul did not seem to notice. He stood, his eyes closed, looking old and frail.

In contrast, Durotan had never seen Gul'dan looking better. There was a new energy about the ore, a strong sense of confidence in his bearing and in his voice when he spoke. "What I am about to tell you may be hard for you to accept, but I have faith that my people are not close-minded when it comes to ways to better themselves," he said. His voice was clear and strong. "Just as we were surprised and awed to learn that there were powerful beings other than the ancestors and the elements, we have discovered that there are ways to harness magic other than cooperating with the elements. Power that is *not* predicated on asking or begging or pleading, power that comes because we are strong enough to *demand* it to come. To control it when it does. To force it to obey *us*, bend to *our* will, rather than the other way around."

Gul'dan paused to let this sink in, looking around at the gathered ores. Durotan glanced at Drek'Thar.

"Is this possible?" he asked his friend.

Drek'Thar shrugged helplessly. He looked completely startled at Gul'dan's words. "I have no idea," he said, "But I tell you, after that last battle . . . Durotan, the shaman were doing the work of the ancestors! How could the elements refuse us under those circumstances? And how could the ancestors allow such a thing?"

His voice turned bitter as he spoke. The shock and shame was still upon him. Durotan understood that the shaman felt like a warrior who had reached confidently for his axe and found it turning to smoke in his hands—an axe a trusted friend had given him, an axe he had been asked to use in a good cause.

"Yes! Yes, I see you understand the value of what I— what the Beautiful One who has taken us under his wing is offering," Gul'dan said, nodding. "I have studied with this great entity, as have these few noble shaman,"

He stepped back and several shaman, dressed in some of the most beautifully tooled leather armor Durotan had ever seen, stepped forward.

"They are all Blackrock ores," Draka murmured, her brows drawing together in a frown. Durotan had noticed that too.

"What they have learned," Gul'dan continued, "will be taught to every single shaman who wishes to be instructed. This, I swear to you. Follow me now to the open lands where our Kosh'harg rituals have been held as far back as anyone can remember. I will have them demonstrate their formidable skills."

For some reason he could not fathom, Durotan felt suddenly ill, Draka squeezed his arm reassuringly, noticing his abrupt paleness. "My mate, what is it?" she asked quietly as, along with everyone else assembled, the two moved toward the Kosh'harg festival grounds.

He shook his head. "I don't know," he said in an equally soft voice. "I just... I feel as though something terrible is about to happen."

Draka grunted. "I have been feeling that way for a long time now."

Durotan kept his face neutral with an effort. He was responsible for the welfare of his people, and his position with Ner'zhul and likely now Gul'dan was already precarious. Durotan was well aware that if either shaman sought to discredit him or his clan, it would be easier than it had been in the past. With the clear focus on union, for the Frostwolf clan to be exiled or in any way cut off could spell extinction for them. Durotan did not like the direction in which things were going, but he could protest only so much. For himself, he did not care. But he could not permit his clan to suffer.

And yet—his blood raced, his heart shook, his body trembled with foreboding. He said a quick prayer to the ancestors that they would continue to guide his people wisely.

They reached the flat river valley that for generations had played host to the Kosh'harg festival. As his feet touched the sacred ground. Durotan felt himself relaxing slightly. Memories came back to him. and he smiled as they brushed his mind. He recalled that fateful night when he and Orgrim had both decided to fly in the face of tradition and dared to spy on the adults as they spoke—and how disappointed both had been at the mundane conversations. Wiser now. he was sure that he and Orgrim, bold though they had thought themselves at the time, had likely not been the first to be so daring, nor were they likely to be the last. He recalled, too, his first real glimpse of the female who would become his life-mate, hunting in these lush fields, dancing around the fire to the sound of the drums throbbing in his veins, and chanting to the moon. As

long as his people still had this, he thought, all would still be well with them. Heartened somewhat, he looked over at where the dancing was usually held. A small tent was erected, and he wondered what it was for.

He and Draka halted a few yards away from the tent, assuming it was part of the demonstration. The others followed suit. The sun shone brightly as more and more ores gathered. Durotan saw that most of those who had come today were clan chieftains and their shaman, so the site did not have to accommodate quite as many as it did during the festival time.

Gul'dan waited until everyone else was assembled before striding purposefully toward the tent. The shaman trained in this mysterious new magic followed him. They all strode with confidence and pride. Coming to a halt in front of the tent, Gul'dan beckoned to a few of the Blackrock warriors, who stepped forward and stood at attention.

At that moment, the wind shifted. Durotan's eyes widened as a familiar scent was carried to his nostrils.

Draenei...

Low murmurs around him told him that he was not the only one who had caught the scent. At that moment, Gul'dan nodded to the warriors. They disappeared inside the tent for a brief moment.

Eight draenei. their hands tightly bound, emerged from the tent.

Their faces were puffy and swollen from beatings. Rags had been shoved in their mouths. Blood was caked on their blue skin and what Htdc remained of their clothing. Durotan stared.

"When the Blackrock clan fought using the magic I am about to share with you. their victory was so absolute that they were able to take several prisoners," Gul'dan said proudly. "These prisoners will help me show you what these new magical abilities can do."

Outrage flooded Durotan. Slaying a foe in armed combat was one thing. Slaughtering helpless prisoners was another. He opened his mouth, but a hand on his arm stayed his words. He glanced up angrily into Or-grim Doomhammer's cool gray eyes.

"You knew about this." Durotan hissed, his words for his old friend's ears alone.

"Keep your voice down," Orgrim hissed back, glancing about to see if anyone was paying attention to them. No one was; everyone's attention was riveted on Gul'dan and the draenei prisoners. "Yes, I knew. I was there when we captured them. It is the way of such things. Durotan."

"It did not use to be the way of the ores." Durotan replied.

"It is now." Orgrim said. "It is a sad necessity. For what it is worth, I do not believe that this will become a common practice. The goal is to slay the draenei, not torment them."

Durotan stared at his old friend. Orgrim kept the gaze for a moment, then flushed and looked away. Durotan felt his outrage abate somewhat. At least Or-

grim understood what a violation this was, even if he supported it. But what else could Orgrim have done? He was second in command to Blackhand. He was oath-bound to support his chieftain. Like Durotan, he had responsibilities to others he simply could not shirk. For the first time in his life, Durotan wished he were a mere clan member.

He looked down into his mate's eyes. She stared, aghast, first at him and then at Orgrim. And then, he saw the sorrow and resignation flit across her features and she lowered her head.

"These beings have worth to us in this moment," Gul'dan was saying. Durotan, his body feeling heavy as lead, dragged his gaze to the shaman. "We will use them to demonstrate these new powers."

He nodded to the first Blackrock shaman in line, who bowed. Looking slightly nervous, the female closed her eyes and concentrated. A sound like rushing wind filled Durotan's ears. A strange pattern written in purple light appeared at her feet, encircling her. Above her head, a purple cube turned idly. Then, suddenly, a small, squawking creature appeared at her feet. It cowered, its eyes blazing red, its small but sharp teeth bared in what looked like a smile. Durotan heard mur-murings and some hisses of fear.

Other shaman followed suit, summoning the same eerie purple circles and cubes, manifesting creatures seemingly out of thin air. Some were large, shapeless things in hues of blue and purple, hovering ominously. Other beings were fair to look upon, save for their hooved feet and batlike wings. Some were large, some small, and all sat or stood quietly beside those who had called them into being.

"Pretty little pets, to be sure," came the distinctive voice of Grom Hellscream, dripping with sarcasm. "But what do they do?"

Gul'dan smiled indulgently. "Patience, Hellscream," he said, almost condescendingly. "It is a strength, not a weakness."

Hellscream's brows drew together, but he stayed silent. He was as curious as anyone, Durotan assumed. Blackhand stood, smiling a little, looking like a proud father. Only he seemed unsurprised by what was unfolding here, and Durotan realized that he must have already witnessed the powers of the newly trained shaman. Witnessed, and approved.

One of the draenei was cut loose from the rest and shoved forward. His hands still bound, he stumbled a few steps on his cloven feet, then stood erect. His face was impassive. Only his slowly moving tail gave any indication of stress.

The first shaman stepped forward, moving her hands and murmuring slightly. The little creature at her side squawked and jumped about, then suddenly fire erupted from its clawed hands to slam into the hapless draenei. At the same moment, a ball of... darkness ... formed at the shaman's fingertips and rushed toward the prisoner. It grunted in pain as its blue flesh was

blackened and burned from the small creature's attack, but it dropped to its knees in obvious agony as the shadow ball struck it.

Again the shaman muttered something, and flames erupted from the very flesh of the tortured draenei. Where before he had been stoic and silent, now he screamed in torment, his cries muffled somewhat by the gag in his throat, but not completely. He jerked and spasmed on the earth, flailing like a fish freshly hooked, his eyes rolling wildly. Then he was still. The reck of burned flesh filled the air.

For a moment, there was silence. Then came a sound that Durotan had never thought to hear: cries of approval and delight at the sight of a bound foe dying in helpless torment.

Durotan stared in horror. Another prisoner was slain for "demonstration purposes." This one was beaten with a whip by one of the fairer servants of the shaman, standing transfixed while fire rained upon it, and darkness pummeled it. A third was brought forward, its magical essence sucked out of it by a monstrous creature that looked like a deformed wolf with tentacles sprouting from its back.

Bile rose in Durotan's throat as blue blood and ashes covered what once had been sacred land, land that had been and was even now lush and fertile, though its profound sense of tranquility had been brutally violated. Here he had danced, had sung to the moon, had conspired with a boyhood friend, had courted his beloved. Here generations of ores had celebrated their unity on a place so holy that any fights that broke out had been halted immediately, the combatants ordered to make peace or to depart.

Durotan was no shaman. He could not sense the earth or the spirits, but he did not need to in order to feel their pain as his own.

Mother Kashur, surely, surely this is not what you wanted, he thought. The cheering filled his ears, the stench of blood and charred flesh assaulted his nostrils. Worst of all was the sight of his brethren, even some among his own clan, who were caught up in the frenzy of inflicting pain and torment upon beings who were rendered incapable of even spitting on their opponents.

He was dimly aware of his hand hurting. Somewhat in a daze, he looked down to see that Draka was clenching it so hard she threatened to break the bones.

"For the shaman!" cried someone.

"No!" Gul'dan's voice carried over the noise of the cheering crowd. "No longer are they shaman. They were abandoned by the elements—they will call them no longer and beg for their aid. Behold those who have power, and who are not afraid to wield it. Behold, . . . the *warlocks!*"

Durotan tore his gaze from his fingers entwining with his mate's to look up at the sacred mountain. It jutted serenely skyward as it ever had, its sides catching and reflecting the light, and for a long moment, Durotan wondered why it did not shatter and break, like the heart of a sentient being, overcome with horror at what was being done in its once-comforting shadow.

There were wild celebrations that night. Durotan participated in none of them and forbade members of his clan to do so. As the Frostwolf shaman sat by their small fire, subdued and eating in silence, Drek'Thar dared ask the question that Durotan knew was in their hearts.

"My chieftain," said Drek'Thar quickly, "will you permit us to learn the ways of the warlocks?"

There was a long silence, unbroken save by the crackling of the fire. Finally Durotan spoke.

"I have a question for you first," he said. "Do you approve of what was done to the prisoners today?"

Drek'Thar looked uncomfortable. "It . . . would be better had we attacked them in honest combat," he admitted. "But they are our enemies. They have proven that."

"Proven that they will fight back when attacked," Durotan retorted. "That is all that has been proven." Drek'Thar started to protest, but Durotan waved him to be silent. "I know, this is the will of the ancestors, but today I beheld something that I never thought I would see. I saw the sacred fields where for countless years our people met in peace defiled by the blood of those who couldn't even lift a hand to defend themselves."

He saw movement at the edge of the circle and caught Orgrim's scent. Durotan continued. "In the shadow of Oshu'gun itself Those who slew the draenei today did not do so in order to protect an immediate threat to our lands. They butchered prisoners in order to show off their new . . . talents/'

Orgrim now coughed quietly and Durotan motioned him forward. Orgrim was well known to all present, and he sat down by the fire with the familiarity of one known and welcomed.

"Orgrim," Draka said, touching her friend's arm gently. "The first . . . warlocks . . . are from your clan. What are your thoughts?"

Orgrim stared into the firelight, his heavy brows knitted together as he sorted through his thoughts. "If we are to fight the draenei—and even you Frostwolves are resigned to the necessity of it—then we should fight to be victorious. The elements have abandoned the shaman. They are fickle and unpredictable at their best, and were never the most reliable allies. Not like one's friends."

He glanced at Durotan and smiled a little. Despite the heaviness in his chest, Durotan smiled back.

"These new creatures, these strange powers—they seem to be more dependable. And destructive."

"There was something about them...." Draka's voice trailed off. Drek'Thar broke in quickly.

"Draka, I know your concerns. They were definitely not natural powers, at least not natural as we shaman have always known them. But who is to say that is wrong? They exist, they must have some place in the order of things. Fire is fire. Whether it comes from the

fingers of a little dancing being or with the spirit of fire's blessing, it burns flesh just the same. I agree with our esteemed guest.

We have committed to the battle. Surely we do not fight to lose it!"

Draka still shook her head, her beautiful eyes unhappy. Her hands moved as if she were physically groping for the words.

"It is more than summoning fire, or even the strange bolts of darkness," she said. "I have fought draenei. I have slain draenei. And never have I seen them writhe in such pain, nor give voice to such torment. The things who are serving the warlocks seemed to . . . enjoy that."

"We enjoy the hunt," Durotan pointed out. He disliked arguing with his mate, but as always, he needed to see all sides of an issue in order to decide what was best for his clan. "The wolves enjoy feasting on steaming flesh."

"Is it wrong to wish to win?" Orgrim challenged, his gray eyes narrowing. "Is it wrong to take pleasure in the victory?"

"In the hunt, in the victory, no. It is the suffering of which I speak."

Drek'Thar shrugged. "Perhaps the beings who are summoned to serve feed on that. Perhaps it is necessary to their existence."

"But is it necessary to *ours*?" Draka's eyes glittered in the firelight, and Durotan knew with a pang that it was not from anger but from tears of frustration. "The draenei have always had superior magics to ours, even with the aid of the elements." Drek'Thar said. "I have always been a shaman. I was born so. And now I tell you I will embrace the path of the warlock, if my clan leader will permit it. Because I understand what those powers can do for us, having dealt with the elements for as long as I have. I would say, Draka, I am sorry, but yes—yes—this is necessary to our existence. If we do not have the powers of the elements to call upon, the draenei will obliterate us from the face of the earth."

Draka sighed and buried her face in her hands. The small group was silent, the only sound the crackling of the fire. Durotan thought something was missing; now he knew. He did not hear the sounds of the night creatures, the birds and insects and other living things who formerly filled the air with quiet sounds. They had been driven from this place by what had occurred here earlier. He tried not to think of this as an omen.

"I will permit the Frostwolf clan to learn these arts," he said heavily.

Drek'Thar bowed his head. "I thank you, Durotan. You will not regret it."

Durotan did not reply.

FOURTEEN

Drek'Thar weeps as he tells me of these things, tears falling from eyes that can no longer see the present but too keenly can see the past. I have no comfort to offer him. That the elements have come again to his call—to mine—indeed to that of any orcish shaman is testimony to their compassion and forgiveness, their desire to see the balance restored.

The Spire that still houses darkness is not on this continent. We are well away from its malevolence physically, but not yet out of its shadow. The shadow that was cast so long ago, on the day following the defiling of what had once been our most sacred place. The shadow of a black hand.

Sleep did not come easily to Durotan. Nor, he realized, to Draka, as she tossed and turned and sighed. Finally he gave up and lay awake, going over the events of the day. Everything in him screamed that it was wrong to embrace a magical path that so blatantly threw on the suffering of another being. And yet, what else was there to do? The elements had deserted the shaman, even though the ancestors themselves had given the orcs this task. Without magic to use as an additional weapon, the orcs would be wiped out by the superior technology and knowledge of the draenei.

He rose and left the sleeping tent. He started a fire to shake off the predawn chill and silently ate cold raw meat. As he broke his fast and watched the sky lighten, he saw a courier approaching. Without stopping, the rider tossed a scroll to Durotan and rode on. Durotan unfolded it and closed his eyes at the contents.

There was to be another meeting in two days. At that time, the chieftains would elect a leader who would speak for them all. Make decisions for them all. They would select one who would be called Warchief.

A soft hand stroked his hair. He looked up to see Draka reading over his shoulder.

"You might as well stay home," she said gruffly. "The outcome is decided anyway."

He smiled sadly at her. "You did not use to be so cynical, beloved."

"I did not use to live in such times," was all she said. In his heart, he knew she was right. There was only one orc who was well-known enough, charismatic enough to win sufficient votes to be elected Warchief. Grom Hellscream might give Blackhand a bit of a challenge, but Hellscream was too impulsive to be trusted

with such a task. Blackhand had been a visible figure from the very start, at first opposing and then supporting Ner'zhul. It was his shaman who had become the first warlocks. He had won more victories in his attacks against the draenei than anyone else.

Draka, as she was so often, was right in this as well. And two days later, Durotan watched with dull eyes as the votes of the clan chieftains were tallied, and as Blackhand of the Blackrock clan was chosen. He felt several glances come his way as Blackhand's name was announced by Gul'dan, and as the big orc stood and with false modesty accepted the title. Durotan did not even bother to object. What would be the point? He was already being watched closely for suspicion of disloyalty. No word he could possibly utter would change anything.

At one point, he looked over at Orgrim. To all other eyes, the second in command of the Blackrock clan looked steady and supportive of his leader. But Durotan knew Orgrim better than anyone, and he saw the slight frown that furrowed his friend's brow, the tightness around the lips that indicated that Orgrim was perhaps as unhappy with the decision as Durotan. But he, too, was in no position to object. Durotan hoped that perhaps Orgrim's position, so close to Blackhand, would help mitigate the damage he was certain Blackhand would do.

Blackhand now stood in front, waving and smiling at the cheering crowd. Durotan could not object, but neither could he bring himself to cheer for an orc who exemplified everything he despised.

Orgrim stood behind his leader on Blackhand's right. Gul'dan, whom Durotan was certain was manipulating things but was unsure as to how, stood back and gazed at Blackhand respectfully.

"My orcish brothers and sisters!" Blackhand cried. "You honor me, I will prove a worthy Warchief of this vast sea of noble warriors. Day by day, we improve our weapons and our armor. And now, we reject the unpredictable elements and embrace true power—power that our warlocks control and wield without groveling or scraping to anyone or anything. This is liberation! This is strength! We are of one purpose, one clear focus. We will wipe the draenei from our lands. They will be unable to resist this tide of warriors and warlocks, this sweeping Horde. We are their worst night-mare. To battle!"

He lifted his arms and shouted, "For the Horde!"

And thousands of impassioned voices cried, "For the Horde! For the Horde! *For the Horde!*"

Durotan and Draka returned home shortly after the election of Blackhand, too disgusted to remain longer. The shaman stayed behind for training. When they returned several days later, Durotan saw they stood tall and proud once again. This new magic had given them back their faith in themselves—something that had evaporated like morning mist when the elements deserted them. For that, Durotan was grateful. He loved his clan, and knew them to be good people. He did not like seeing them broken and disheartened.

They practiced their skills on beasts at first, joining the hunting parties and sending their strange creatures after clefthoof and talbuk. Durotan was still troubled at the agony the attacked creatures suffered. As time passed, the creatures suffered less—not because the pain was decreased, but because the warlocks were learning to kill faster and more efficiently. The addition of the strange "helpers," or "pets," as some warlocks fondly referred to the beings firmly under their control, seemed to make all the difference.

Blackhand seemed to enjoy his newfound position. Scrolls came almost daily from couriers whose wolves and whose selves seemed to wear more ornate adornment each time they rode into camp. Durotan had to admit that knowing what was going on with the other clans was useful information.

But one day, someone other than the courier came into the encampment. Durotan recognized the raiment; the approaching orc, mounted on a wolf with a particularly glossy black cloak, was one of Blackhand's personal warlocks, Kur'kul. He halted his wolf, dismounted, and bowed before Durotan.

"Chieftain, a word with you from the Warchief," he said in a surprisingly pleasant voice. Durotan nodded and motioned that the warlock walk with him. They strode until he felt certain they would not be overheard. "What is it, that Blackhand sends one of his most important warlocks to me?" he asked.

Kur'kul smiled around his tusks. "I am riding to all the clans," he said, clearly intending for Durotan to be put in his place. The Frostwolves were not being particularly honored, it would seem. Durotan grunted and folded his arms across his chest, waiting. "The most important factor in our eventual and glorious victory over the draenei is numbers," Kur'kul continued. "They are few, we are many. But we need to be more."

"So what is it Blackhand wishes?" growled Durotan. "Shall we leave off fighting for mating?"

Kur'kul did not blink. "Not leave off fighting, but yes . . . encourage your warriors to procreate. You will receive accolades for each child that is born to your clan. That will help. But unfortunately, we need more warriors right now, not six years from now." Durotan stared, stunned. He had meant the comment as a crude joke. What was going on?

"Children begin training at age six," Kur'kul continued. "They are strong enough to fight at age twelve. Summon all your younglings."

"I do not understand," Durotan said. "Summon them for what?"

Kur'kul sighed as if Durotan were a foolish child, "I have the ability to accentuate their growth," he said. "We will. . . push them forward a bit. If we take all the children that are between six and twelve now and age

them to twelve, we will increase the numbers of warriors on the field by almost fifty percent."

Durotan couldn't believe what he was hearing. 'Absolutely not!'

"I'm afraid it's not a choice. It's an order. Any clan who refuses will be branded a traitor to the Horde. The clan will be exiled, and their leader and his mate ... executed."

Durotan stared, stunned. Kur'kul handed him a scroll. He read it, shaking with anger, and saw that the warlock had spoken truly. He and Draka would be put to death, and the Frostwolf clan exiled.

"You would rob them of their childhood, then," he said stonily.

"For their future? Yes. I will drain a little of their lives . . . only six years' worth. They will come to no harm. The Blackrock children certainly didn't. Black-hand insisted his own three young ones be the first to be so honored. And in return, they will be able to fight for the glory of the Horde now, when they can make a difference."

Durotan was not in the least surprised that Black-hand had permitted this to be done to his children. For the first time, Durotan was grateful that there were so few children in his clan. There were only five of them older than six and younger than twelve. He again read the missive, feeling furious and sickened at the same time. These children ought to be able to simply *be* children. The warlock waited calmly. Finally, Durotan said in a voice he made deliberately harsh to hide his pain, "Do what you must do."

"For the Horde!" said Kur'kul.

Durotan did not reply.

What happened next was barbaric.

Durotan forced himself to remain impassive while Kur'kul cast a spell on the five Frostwolf children. They writhed in pain, screaming and flailing on the earth as bones were stretched, as skin and muscle burst into unnatural growth. A sickly green line linked the children to the warlock, as if he was sucking the very life out of them. The expression on Kur'kul's face was ecstatic. If the children were suffering, he most definitely was not. For an awful moment, Durotan feared the warlock would not stop at age twelve, but would continue draining life from the children until they were shriveled and ancient.

But thankfully, Kur'kul did stop. The young ones—children no longer—lay where they had dropped the instant the draining had begun. For long moments, they could not be roused, and when they did, they wept, softly, breathily, as if they no strength left for anything else.

Durotan turned toward the warlock. "You have done what you have come for. Get out."

Kur'kul looked offended. "Chieftain Durotan, you—"

Durotan seized him by the front of his scarlet robe. Fear flickered across the other ore's face.

"Get out. Now."

Durotan shoved hard and Kur'kul stumbled backward, almost falling. He glowered at Durotan.

"Blackhand will not be pleased to hear of this," Kur'kul growled. Durotan did not dare speak; if any other words came from his mouth, he knew they would doom his clan. Instead he turned away, shaking with rage, and went to the children who were children no longer.

For some time after that, nothing was asked of the Frostwolf clan save more intensive training and reporting back on that training, and Durotan was both relieved and apprehensive. Somehow, he knew that when Blackhand and Gul'dan chose to notice him, the task they would set for him would be a difficult one.

He would not be disappointed.

Durotan was looking at a new pattern for armor the smith had just drawn up when the wolfrider loped into the Frostwolf encampment. Without breaking stride, the rider tossed Durotan a parchment, wheeled his mount around, and departed. Durotan unrolled it and began to read, his eyes widening. He looked up quickly at the departing figure of the rider—it was not the official courier.

Old friend—

I am sure it comes as no surprise that you are being watched. They will set a task for you, one that they know you can complete. You must do so. I do not know what they will do if you refuse, but I fear the worst.

There was no signature; the missive did not need one. Durotan knew Orgrim's bold script. He crumpled the parchment and tossed it into the fire, watching it twist and curl in on itself like a living thing as the flames licked and consumed it.

Orgrim had sent the warning just in time. That very afternoon, a rider wearing the official tabard of a courier approached and handed the Frostwolf chieftain a parchment. Durotan nodded as he accepted it and put it aside. He did not want to see it right now. But the courier looked uneasy. She did not dismount, but neither did she turn her wolf and ride back to the Frostwolf lands.

"I have been instructed to wait for a reply," she said after an awkward pause.

Durotan nodded and unrolled the parchment. The writing was exquisite, and he knew that Blackhand had dictated the missive; the Warchief, smart and cunning though he was, was barely literate.

It was worse than he had thought. Durotan kept his face carefully neutral, though out of the corner of his eye he saw that Draka was watching him carefully.

Unto Durotan, son of Garad, chieftain of the Frostwolf clan, Blackhand, Warchief of the Horde, gives greetings.

You have now had time to see the skills of our newly trained warlocks in action. It is time to take the attack to our enemies. The draenei city of Telmor is close to your borders. You are instructed to form a war party and attack them. Orgrim has told me that as boys, the two of you entered that city. That you saw the secret of how the draenei kept themselves unseen. Orgrim also tells me that you have excellent recall and that you would remember how to expose the city to our warriors for an assault.

I'm sure I don't have to tell you what destroying this city would mean to the Horde. And to the Frostwolf clan. Reply to this letter immediately and we will begin preparations for the assault.

For the Horde!

The signature was an imprint of Blackhand's right hand, stained with ink.

Durotan was furious. How could Orgrim have revealed this information? Did he truly follow Blackhand after all, that he would tell the Warchief of this incident and so put Durotan on the spot? The anger ebbed as he realized that the information to which Blackhand referred—their visit there as boys, the way the city was hidden, Durotan's almost uncanny memory—these were things

that could have been dropped in conversation at any point over the last few years. Blackhand was intelligent enough to pick up any crumb of information, and hoard it until such time as it was necessary. Durotan thought about lying, about claiming that he could not recall the words by which Restalaan had dispelled the illusion that kept die draenei city safe and hidden from the eyes of the ogres . . . and, now, the eyes of the ores. It had been a long time, and he had only heard the phrase uttered once. Anyone else would indeed have forgotten it. But the threat in die letter was so thinly veiled as to be almost ridiculous. If Durotan agreed to assist with the attack, he would prove his loyalty to the Horde, to Blackhand, and to Gul'dan. at least for the moment. If he refused, even if he claimed not to recall the words Blackhand wanted him to speak . . . well, like Orgrim, Durotan feared the worst.

The courier was waiting.

Durotan made the only decision he could make.

He looked up at the courier, his face impassive. "I will do as the Warchief bids, of course. For the Horde!"

The courier looked both relieved and a little surprised. "The Warchief will be pleased to hear this. I am instructed to give you the following." She reached into her leather backpack and retrieved a small sack, which she handed to Durotan. "Your warriors and your warlocks will need to train with these."

Durotan nodded. He knew what they were: the Heart of Fury and the Brilliant Star that he had ordered taken off Velen. These stones were perhaps the only things that had spared him once before when he had incurred Ner'zhul's anger. Now, he would use them against the very people he had taken them from.

"The Warchief will contact you soon," the courier said, inclined her head, and turned her wolf. Durotan watched her go. Draka stepped quietly beside him. He handed her the letter and went into their tent.

A few moments later she joined him, slipping her arms around him from behind while he buried his face in his hands and grieved over the events that had led to the terrible decision he had been forced to make.

A few days later the war party gathered at the Frostwolf encampment. Most of the warriors and warlocks were from the Blackrock clan, but there were more than a few painted Warsong faces in the crowd, and several Shattered Hand as well. Even the most obtuse among the Frostwolves could sense the mistrust and contempt from the visitors. Durotan knew it was no accident that the other ores were all from the most martial clans. They were there to make sure the Frostwolves did not falter at any critical point. Durotan idly wondered which among them had the instructions to slit his throat at the first sign of hesitation. He hoped it was not Orgrim. The two old friends exchanged only a few words, and Durotan saw regret in Orgrim's visage. For that, at least, he was glad.

A courier had been sent ahead, so there were plenty of bonfires roaring and food and drink for the hungry "guests." Many of the Frostwolves gave up their own lodging for the visitors, so that those who would head into battle the following morning would rest as well as possible. Durotan met with Orgrim and the others who would lead the assault, sketching out a layout of the city as best he and Orgrim could recall it.

By daybreak, the war party—a small army of ores—was on the move. They passed into the meadows that surrounded the Terokkar forest, where so long ago Orgrim and Durotan had raced as youths and been startled by the appearance of an ogre. No lumbering giants troubled the vast wave of ores as they moved steadily toward their destination this morning. Durotan was in the front, riding beside Orgrim on Nightstalkcr. They were silent, but Durotan did not miss the fact that Orgrim's gray eyes lingered on the site where two boys had been rescued by draenei warriors.

"The years have been long since we passed this way," Durotan said.

Orgrim nodded. "I am not even sure we have the right direction. The forest and fields have changed and grown, and there were precious few landmarks originally—"

Durotan said heavily, "I remember the way." He wished he did not. A pile of stones here, a strange-shaped outcropping there was enough to guide him. It looked like nothing to anyone else. Blackhand had told his troops that the draenei were able to disguise their city. Even so, Durotan's sharp ears caught slight murmurings of concern. He frowned.

"We are drawing close," he said. "We must be quiet."

There is an excellent chance that We will have been seen and reported already."

The war party grew silent then. With a few gestures, Orgrim dispatched some of his outriders to scout the area. Durotan's mind went back to that twilight, when he, too, was worried about where they were going and what the draenei had planned for him. He brought his wolf to a halt and dismounted. Nightstalkcr shook his head and scratched his ears absently. It was here ... or close to here. . . . Durotan felt a desperate hope that perhaps the draenei remembered that they had exposed their secret to him, that they had changed the hiding place of the magical stone upon which their protection depended.

There was no telltale rock beneath which the green gem was secreted. Durotan's memory would have no aid in uncovering it. He concentrated, walking slowly, hearing the jangling of tack and the soft clinking of armor as the others watched and waited. He closed his eyes to aid his concentration, saw again Restalaan kneeling on the ground, moving aside leaves and pine needles to uncover—

Durotan opened his eyes and moved a few steps to his left. He said a quick prayer to the ancestors; whether it was asking for help in finding the stone or in not finding it, he was not certain. Mailed hands reached down and brushed away layers of detritus and then touched something cool and hard.

There is no turning back now. Durotan closed his fingers around the gem and picked it up.

Even in his distraught state of mind, he could sense the stone emanating a comforting energy. It nestled in his palm as if it belonged there. Durotan ran his left index finger over it, drawing out this moment before everything would change irrevocably "You found it." breathed Orgrim. who had silently stepped up to his friend. Durotan was overcome with emotion and could not speak for a moment. He merely nodded, then tore his gaze from the beautiful, pulsating stone and looked up at the awestruck faces gazing at the treasure he held.

Orgrim nodded brusquely. "Get into position," he said, "We have been fortunate that there has been no advance warning."

The stone was so calming to hold, Durotan wanted nothing better than to simply stand and look into its depths, but he knew that he had already made his choice. He took a deep breath and spoke the words that Restalaan had spoken so long ago in this same place.

"Kehla men samir, solay Uimaa kahl."

He wanted to believe that his thick, orcish accent would not activate the stone. That he was able to fulfill his obligation to his people without storming a small city full of civilians. But apparently the words were understood by whatever force controlled the green gem. The illusion was already dissipating, the trees and boulders shimmering into insubstantiality, and before the orcish war party a wide, paved road stretched as if in invitation.

They needed no urging. The glorious city of the draenei lay before them, and with cries torn from over a hundred throats, the ores descended upon it.

FIFTEEN

Drek'Thar speaks in a broken voice of glories ruined, of beauty destroyed, of the slaughter of children. Through his tale runs the unspoken excuse: It seemed so right at the time. / imagine it did seem right. It did seem just. I can only pray to the ancestors that I am never placed in the same position as my father—torn between what I know in my heart is right and the defense of my people. It is why I continue to strive to uphold the tenuous peace between us and the Alliance.

Because few offenses and insults in this or any other world are sufficient to warrant the slaughter of children.

Later, Durotan would wonder how the city of Telmor had received no advance notice of a wave of mounted ores. He would never be able to speak with a draenei to find out. He could only assume that the draenei were so certain in their Hlusionary camouflage that the idea that it could be breached never occurred to them.

The quiet air was rent with the sound of war cries and wolf howls as the riders stormed the streets of the city. Several unarmed draenei were cut down in the first few seconds of the assault. The white pavement was soon blue with spilled blood, but it did not take very long for the city guards to counterattack.

Durotan had shoved the stone into his pack the moment he had finished using it; it would join the red and yellow stones he had taken from Velen. He mounted quickly and rode with grim determination, his axe at the ready. While he had made his own private vow that he would not attack an unarmed foe or a child, he had also made his choice, and was prepared to kill or die for it.

The first wave flooded the city. A river of ores forked into streams, pouring into the large, spherical public buildings that branched off to either side of the main street, surging up the wide stone steps. The warlocks brought up the rear. Their creatures were silent and obedient, save the small ones that muttered constantly under their breaths. They waited for the right moments to bring down the rain of fire, the bolt of shadows, the various curses of torment. The warriors emerged covered with blood, their boots tracking it down the wide steps as they continued on to the next building, and the next.

The draenei guards were in the streets now, casting their own magics. Durotan turned in his saddle barely in time to deflect a blow from a sword that blazed with blue energy. The sword clanged against the head of his axe and jarred his arm to the bone. But that was nothing compared to the shock he felt at recognizing his attacker.

For the second time, he and Restalaan were meeting in battle, Durotan had spared Velen, and in return. Restalaan had spared him when he was helpless before the draenei warrior. Durotan saw recognition in the other's eyes, then those glowing blue orbs narrowed.

All debts between them were paid. This time, there would be no quarter given, on either side.

Restalaan cried something in his musical tongue. Instead of attacking again, he hauled Durotan from his saddle. Durotan was taken by surprise, and before he knew what was happening, he lay on the ground before his enemy. He reached for his axe as Restalaan swung his sword, thinking even as his fingers closed about the hilt that he would not be swift enough.

Nightstalkcr, however, was trained almost as well as the orc who rode him. The instant the wolf felt his rider leave his back he whirled on Restalaan. Huge teeth crunched down on the draenei's arm. Had it not been for the protective armor Restalaan wore, his arm would have been severed instantly. As it was, the pressure was enough to cripple him and make him drop the sword. With a grunt, Durotan swung his axe as hard as he could. It slammed into Restalaan's midsection, its keen edge cleaving through his armor to bite deep into his flesh.

Restalaan fell to his knees, his useless arm still held fast by Nightstalkcr's teeth. The white wolf bit down harder, growling, and started worrying the draenei's

arm as if it were a small animal. Within moments, the wolf would rip it off. Blood gushed from the wound in Restalaan's side. He made no sound despite the agony he must be enduring.

Durotan got to his feet and struck again, this time a killing blow—a mercy blow. Restalaan sagged and Nightstalkcr immediately let go of the arm. The captain of the guards of Telmor was dead.

Durotan did not permit himself regret. He mounted Nightstalkcr quickly and sought out his next target. There was no lack of them. The city was certainly not the size of Shattrath, their capital, but it was big enough. There were draenei aplenty to slaughter. The air was filled with cries of bloodlust, of pain and fear, of the clanging of sword on shield and the crackle of spells being cast.

Odors assaulted his nostrils, of blood **and** feces and urine and the unmistakable, unique reek of terror.

The rage boiling inside him felt good. His senses had never been higher, and he seemed to move without thinking. Over there—another one of the guards, fighting Orgrim. Durotan tensed, thinking to rush to his friend's aid, but the Doomhammer swung through the air and crushed the attacker's skull even through his helm. Durotan grinned fiercely. Orgrim needed no aid.

He sensed the presence at his side before he heard or smelled it, and turned, bellowing his clan's war cry. He hoisted the gore-covered axe and prepared to bring it down. The child was barely out of puberty, but she screamed in fury as she tore with bare hands at his armor-covered leg. Tears streamed down her pale blue face and her teeth were bared. Blue blood, too much of it to be her own, saturated her dress so that it clung to her body. She pounded futilely at him, her tear-filled eyes burning with pain and righteous fury

For a horrible second she seemed to be the same girl that Durotan and Orgrim had encountered years ago. That could not be—surely that girl was a woman grown now. Or was she? But it did not matter. It was a female child who, both bravely and stupidly, was attempting to attack a mounted orc warrior with her bare hands.

It was with an enormous effort that Durotan halted the axe in mid-swing. He would not harm a child—that was not the code, that was not the way of the ores—

Suddenly the girl froze. Her eyes widened. She opened her mouth and blood gushed forth, Durotan's gaze dropped from her face to her chest, and he could see the spear point tenting the blood-soaked fabric. Before Durotan could react, the Shattered Hand orc who had slain the girl shoved the spear to the side, forcing the body to the earth. He put one booted foot on her shoulder.

Grunting, he pulled loose his spear and grinned up at Durotan.

"You owe me one, Frostwolf," the orc said, then vanished into the close-pressing crowd of slayers and victims.

Durotan threw back his head and cried his agony to the ancestors.

On surged the orcs, leaving corpses in their wake. The vast majority of the dead were draenei, but here and there a brown body of a fallen orc could be seen. Some of the ores who fell yet lived, crying out for aid, but their pleas fell on deaf ears. Shaman could have healed them with spells, but apparently, warlock magics did not embrace the healing arts. So they lay where they had fallen, some wheezing out their last breaths next to the draenei they had slain, while the unstoppable tide poured forward.

They followed the road through the foothills, entering each building as they went and slaughtering anyone they found. No doubt some draenei had hidden, Durotan thought, and prayed they would not be found. He did not think that prayer would be answered. Once the first round of slaughter had been completed, there would be the looting and the search for those who had escaped the first assault. He knew. It had been planned thus.

They had reached the largest building yet, the one that sat highest on the mountain, and Durotan recognized it immediately. It was the magister's scat, where he and Orgrim had had dinner with the Prophet. Bitterly he thought that Velen was not much of a prophet if he had not foreseen this black moment. Nightstalker raced up the steps, and Durotan could not help himself. He craned his neck and looked over his shoulder, back down toward the city as he had done the first time he had climbed these steps on his own two feet.

Then, the draenei city had been spread out like jewels on a meadow. Now, it looked exactly like what it was—a broken, taken city, spattered with blood and gore and the death not just of its citizens, but of any hope of peace or truce or negotiation. Durotan closed his eyes briefly in pain.

I am proud of my people and our city, Restalaan had said to Durotan. Restalaan, who lay dead and stiffening on the white street along with countless other draenei. *We have worked hard here. We love Draenor. And I never thought to have the chance to share it with an ore. The ways of destiny are strange indeed.*

Stranger than either orc youth or draenei guard could have imagined.

The rooms that had made two orc youths feel slightly penned in years ago now seemed utterly claustrophobic when crammed with adult orc warriors by the dozens. Most were empty; there had been time for an evacuation of all but those who had sworn to die in service to their city. And die they did, the guards who attacked them now. The beautiful, ornate furniture was used as weapons, brought crashing down upon draenei heads, the breakage adding to the thrill of the fight. Ores punched holes in the smooth, curving walls for the sheer pleasure of it. Beds were hacked with swords, bowls of fruit and delicately wrought statuettes swept off furniture that was in turn smashed by axe or hammer.

Durotan had had enough. "Hold!" he cried, but no one listened. The creatures controlled by the warlocks seemed well pleased with this behavior, almost smug. But the time for destruction had passed, and the ruthless savagery would not serve the ores now that all the inhabitants of Telmor were either slain or had fled.

"Hold!" Durotan yelled again. This time Orgrim heard him and took up the cry. The Warsong representative also shook his head, as if to clear it of something hazy and obscuring, then he, too, tried to calm his warriors. Drek'Thar, back with the other warlocks, had not become as lost in bloodlust as the others, and he was able to stop the others from casting spells.

"Listen to me!" Durotan roared. Most of them had reached the room where Velen had hosted them at his table. The room was empty, the chairs and tables overturned, the wall hangings shredded and cast to the floor.

"We have taken the city, it is now time to take what we need from it!"

They were listening now, their breaths coming in pants that filled the room with raspy sound. But at least they had stopped swinging their weapons at anything that moved ... or even anything that didn't.

"First we attend to the injured," Durotan ordered. "We will not leave our brethren to suffer in the streets."

Some of them started guiltily at that. Durotan realized with disgust that many of these warriors had completely forgotten that some of their number still lay writhing in pain outside while they enjoyed the wanton destruction of the magister's estate. He pushed his feelings down and nodded to Drek'Thar. The warlocks might no longer have healing spells, but they had once been shaman, and knew how to tend battle wounds in a more mundane fashion. Drek'Thar motioned to several warlocks, and they hurried back the way they had come.

"Next, this city has supplies the likes of which we have never seen. There are foodstuffs aplenty, and weapons, and armor, and other things we know not of. Things that will serve the Horde in its quest to—"

He could not say the words he had planned: *In its quest to wipe out the draenei.* Instead he added somewhat awkwardly, "In its quest. We are an army. An army marches on its stomach. We need to be well led, well watered, healed, rested, protected.

Orgrim—you take a group and start at this end. Guthor, you take a group and head back to the gates. Work your way up the main road until you meet Orgrim's group. Anyone who has any healing knowledge, report to Drek'Thar and do exactly what he tells you to do."

"What of any draenei we find alive?" asked someone.

What, indeed? There was no infrastructure to take care of prisoners, and in truth, the only purpose of a prisoner would be for negotiations. Since it had been made quite clear that the sole purpose of the Horde was total extermination of the draenei race, there was no reason to host prisoners.

"Kill them." Durotan said hoarsely. He hoped the raggedness of his voice would be interpreted as raw fury rather than the agonizing pain it was. "Kill them all."

As the ores he commanded hurried to obey his orders, Durotan found himself wishing that Nightstalker had not been so quick to protect him. It would have been easier had he perished by Restalaan's hand this day than speak the words he had just uttered.

With any luck, during this horrific campaign to obliterate a species who had never raised a hand to them, death would find Durotan sooner rather than later.

SIXTEEN

The Shadow Council. Even now, so many years on, we know so little about who they were and what they did. Gul'dan carried many, many secrets to his grave. May he rot there in torment. It is difficult enough for me to understand how one or two may become so corrupted that they would doom their descendants for power in their lifetimes; that there were so many—the number is not even known for certain—is beyond the scope of my limited imagination.

Yet even these numbers would not have mattered had it not been for the demons who held them in their grasp. Their pain, I rejoice in; what they did to others who obeyed them because they trusted them, I condemn with every fiber of my being.

"That was an excellent test," Kil'jaeden approved, smiling at his subjects, Gul'dan bowed, his eyes bright with his master's approval. Ner'zhul hunkered down, his eyes on the floor. But even so, he was listening.

"I confess. I was surprised Durotan was able to carry out our orders," Gul'dan said. "I expected him to resist, or at least put shackles on what his ores could and could not do. But the city lies claimed and broken, my lord. All the draenei who once lived there are gone—most of them dead."

"'Most' is not good enough. Gul'dan. You know that."

Gul'dan flinched slightly at the criticism. He wondered, not for the first time, about the connection between Kil'jaeden and the draenei, and why the Beautiful One so despised them. "It was our first attempt at taking the battle to them, rather than attacking lone hunting parties. Great One," the warlock replied, a little surprised at his own daring. Kil'jaeden cocked his horned red head, considered, then nodded.

"True. And there is yet time."

It had been several days since the fall of Telmor. Gul'dan, impressed with the job Durotan had done, had tried to give the city to the Frostwolf clan as a reward, but Durotan had declined the offer. The Frostwolves, he stated, would continue to live in their ancestral lands.

The Blackrocks, however, had not been so foolish. Blackhand and his family now slept in the beds where the magister of the city had once slept. At first, the ores had not known what to make of the trappings of the draenei, but now they were beginning to incorporate their victims' way of life into their own. They sat in chairs, ate at tables, analyzed and trained with draenei weaponry, adapted the armor for bulkier orcish frames. Some of the females and not a few of the males of the Blackrock clan had taken to wearing draenei clothing, incorporating it with traditional orcish tunics, robes, and breeches,

Gul'dan knew that many wondered why he or Ner'zhul had not taken the city for themselves. It was tempting, but Gul'dan had been well advised by his master. Creature comforts were pleasant, but power was sweeter, and the less Gul'dan claimed for himself publicly, the greater his reach would be in secret. Kil'jaeden would not let him down, as long as Gul'dan did his master's work well. A few items were brought to this new place he called home—an enormous, circular table carved of wood inlaid with softly glowing shells and stones, along with several beautiful chairs,

Gul'dan stepped forward to the massive table, running his hands over the polished surface, smiling to himself. All that remained was to summon those whom Gul'dan had reason to believe would answer. Some names were immediately obvious to him. Others came only with extended thought. But he had a list of names now that was long enough to be comprehensive, should enough to be . . . managed.

Soon, sooner than he had even hoped, the Shadow Council would form. While on the outside, Gul'dan was advancing the ores as a race, giving them power and eliminating the "enemy" that was the draenei, a handful of ores almost as corrupt and power hungry as he would pull the strings.

It was not about the ores as a race.

It had *never* been about the ores as a race.

It was about power—getting it, wielding it, and keeping it. Ner'zhul had never understood that. He liked the power, but was not willing to feed it the meat it craved. The end Kil'jaeden demanded.

Deceit, lies, manipulation—even Blackhand, who thought he was initiated into Gul'dan's ultimate schemes, hadn't grasped the vastness of Gul'dan's ambitions. It was as huge as Kil'jaeden's desire to destroy the draenei. It was as enormous as the sky, as deep as the oceans, and knife-sharp as hunger.

Gul'dan looked at Ner'zhul with contempt as the older orc who had once been a mentor sat huddled in a corner. His gaze traveled to the blazing eyes of Kil'jaeden, and the great being nodded.

"Summon them." Kil'jaeden said. His lips parted in a smile, showing sharp white teeth. "They will come when you call. And they will dance to your tune. I will see to that."

Allies.

They needed allies.

Gul'dan wondered how Kil'jaeden had not foreseen this. The orcs were mighty indeed, especially when controlled and directed properly. The long months, over a year now, that this war had stretched had only made them more so. Their best brains had gotten to work on understanding the technology of the draenei as best they could. Building had begun on a center fortress, which Gul'dan called the Citadel, where a standing army could be conveniently quartered, trained, and equipped. The ores had never before attempted anything like this, and Gul'dan was proud that he had suggested the idea. There were warriors, there were shaman—now, of course, warlocks—there were healers, there were craftsmen. The first three had clear roles and no lack of opportunity to perform their duties. The craftsmen were contributing on a different level, creating the armor and weapons and buildings to support those who had the glory of slaughtering draenei until their bodies were sticky with spilled blood.

Some would call these laborers a lower class of ore. Privately, Gul'dan felt that way himself. But he was wise enough to know that their work, while hardly glamorous or likely to gain them recognition, was as necessary as a warrior's willingness to kill or a warlock's mastery of curses. Those who provided food, shelter, weapons—the warriors and warlocks would not get very far without them. So Gul'dan had made a show of praising the craftsmen, the pleasant result being that they were inspired to work harder and continually improve.

But even though every member of every clan was working as hard as he could—and Gul'dan had spies in each clan to make certain of it—it was not going to be enough. The taking of Telmor had been surprisingly easy, and the boost to morale was tremendous. But Gul'dan knew that the Horde's victory was largely due to luck. No one in that sheltered city believed for a moment they would be discovered and overrun in a matter of a few hours. They had thought themselves completely and utterly safe, protected by the magic of the green stone Gul'dan had dubbed Leafshadow, which shielded them first from ogre eyes and then from orcish. That easy victory would not be repeated. How would—

"Ogres," he said aloud, thoughtfully. He tapped one sharp-nailed finger against his jutting chin. "Ogres. . ."

"Absolutely not!" cried Blackhand. He dosed the distance between himself and Gul'dan in two strides, towering over the smaller ore. It took every ounce of bravado Gul'dan had not to retreat from that fearsome face shoved to within an inch of his.

"Come now, Blackhand," Gul'dan soothed. "Calm yourself and listen to what I am saying. You will be the one to benefit most from this, after all."

That got him. Blackhand growled, snorted, and stepped back. Gul'dan did his best not to look obviously relieved.

"They are filth," Blackhand grunted. "They have long been enemies of the ores. Longer than the draenei, and with better reason. How is it that I will benefit?" *Getting right to the point*, Gul'dan thought with satisfaction. He had judged Blackhand properly.

"There are some who still mutter that you were not elected fairly," Gul'dan said. "If you succeed in this, it will only add more glory to your name."

Blackhand's eyes narrowed. "Perhaps," he admitted. "But will the ores agree to this?"

Gul'dan permitted himself a smile. "They will if we tell them to," he replied,

Blackhand threw his head back and roared with laughter.

Orgrim shifted uneasily in his saddle as he glanced at his leader. When Blackhand had explained what he wanted to do, Orgrim had erupted in protest. He had joined in countless hunting parties over the years to eliminate the ogre threat. More than most orcs, with him it was personal. He had never ceased hating the fact that years ago, he had fled from one of the giant, lumbering, thick-skulled creatures. And now Blackhand proposed this.

But Orgrim knew that whatever else his leader was—and he was many things that Orgrim did not like—he was a good strategist. The plan was sound, if one could detach oneself emotionally from it. So he had agreed to lend his support.

Obtaining information had been tricky. The Blackrocks had captured three of the ogres and spent many a long night speaking in sufficiently small words to get their point across before the deceptively pudgy things understood what They wanted and began to cooperate. Now every warrior, warlock, and healer from the entire enormous clan stood prepared for battle.

The ogres had told them where their masters lurked and led them to this place—an opening at the foot of the Blade's Edge mountain chain. They had made no attempt to hide themselves. Refuse littered the area outside, and there were plenty of large bare ogre footprints going in and out. Even as Orgrim watched, he saw a small group of ogres trundling out into the daylight. No doubt, they thought themselves safe, as the draenei in Telmor had before them; and no doubt, a year ago, they would have been right. But much had changed since then. The ores were no longer groups of scattered clans, but a unified fighting force willing to put aside an old grudge for a new hatred.

Blackhand was in front, flanked by the three ogres. Behind him were his sons. Rend and Maim, who spoke to one another in low voices punctuated by the occasional rough giggle. Orgrim had been against allowing the boys to fight at first, but they had proven to be stronger and better than one might think. They lacked their father's cunning, but they certainly had inherited his bloodthirst. Griselda, too, had been trained to fight, but she was not a natural the way the boys were. Their

names were appropriate. Their father shot them an angry look and they sobered at once.

Orgrim wondered if Blackhand would make a speech. He hoped not. Blackhand was at his best in action, not words, and his clan was more than ready to follow him. To his relief, Blackhand looked over the sea of warriors, nodded once, and then gave the order to attack.

The first wave charged, screaming wildly and pouring down the side of the foothills where They had hidden. At first the ogres were so confused at the sight of three of their own allying with the ores that they simply stood and let themselves be slaughtered. Then, as their slow brains began to comprehend that they were under attack, they rallied. They still did not attack their fellow ogres, who lumbered through their ranks to talk to the head of the guards stationed somewhere inside the cavern.

Orgrim was determined to enjoy the last authorized ogre-killing he was likely to taste, and swung the Doomhammer with something akin to glee. His wolf was swift, and darted easily between the tree-trunk-thick legs of the ogre who raged impotently and swung his club as fiercely as he could. He recalled how big they had seemed to him as a child. They were still big, but so was he, now, and he wielded a legendary weapon with control and skill. He fractured the shin-bone of the ogre and it roared in agony. Orgrim's wolf danced out of the way as the huge thing fell, making the earth tremble as it landed. It tried to get up, pushing its bulk off the ground with its large, fat hands, but by then other Blackrocks had swarmed upon it. Faster even than Orgrim could reckon, the ogre was dead and bleeding from over two dozen wounds.

Orgrim wheeled just in time to see one of the orcish warriors hurtling through the air, dead from a single blow from an ogre's massive club. Growling, Orgrim gathered himself to charge the murdering creature when a cry of "Hold, hold!" brought him up short.

It was testament to the power of Blackhand's personality that even now, even when most of the Blackrocks were caught in the grip of bloodlust and killing an ancient enemy, they stayed their hands. The ogres didn't, at least not at once, and Orgrim found himself

riding away from the battle until the slow ogre brains understood what was going on. The thought galled him. *It is for the good of all of us, Orgrim*, he told himself.

He glanced over to see the ogres the Blackrocks had befriended talking to their kind. Or, rather, bellowing at them and occasionally smacking them. But at least the ogres had been distracted from following the retreating ores and appeared to be listening. One of them, bigger and wearing something that looked like an official sash of some sort, actually seemed to have a brain. Orgrim could not understand the vile things and used the pause to catch his breath and gulp some water.

"Can't wait till we can kill them again," Rend said. Orgrim glanced at his chieftain's eldest son.

"If we succeed, they'll be Fighting alongside us," Orgrim replied. "You won't be allowed to kill them."

Maim spat. "Heh. Right. Kill 'em on the sly."

Orgrim grimaced. He himself would like nothing better, but... "Several are dead already trying to make this plan of your father's work- He wouldn't like you undermining his efforts."

Rend sneered at him. "Who's going to tell him?"

"I will. If this works, and they listen to us—if any of them turn up dead, yours are the first names I'll mention."

Rend glowered. Right now, he was so young that it looked like childish petulance, but inwardly. Orgrim was touched with foreboding. He had never liked Blackhand, and liked his children, with the exception of little Grisclda, even less. He did not know if it was their parentage or their forced growth that was responsible, but there was a darkness in them that Orgrim mistrusted. One day, if they survived and began using their brains in addition to their powerful muscles. Rend and Maim would grow up to be even more dangerous and deadly than their father.

"I told you he wouldn't listen. Rend." Maim said petulantly. "Old man's forgotten what it's like to have bloodlust running through him. Let's go."

With a final sneer, Rend followed his brother. Orgrim sighed. He had bigger problems than two upstart youngsters right now. He turned his attention back to the negotiations, although he doubted the ogres would have understood the word. The attacks appeared to have stopped. Blackhand, who had fled the battlefield as he had told all his clan to do, now directed his wolf back down to where the ogres were gathered. Orgrim rode to his chieftain's side, arriving just in time to hear the leader of the guard announce. "We no like gronn. Gronn hurt us."

He beckoned to one of the other ogres who turned to show his back to Orgrim and Blackhand. Orgrim saw that there were scars crisscrossing the ogre's back. He felt no twinge of pity for the creature; they had done worse to the orcs for decades. Still, it was useful to know. The captured ogres had also spoken of such things, and now they nodded as if they were terribly wise.

"What you give us if we join you?" demanded the guard.

Blackhand grinned up at the thing. "Well, for one thing, we won't beat you." Orgrim thought of Blackhand's own sons, but said nothing. "We'll see to it that you're fed and given appropriate weapons." Orgrim was relieved that Blackhand hadn't promised armor; three ores could be armored out of the materials that would protect a single ogre. And, fortunately, the guard—obviously one of the more intelligent of the ogres—still wasn't smart enough to think of armor himself.

"You'll have food, and shelter, and the delight of smashing draenei to small wet stains on the grass."

The other ogres had been listening intently, and now one of them literally jumped up and down with delight, "Me smash!" it roared gleefully, and several others took up the simple but apparently highly entertaining phrase. Blackhand waited for their enthusiasm to die down before continuing. "So, are We agreed?"

The ogre captain nodded. "No more hurting of ogres," he growled, and turned to regard those he led. His tiny eyes were shiny with tears, and this time, as he looked upon the ogres whose backs were crawling with scars, Orgrim did feel a little sorry for them. A very little.

"What is your name?" Orgrim asked the captain suddenly. It shifted its gaze to him,

"Krol," he said.

"Krol, then," said Blackhand quickly before his second could say more. "When do you think We should lead our combined assault?"

"Now," Krol said, and before either Orgrim or Blackhand could protest, he bellowed something in his hideous native tongue. The other ogres jumped up and down, and the earth shook as they landed. Then they all turned and purposefully reentered the cave mouth. Blackhand cast a glance over at Orgrim, who shrugged. He suspected it was easier to stop the tide than this flood of stupid, single-minded giants.

"Call them," Blackhand said. Orgrim produced a clefthoof's single horn and blew on it. The ores cried out in delight and began to again descend in response.

There was no time to remind the Blackrock clan of the plan. Orgrim hoped they would remember it, especially the overzealous Maim and Rend. Slaughter of ogres aplenty awaited them, but they had damned well better be killing the rig/it ogres.

Because if they didn't, if they gave the ogres any reason to question this sudden and very peculiar alliance, then the babes and old males and females who awaited word at the encampment might be all that remained of the Blackrock clan.

Orgrim was not optimistic. The Blackrock clan had ever been fierce in the hunt. Blackhand was little more than a cunning savage, and Orgrim had not failed to observe that recently, a sort of manic fury had begun to creep through all the clans. As he whirled his wolf around to charge into the cave with his fellow clan members, he wondered if perhaps his eyes were playing tricks on him.

Surely the greenish tinge on the skins of the ores next to him was nothing more than a trick of the light.

SEVENTEEN

Home, whatever race you are, it is a word, a concept, that makes the heart swell with longing. Home can be ancient ancestral lands, or a new place that one has made one's own. Home can even be found in the eyes of the beloved. But we all need it, yearn for it, know that without a home of some sort we are incomplete.

For many years, each clan had its own home. Its own sacred lands, its own spirits of earth, air, water, fire, and spirit of the wilds. The uprooting began and continued, each more shattering than the last, until we came to Kalimdor. Here, I find a home for a wandering people. A place of rest and sanctuary, where we could regroup and rebuild.

Home, for me, is now named for my father: the land of Durotar.

Durotan lifted his head and sniffed the wind. The scent that filled his nostrils was one of dust and desiccation.

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an acrid sort of odor. Not the smell of something burning, not quite, but similar. Once, Drek'Thar would have been able to catch the scent even better than he. But those days had passed. He was no longer a shaman, but a warlock. The air would not waft to him when asked, bearing information as detailed as if it had been written on a piece of parchment. And worse. Drek'Thar, along with the other warlocks of the Frostwolf clan, did not particularly seem to care.

There had been no rain for some time, and the summer seemed hotter than usual. It was the second summer in a row that rains had come scantily, if at all, and on a whim Durotan knelt and dug his fingers into the soil. Once, it had been fertile loam, dark brown and emitting a rich earthy scent. Now, his fingers plunged easily into the dust. Its crust crumbled beneath his fingers, yielding instantly to dissolve into sand that would not hold grasses or crops, would not hold anything. It sifted through his fingers like water.

He sensed Draka's approach, but did not turn around. Her arms slipped about his waist from behind and she pressed against him. They stood like that, for a long moment, then with a final squeeze she released him and stepped around to face him. Durotan dusted off his hands.

"We have never relied that much on what we could grow anyway," he said quietly.

Draka regarded him with her dark, knowing eyes. His heart ached to look at her. In so many ways, she was better than he. But she was the mate of the chieftain, not the chieftain, and she did not have to make the choices he did.

The choices he had.

"We have depended upon what We could hunt, mostly," Draka said. "But the animals We hunt survive on what the earth provides. We're all connected. The shaman knew that."

She fell silent as one of the younger warlocks hurried by, a small capering thing at its heels. As they passed, the little thing turned to look at Draka and smiled, showing a mouth crammed full of pointed teeth. Draka could not suppress a shudder.

Durotan sighed and handed her a scroll. "I just received this. We must all prepare for a long march. We are to leave our lands."

"What?"

"Blackhand's orders. He has relocated to this new citadel that has been made for him and he wants his army there. It is no longer enough for us to join together to attack. We must all live together and be ready to follow where Blackhand leads us."

Draka stared up at him incredulously, then her eyes dropped to the scroll. She read it quickly, then rerolled it and handed it to him.

"We had best prepare," she said quietly, then turned and strode back to their tent. He watched her go, and wondered exactly what it was that made his heart break at the sight.

The Citadel was incomplete, but the moment it came into Durotan's sight, he was stopped dead in his tracks. Beside him there were several awed murmurs.

"So powerful!"

"So big!"

"Worthy of a Warchief!"

Had Durotan spoken, he would have said: *Blasphemous, A blight upon the land. Out of harmony with everything we are.*

The traveling Frostwolf clan was still many leagues distant, but the Citadel perched upon the horizon like a buzzard. There was nothing in its design that bespoke orcish building. This structure, this architectural nightmare, this offense to eye and spirit was larger even than the draenei buildings. Of course, Durotan knew its purpose, and it would have to be enormous if it were to constantly house an elite force of orcish warriors. Still, he had expected something else.

Instead of the smooth, sleek lines that marked the structures of the draenei, this fortress was sharp and jagged. Instead of coexisting with the landscape, it dominated it. Hewn from black stone and jagged wood and metal, it fairly bristled against the sky. Durotan knew that he could see only the main tower from here, but that was enough. He stood as if rooted to the spot, reluctant to take a single step closer to the monstrosity.

A silent look passed between him and Draka. Were they the only ones left who saw? The rest of the Frostwolves moved forward, passing their chieftain. Reluctantly. Durotan squeezed his mount and continued.

Proximity to the fortress did nothing to make it seem more attractive. Now Durotan could see other buildings—barracks, storage silos, a flat expanse of training areas that were crowded with large weapons he had never seen before. They, too, looked dark, and dangerous, and deadly.

Officious members of the Blackrock clan and others greeted Durotan perfunctorily and sent the Frostwolves to a flat area in the western part of the complex to begin setting up tents. It was heading on toward dusk when Durotan received the summons to report to the courtyard of the Citadel, along with several others from his clan. The group of about twenty walked the distance and waited.

He heard the drums first, in the distance. Durotan tensed. They had specifically been instructed not to bring any weapons, just to come and wait for . . . they were not told what. Draka glanced at him uneasily. He had no assurance to offer her; he was as in the dark about what was to unfold as she.

The drums came closer. The earth began to vibrate beneath Durotan's feet. Such was not unusual when the drumming started in circle, but so far away? He heard other concerned murmurings and knew that he was not the only one with a twinge of apprehension.

The earth continued to shake, the vibrations growing stronger. Two Blackrock riders approached, looking exultant. "Do not fear, proud members of the Horde!" one of them cried. "Our new allies, brought into our ranks by the mighty Blackhand, are approaching! Welcome them!"

There was something familiar in the feel of the ground shaking. The only other time Durotan had ever experienced such a thing was when he had been fighting—

"Ogres!" someone screamed. And indeed, now Durotan could see them. Dozens of them, huge and purposeful, were striding toward the gathered group of ores. More wolfriders from the Blackrock clan were trotting about, shouting and blowing horns in triumph. The crowd was going insane with delight, yelling and dancing and cheering wildly. These were the new allies? Durotan could scarcely believe it. Even as he stared, unable to find words, the biggest ogre he had ever seen appeared. Blackhand himself strode beside it, his movements as lithe and proud as if the mammoth thing did not make him look like a child's toy.

"We will crush the draenei!" Blackhand bellowed, and as if they had been awaiting the cue, the ogres marching with him cried, "Crush! Crush! Crush!"

For a sick, dizzying moment, Durotan was a child again, fleeing before such a monster. He blinked, and he again saw in his mind's eye his father's strong frame smashed and broken, blood and life dripping into the ground, Garad's skull crushed like a nut by a single blow from an ogre's club.

Ores were fighting alongside monstrous, feeble-brained creatures in an effort to destroy an intelligent, peaceful race.

The world had gone mad,

Velen shuddered. His assistant was at his elbow, offering a warm, soothing drink, but the Prophet waved it away. No comfort could come from a beverage now. No comfort could ever truly come again.

He had grieved when word had come that Telmor had fallen, and with the city his dear friend Restalaan. It had been even more painful to hear how the attack had occurred. Velen had seen something special in the youth Durotan had been, and his treatment at the ore's hands had only served to confirm his faith in the chieftain of the Frostwolf clan. But now this. Durotan and Orgrim had been the only two ores ever to witness how the green stone had protected the city. One of them had even memorized the incantation that would deactivate the stone's protective camouflage. A handful had escaped to flee here, to the Temple of Karabor. Their wounds had been dressed, but there was nothing Velen or anyone else could do to heal their shattered spirits.

But worse news was to come. The refugees did not tell of simple bows and arrows, or axes or spears or hammers being the sole weapons of destruction. They

spoke in low, hushed voices of greenish-black bolts of terrible pain, of torment beyond anything that the shaman had hitherto inflicted upon their enemies. They spoke of creatures gibbering and capering at the feet of those who wielded this magic based on suffering and agony.

They spoke of man'ari.

Suddenly, many things fell into place with a dreadful logic. The abrupt, irrational attacks by the orcs. Their sudden increase in technology and skills. The fact that they had turned their backs on shamanism, a religion that, as Velen understood it, required a give-and-take relationship between the elemental powers and those who would wield them. Those who would command man'ari did not seek balance or harmony with their power; They sought dominance.

Just as Kil'jaeden and Archimonde had.

The ores were nothing more than pawns in the hands of the eredar. Velen knew that he and the rest of the draenei, the "exiles," were the real targets. The Orcish Horde, augmented now with creatures that were immensely powerful, was the way by which Kil'jaeden sought to destroy him. For a brief moment Velen wondered if perhaps the new leader of this Horde would listen to reason; if he would turn and fight alongside the draenei to overthrow Kil'jaeden once he learned how he had been used. He dismissed the thought almost at once. It was probable that those who were being used by Kil'jaeden knew of the eredar's true nature and purpose, and the offer of power likely seemed believable as well as seductive. So had Archimonde and Kil'jaeden succumbed, and they were far older, stronger, and wiser than any ore.

And now, this vision, adding insult to injury. A vision of the lumbering ogres allying with the ores—something that he once would have dismissed as a dream brought on by a too-rich meal. Now, he knew it to be the truth. Something had changed the inherent nature of the ores so drastically, so irrevocably, that they had allied with creatures that they had hated for generations against the draenei, a people they had been tentative friends with for almost as long.

If this had happened elsewhere, the response would be simple. Velen would gather his people and flee, protected by the Naaru. But the ship had crashed, and K'ure lay dying, and there was no escape other than fighting against this Horde and praying that somehow, some way, they would survive.

Ah, K'ure, my old friend. How I miss your wisdom now, and how bitter it is that you be in the hands of the enemy, who does not even understand that you exist.

He held the stone known as Spirit's Song close to his heart, and felt the faintest of flickers from the dying Naaru. Velen closed his eyes and bowed his head.

Gul'dan looked around the room with utter satisfaction. Everything was going as planned. The Shadow Council had been meeting for some time now, and thus far, Gul'dan felt confident he had selected them well. They were

all prepared—nay, eager—to turn their backs on their people in order to advance their own aspirations to power. They had accomplished so much already, acting through their puppet that was foolish enough to believe he was a true part of the Council rather than simply their mouthpiece. It had been easy to get him elected Warchief, and as long as the Council smiled and nodded at him for the few moments that he attended the meetings, he did not question his position. But Blackhand always departed before the real meetings began, sent off on some mission or other that made his barrel chest swell with pride.

"Greetings," Gul'dan said as he slipped into his chair at the head of the table. As always, Ner'zhul lurked in a corner, never invited to sit with the others, but permitted to hear their conversations, Kil'jaeden had so instructed, and while Gul'dan was unsure as to why his benefactor desired this, he wanted nothing more than to stay in Kil'jaeden's good graces and did not demur.

The Council murmured perfunctory greetings, and Gul'dan got down to business. "How are the various clans reacting to the idea of ogres as allies? Kargath, let's start with you."

The chieftain of the Shattered Hand clan grinned and grunted. "They are primed for bloodshed, and they don't care who helps them slit open draenei throats,"

Rough laughter filled the cavern as many of the Council nodded in agreement. In the dim light provided by the torches, their eyes seemed to Gul'dan to glow orange. A few, however, scowled and did not join in the merriment.

"I have heard protests from some in the Whiteclaw clan." one said. "And Durotan of the Frostwolves still bears watching, for all that he led the attack on Telmor."

Gul'dan held up a hand. "Do not fear, I have had Durotan in my mind for some time."

"Why has he not been eliminated?" Kargath growled angrily. "It would be easy to replace him with another more in line with our plans. Durotan is becoming well known for disagreeing with Blackhand's position—and yours as well."

"That is precisely why I still need him alive," Gul'dan said, watching to see who understood without further explanation. He saw comprehension register on a few faces, while others still looked puzzled and angry.

"Because he is known for a more moderate stance," Gul'dan continued, regretful that he had to spell it out for anyone on the Council, "when he does finally go along, everyone else who might have doubts goes with him. He speaks for many who do not dare speak for themselves. If Durotan agrees, so goes their logic, then it must be all right. As Kargath mentioned, the Frostwolf clan is not the only one who appears to have reservations,"

"But.. . what if there comes a time that he does not agree? Some line he is not willing to cross?"

Gul'dan smiled frostily. "Then we will deal with him in a way that best advances our power without placing it at risk. As we always do." Gul'dan decided it was time to change the subject. He leaned forward, placing his hands on the table. "Speaking of those who have reservations. I have heard that there are some who continue to attempt to contact the elements and the ancestors." One of the members looked uncomfortable. "I have attempted to dissuade them, but I cannot see how I can punish them for it. It was, after all, belief that the ancestors wanted us to attack the draenei that even made this possible."

He sounded a bit defiant. Gul'dan smiled reassuringly "Yes indeed. That was the bait that hooked them so deeply." He glanced over at Ner'zhul. The older shaman met his eyes and then glanced down quickly. Such had been the bait that had hooked Ner'zhul as well—bait that did not hold the same appeal for Gul'dan.

"But that is no longer necessary," Gul'dan continued. "We must make sure that there is no turning back to the old ways. We have been lucky indeed in our campaign, and with the ogres success is likely to continue. But if there are any setbacks, any battles that go poorly, then those who still hold shamanism close to their hearts may find an appreciative ear. That won't do at all." He tapped his chin thoughtfully. "We must do more than simply encourage warlock practices. We must actively discourage shamanism. It would be unfortunate if for some reason the ancestors actually were able to communicate with their descendants."

Again, he glanced at Ner'zhul. It had only been when Ner'zhul had traveled to the sacred mountain that he had been able to speak with the ancestors and discover what had really been going on. Until that point, even as powerful a shaman as he was, Ner'zhul had been tricked by illusions. The answer, therefore, seemed simple.

Deep in the disembodied dreaming floated the beings that were made of light. They had the memories of wluutt had gone before, and they had glimpses into the future. Long had they dwelt here, fed by the Other, who was like them, but not like them, and who they sensed was well into the heart of a slow passing. Until recently, they had dwelt in this state of being-not-being in peace and tranquility. But now, defilement and hatred and danger had come. They could not reach the sleeping, beloved living any longer. And the beloved living did not come as they used to, to replenish the sacred pool and unintentionally keep the Other alive. Only the Greatly Deceived One had come, weeping and begging, but too far lost in the deception to be aided.

Suddenly, their deep dreaming was disrupted. A tremor went through them. Pain savaged them and they cried out for aid from the Other, who could not help them, who could not help itself. The dark unholy things that had once been beings of beauty were coming. The ancestors sensed their approach. They came inexorably, joining their powers, creating a ring of darkness and severance around the base of the mountain. Darkness visible danced from the twisted things who had followed Sargeris, lured by the promise of power, fed now with the promise of the obliteration of everything. The ancestors felt the seething, focused hatred coalesce into a manifestation of greenish-black energy, whipping around like severed tentacles, seeking a dreadful union. Slowly, inexorably, their stranglehold increased until a rope of shadow power choked the mountain, sealed it shut, preventing any lost orc from entering, any frantic soul from departing.

And now, the Other, too, cried out in grief as the circle was sealed shut. For without the shaman to bring it water, it could not even continue to attempt to heal itself. And without the Other, there would eventually be no ancestors.

Far away, in their sleep, the few orcs who still secretly thought of themselves as shaman trembled and wept, their dreams corrupted into nightmares of endless torment and an inescapable doom.

EIGHTEEN

I am one of the second wave of shaman, just as I am the leader of the second, and I pray better and wiser, incarnation of the Horde. I have spoken with the elements and spirits, and I have felt them working in harmony with me many times, and refusing their aid almost as often.

But I have never seen the spirits of the ancestors, not even in my dreams; my soul yearns for such a connection. Until very recently, those who once walked the path of the shaman did not even dream of being able to walk it again, and yet they do.

Perhaps one day, the barriers between us and the beloved dead, too, will be lifted.

Perhaps.

But I wonder, if they truly knew how far we wandered from their loving teachings, if they saw what we had done in Draenor, done to Draenor.. . perhaps even now they would turn their backs on us and leave us to our fates. And if they so chose, I cannot say that I would blame them.

"I don't understand." Ghun said. He was the youngest of the clan's warlocks, and still, Durotan mused with bitterness, an idealist. He had seen Ghun's nose wrinkle at the strange creatures he was forced to utilize in the battle against the draenei. He had seen the youth's face filled with regret as his enemy writhed in agony before him. Drek'Thar had brought the boy to Durotan's attention after the declaration from Gul'dan had been issued. "What is wrong in hoping that the elements will one day work with us again? And why can I not go to Oshu'gun?"

Durotan had no real answers for him; the decree that no one must ever again practice the shamanic arts on pain of severe punishment—or exile or death for repeated violations—had seemingly come out of nowhere. True, most of those who had walked

the shamanic path had turned from it when the elements abandoned them. But what about the ancestors? Why in the world, in this time of crisis and need, did Gul'dan forbid the ores their most sacred place?

And because he had no answers for a youth who deserved them, Durotan grew angry. His voice was gruff and deep.

"In order to triumph over the draenei, our Warchief has made certain allies. These allies have given us the warlock powers you control. Do not lie to me, I know you are pleased with the results."

Ghun's sharp-nailed, long fingers had been working in the dead earth and had dislodged a stone. He tossed it up and down in his palm. Durotan frowned, looking at the boy's skin. The dryness of this place and the harsh conditions under which they had been laboring for nearly two years now were taking a toll. Normally smooth brown skin, stretched tight over toned muscle, was dry and flaky. Absently Ghun scratched at a patch of rough skin. Durotan glanced at the new skin underneath.

It had a greenish tint.

For a moment, mindless, animal panic washed over Durotan. Durotan forced himself to be calm and look again. There was no mistaking it—the skin was indeed slightly green. He had no idea what it meant, but it was new, and it was strange, and he instinctively did not like it. Ghun seemed not to have noticed. He hurled the rock with a grunt, watching it sail into the distance. Had Ghun been older, he would have noticed the warning in the tone of voice his clan chieftain used earlier. But he was young and wrapped up in his own concerns, and did not heed the warning.

"The spells . . . the creatures who obey me ... I am pleased with the efficiency. But not with *how* it is efficient. It feels—it feels *wrong*, my chieftain. Killing is killing, and the elements used to give me powers that killed my foe just as dead. But I never felt this way about it when they gave me the power. We are in this war because the ancestors told us we needed to kill the draenei," Ghun continued. "So why is Gul'dan now saying we can't go talk to them?"

Something inside Durotan snapped. He let out a furious bellow and hauled the boy to his fret. He gripped the fabric of Ghun's shirt and brought his face to within an inch of the shocked young warlock's.

"*It doesn't matter!*" he cried. "I will do what is best for the Frostwolves, and now that means doing what Gul'dan and Blackhand tell us to do. Obey this new order!"

Ghun stared up at him. As abruptly as it came the white-hot fury departed, leaving sorrow in its wake. Durotan added in a harsh whisper meant for the boy's ears alone, "I won't be able to protect you if you don't."

Ghun looked up at him, an odd, orange gleam in his eyes for an instant, then he looked down and sighed.

"I understand, my chieftain. I will not bring dishonor upon the Frostwolf clan."

Durotan let him go. Ghun stepped back, straightened his clothes, bowed, and departed. Durotan watched him go, conflicted. Ghun, too, sensed the wrongness in the way things were unfolding. But a single youth attempting to contact the elements could not stand against it.

Nor, Durotan thought bitterly, could a single chieftain.

A sacred site was the next to fall beneath the might of the Horde.

Hard on the heels of the proclamation banning shamanism was the order to march on a place the draenei called the Temple of Karabor. Although it lay close to the Shadowmoon Valley, the ancestral lands of Ner'zhul's own clan, who had taken the name Shadowmoon from that same valley, no orc had ever seen it before. It was a sacred place, and as such had been respected by the ores. At least it had been respected until now. When Blackhand stood before his assembled army and ranted against the so-called "spirituality" of the draenei,

"The cities we have taken so far were mere practice," Blackhand declared. "One day soon, their capital will be destroyed. But before we shatter their most important city, we will shatter them as a people. We will storm this site! Smash their statues. Destroy everything that means anything to them. Slaughter their spiritual leaders. They will lose heart and then ... then claiming their city will be as easy as killing a blind wolf pup."

Durotan, who stood with the other armed and mounted warriors, glanced at Orgrim. As was almost always the case, his old friend stood at Blackhand's side, Orgrim had become a master at keeping his face impassive, but he could not completely hide his feelings from Durotan. He, too, knew what this meant. The temple was Velen's home. The Prophet had only been visiting Telmor that day when Orgrim and Durotan had met him; his place was in the temple, where he prayed and meditated and served as a prophet and guide to his people. They would very well slay him this day, if he was there. It had been hard enough to kill Restalaan. Durotan would have prayed that he would not be forced to kill Velen, too . . . had there been anyone to pray to.

Six hours later, as he stood atop the stairs to the great seat of the temple of the draenei, he almost choked from the smells that assaulted his nostrils. The now-familiar reek of draenei blood. The stench of urine and feces and the thick odor of fear. The sweet, cloying smell of incense. Blood covered the soles of his boots as they crunched on strewn rushes, releasing a clean fragrance that somehow made all the other scents so much worse—

Durotan doubled over and vomited, the taste sour in his mouth. He heaved and choked until his stomach was utterly empty, then with trembling hands rinsed his mouth with water and spat.

Harsh laughter greeted his ears and he flushed. He turned to see Blackhand's two male brats, Rend and Maim, laughing at him.

"That's the spirit," Rend said, chuckling still. "That's all they deserve—our vomit and spit."

"Yeah," said Maim unoriginally. "Our vomit and spit!"

Maim kicked the corpse of a nearby priest clad in pale purple vestments and spat on it. Durotan turned away in disgust and horror, but there was no respite. Everywhere he looked he saw ores doing the same thing to corpses: defiling them, looting them, putting on their bloody, rent robes and parading about mockingly. Others were methodically filling sacks with beautifully carved bowls and plates and candlesticks while they crunched on sweet fruits that had been left as offerings to deities that the ores didn't begin to understand and didn't want to. Blackhand, with another victory to his credit, had found some kind of alcoholic beverage and was chugging it down so quickly some of the green fluid spilled and dripped onto his armor.

Is this what we have become? Murderers of unarmed priests, looters of things holy to them, defilers of their very bodies? Mother Kashur ... in a way I am glad you are forbidden to us ... I would not want you to see this.

"They have taken the temple," said Kil'jaeden, "but they have not found me my prize."

Kil'jaeden's voice was as honey-smooth as ever, but his tail lashed agitatedly. Gul'dan's stomach clenched in fear.

"Velen the Traitor must have known somehow," Gul'dan said. "He is called 'prophet' after all."

Kil'jaeden's massive head whipped around, and Gul'dan had to force himself not to quail. Then Kil'jaeden nodded slowly.

"You are right," he said. "If he were an easy and stupid enemy, I would have found him here now."

Gul'dan began to breathe again. Part of him burned to ask what Velen had done to one who was, he was certain, his own kind in order to earn himself such single-minded hatred. But Gul'dan was wise enough to keep silent. He could live with his curiosity unsatisfied on this particular issue.

"With their temple taken for our own purposes. Great One, surely those that remain will all have fled to the city. They will be there, thinking themselves safe, but they will be trapped instead."

Kil'jaeden stooped his scarlet fingers and smiled. "Yes," he said. "Yes. The temple shall be yours. Blackhand is quite comfortably ensconced in the Citadel. But before you order your little puppets to attack the draenei stronghold, I have a little . . . gift for them." Ner'zhul waited until Gul'dan was finished. He watched beneath half-closed lids as Gul'dan wrote letter after letter, getting ink stains on his stubby fingers, using those same stubby fingers to pop a piece of fruit or chunk of meat into his mouth. These were important letters, then; normally Gul'dan would have one of the unctuous scribes send out missives.

The temple had been . . . purged, was the word Gul'dan had used. The priests that lingered to bravely and foolishly stand against the wave of ores had been killed with ruthless speed and efficiency. Ner'zhul heard that their bodies had been violated, and found that part of him still held onto enough compassion that the thought sickened him. Those violated bodies were long gone, as were their sacred items. Much of the temple had been closed off; the Council and its servants did not require that much room. Some furnishings had been taken and used for the Council's needs. Others had been torn down or removed, replaced with the dark, ominously spiky decorations that were rapidly becoming inextricably associated with the Horde. The entire structure had been renamed the Black Temple, and instead of priests and prophets, it now played host to liars and traitors. And, Ner'zhul mused bitterly, he was certainly among that number.

At last, Gul'dan was finished. He dusted the ink with powder to prevent smears and sat back. He looked up at his former master with thinly veiled disgust.

"Address them and take them to the couriers. see that you do it quickly."

Ner'zhul inclined his head. He still could not bring himself to bow before his erstwhile apprentice and Gul'dan, knowing full well just how broken Ner'zhul was, did not press it. He sat down in the chair Gul'dan vacated, and the moment Gul'dan's heavy stride could no longer be heard, he immediately began to read.

Gul'dan expected him to read the letters, of course. And indeed there was nothing contained in them that Ner'zhul did not know. He was privy to all meetings of the Shadow Council, though he was forced to sit on the cold stone floor of the Black Temple and not at the huge stone table with those who had the real power. He was not certain just why he was allowed, only that for some reason Kil'jaeden wanted him there. Otherwise, he was certain Gul'dan would have dispatched him here now.

His eyes flew over the words, and he was sickened by them. He felt utterly impotent, like a fly trapped in the sticky sap that flowed down the barks of the olemba trees. Or, that used to. From what he had heard, the trees that provided the sweet nectar had either been cut down, their wood used for weapons, or were dying. Ner'zhul shook off the imagery and began to roll up the missives, his eyes falling on the unused pieces of parchment and still-filled inkwell and pen.

The thought was so audacious his heart stopped for an instant.

Quickly he looked around. He was completely alone, and there was no reason to expect Gul'dan back. Gul'dan, Kil'jaeden, the Council—they thought him broken, as harmless as an ancient, toothless wolf that warmed its old bones by the fire until at last it slipped into the sleep of death. And they were mostly right.

Mostly.

Ner'zhul had reconciled himself to the fact that he had had his power taken away from him. His power, but not his will. If that too had been taken from him, he would have been unable to resist Kil'jaeden at all. Ner'zhul could not act directly, but he might be able to contact someone who could.

His fingers trembled as he took another piece of parchment. He was forced to pause for a long moment and calm himself before he could write anything legible. Finally, he scribbled a brief message, blotted the ink, and rolled it up. The wolf was toothless. But the wolf had not forgotten what it was like to fight.

More orders to march. Durotan was growing heartily sick of it. Their was no respite any more, just battle, repairing armor, eating increasingly tough and stringy meat, sleeping on the earth, and another battle. Gone were the times of drumming and feasting and laughing and ritual. The perfect triangle of the Mountain of Spirits on the horizon had been replaced by the dark, forbidding image of a spire that occasionally emitted black smoke. Some said a creature slept deep inside the mountain, and that one day, it would awaken. Durotan did not know what to believe anymore.

When the courier rode up, Durotan took the missive and began to read it with dull eyes. Those eyes widened as he read, and by the time he had finished it he was sweating and trembling. He looked up, wondering madly if someone had been able to glean the contents of the letter just by watching him read it. Ores strode past him, dust clinging to their rough, flaky skins and battered armor. No one gave him so much as a disinterested glance.

He hurried to Draka, the one person in the world he dared share this information with. Her eyes widened as she read.

"Who else knows of this?" she said quietly, fighting to keep her face impassive.

"Only you," he said, equally softly.

"Will you tell OrgrimT"

Durotan shook his head. Pain laced his heart. "I dare not. He is oath-bound to tell Blackhand."

"Do you think Blackhand knows about this?"

Durotan shrugged. "I have no idea who knows what. I only know that I must protect my people. And I will do so."

Draka looked at him long and hard. "If we as an entire clan do not do this thing . . . we will attract attention. You risk punishment. Maybe even exile or death."

Durotan stabbed a finger at the letter. "Any one of those things is better than what will happen if we obey No. I have sworn to protect my clan. I will not give them over to—"

He realized belatedly that his voice had risen and some heads were starting to turn. "I will not give them over to this."

Draka's eyes filled with quick tears and she gripped his arm hard. Her nails dug into his flesh. "That," she said fiercely, "is why I became your mate. I am so proud of you."

NINETEEN

I am proud of my heritage. I am proud that I can name Durotan and Draka as my parents. I am proud that Orgrim Doomhammer called me friend and trusted me with the leadership of the people he loved.

I am proud of my parents' courage . . . and at the same time, I wish there had been more they could do. But I am not in their place. It is easy to sit back, secure in my position and comforts in this life, decades after the fact, and say, "You should have done this," or "You should have said that."

I offer no judgment on anyone save a handful of individuals who knew full well what they were doing, knew that they were trading the lives and destiny of their people for gratification in the moment, and did so gleefully.

For the others . . . I can only shake my head and be grateful that I was not forced to make the choices they did.

Gul'dan was so excited he could hardly contain himself. He had looked forward to this moment ever since Kil'jaeden had first spoken of it. He had wanted to move forward even faster than his master did, but Kil'jaeden had chuckled and counseled patience.

"I have seen them, and they are not quite ready yet. Timing is everything, Gul'dan. The same blow delivered too early or too late does not kill, only wounds."

Gul'dan thought it an odd metaphor, but understood what Kil'jaeden meant by it. But now, at last, Kil'jaeden thought the ores ready for the final step.

The Black Temple had a central courtyard open to the night sky. When the temple belonged to the draenei, this area had been a lush garden, with a rectangular pool at the center. The conquerors had drunk their fill of the sweet, pure water over the last few weeks with no care about replenishing it, and now the pool was nothing more than an empty space of stone and tiles. The trees and flowering plants that had surrounded it had long since died, withering with astonishing speed. At Kil'jaeden's request, Ner'zhul and Gul'dan now stood beside that empty pool. Neither of them knew what to expect.

For long hours they stood in utter silence. Gul'dan wondered if perhaps he had displeased his lord in some way. The thought made him break out in a cold sweat, and he glanced nervously at Ner'zhul. He wondered if perhaps tonight the defiant shaman was going to be slain for his disobedience, and he perked up a bit at the thought. His mind was wandering, considering various torments that might be imposed upon Ner'zhul, when a sudden loud crack of thunder made them both gasp aloud. Gul'dan looked up at the sky. Where there had hitherto been a host of stars, now there was only a black emptiness. He swallowed hard, his eyes riveted on the darkness.

Suddenly the darkness began to churn. It looked like a thunderhead, black and pulsing. Then it began to swirl in a spiral. The spiraling picked up speed. A wind lifted Gul'dan's hair and stirred his robes, gently at first, then more fiercely, until he felt the wind scouring his skin. The earth beneath his feet rumbled. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Ner'zhul's lips move, but he could not hear what if anything was said. The wind was too loud, the trembling of the earth beneath his increasingly unsteady feet too intense.

The sky cracked open.

Something bright and blazing screamed to earth directly in front of Gul'dan and Ner'zhul. It struck the ground so hard that Gul'dan was knocked off his feet. For a long, terrifying minute, he could not breathe; he simply lay on the earth and gasped like a fish until finally his lungs remembered how to function and he inhaled a great surge of air.

He got to his feet, his body shaking uncontrollably, and lost his breath again at what he beheld.

It towered over him. Chunks of earth flew as it shook four legs that ended in hooves and flapped

large, leathery wings in annoyance. Its hair was more of a mane, flowing in green tendrils over its neck and down its back. Green eyes glittered like fiery stars and its swooping tusks caught the dim light as it opened its mouth. It seemed to have row after row of sharp teeth, and its bellow made Gul'dan want to drop to the earth and weep in utter terror. Somehow, he remained standing and silent before the monstrosity. It raised its clenched fists and shook them fiercely, then lowered its head and looked around at the huddled, quaking ores.

What is that thing? Gul'dan screamed silently.

Suddenly, Kil'jaeden appeared, looking down at Gul'dan and grinning fiercely.

"Behold my lieutenant, Mannoroth. Well has he served me and well shall he continue to serve. On other worlds, they call him the Destructor. But here, he is the savior. Gul'dan," purred Kil'jaeden, and suddenly Gul'dan felt weak and sick again. "You know what I am offering your people."

Gul'dan swallowed hard. He did not dare glance at Ner'zhul, whose gaze he felt boring into his back.

Yes, he knew well what Kil'jaeden was offering. Power beyond imagining . . . and slavery for eternity. Kil'jaeden had offered the former to Ner'zhul in exchange for the latter, and Ner'zhul, the coward, had balked. He had not wanted to doom his people.

Gul'dan was untroubled by such scruples. All he could think of was the reward Kil'jaeden had promised. "I do know. Great One," Gul'dan said, surprised by the strength and steadiness of his voice, "I know, and I accept my lord's most generous offer."

Kil'jaeden smiled. "Excellent," he said. "You are wiser than your predecessor."

Confident and elated, Gul'dan turned to gloat at Ner'zhul. The elder shaman stared at his former apprentice imploringly. He did not dare to speak, of course, but he did not need to. Even in the dim light of the stars, his expression was plain to read.

Gul'dan's lips curled around his tusks, and he turned back to regard Mannoroth. He was still terribly imposing, but Gul'dan's fear had retreated in the face of his overwhelming desire for power. He gazed at the being, knowing that it, like he himself, was highly regarded by the one they both served. They were brothers in arms.

"Only a special blade can do what I ask of you, Gul'dan," rumbled Kil'jaeden. He extended his hand. The dagger seemed tiny in comparison to the huge palm upon which it rested, but it was quite large when Gul'dan curled his own fingers around it.

"This has been forged in the fires of the mountain in the distance," Kil'jaeden said, pointing to the smoking mountain. "My servants have worked long and hard to craft it. You know what to do, Mannoroth."

The creature nodded its huge head. Its tail moving to balance its bulk, it knelt on its front two feet and extended an arm. It turned its hand upward, exposing the comparatively softer flesh of its wrist.

For a heartbeat, Gul'dan hesitated. What if this was some sort of trick, or a test? What if Kil'jaeden really *didn't* want him to do this? What if he failed?

What if Ner'zhul was right?

"Gul'dan," said Kil'jaeden, "Mannoroth is known for many things. Patience is not among them."

Mannoroth growled softly and his green eyes glinted. "I am eager to see what will happen. All of your people ... Do it!"

Gul'dan swallowed hard, lifted the blade, aimed its gleaming edge toward the flesh of Mannoroth's exposed wrist, and brought the knife down as hard as he could.

And flew backward from the force of Mannoroth's blow as the creature bellowed in pain. Dazed, he lifted his head and blinked, trying to clear his vision.

Liquid fire spouted from the wound, glowing a sickly greenish yellow as it pumped into the pool of the draenei priests. The injury was tiny compared to the vastness of Mannoroth's body, but the blood flowed steadily as if from a waterfall. Faintly, Gul'dan was aware that Ner'zhul, the weakling, was crying. Gul'dan could not tear his eyes from the sight of the unholy blood pouring, pouring without ceasing, from the creature who continued to roar and thrash in pain. He got to his feet and walked over to the edge of the pool, being very, very careful not to come into contact with the fluid spewing from the wound he himself had made. "Behold the blood of the Destructor," gloated Kil'jaeden. "It burns away all that will not serve you, Gul'dan. It cleanses all thoughts of hesitation, confusion, or uncertainty. It creates a hunger that can be directed any way you choose. Your little puppet thinks he rules the Horde, but he is wrong. The Shadow Council thinks they rule the Horde, but they are wrong."

Gul'dan lifted his eyes from the pool of glowing green liquid that continued to pump from Mannoroth's injured arm to gaze raptly at Kil'jaeden.

"Gul'dan ... it will soon be you who rules the Horde. They are ready. They thirst for what you will give them."

Gul'dan again turned to look at the flowing liquid.

"Call them to you. Quench that thirst. ... and what their hunger."

The now-familiar horn awakening the Horde and summoning them to the courtyard blew before dawn. Durotan had not been sleeping; he did not sleep much anymore. He and Draka rose without a word and began to dress.

Suddenly he heard her inhale swiftly. He turned at once to see that she was staring at him, her eyes wide.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Your ... your skin," she said quietly. He looked down at his bare chest. His skin was dry and flaky and as he scratched at it, the skin beneath it looked ... green. He remembered seeing the same tint on young Ghun's skin not so long ago.

"It's just the light," he said, trying to reassure them both. She would not be so easily placated. Draka lifted her own arm and scratched. Her skin, too, was green. She lifted dark eyes to him. They both saw it. It was no trick of the light.

"What is happening to us?" Draka asked.

Durotan had no answer. They continued to dress in silence, and as he went outside to the courtyard to wait, Durotan's eyes kept traveling to his arm, the strange green hue of his skin hidden beneath dented metal armor.

The announcement about the assembly had come yesterday afternoon, during a training session with some of the younger ores. Durotan still could not get used to seeing children who, a few months earlier, had been barely able to walk now wielding swords and axes with extraordinary power. They seemed content with their new status, even pleased, but Durotan fought the urge to shake his head every time he saw them.

Durotan found he could not even summon curiosity about their next target. It would be the same as before—slaughter, rage, defilement of corpses. Recently, even the bodies of slain Horde had been left where they had fallen, their weapons and armor taken to be used on a living body. Sometimes a friend or family member bowed over the corpse for a moment, but even that was happening less frequently. Gone were the days of bringing home the honored dead and placing them with deep ritual upon a funeral pyre, their spirits sent with all ceremony to join the ancestors. Now, there was no time for rituals, or pyres, or the ancestors. There was no time for the dead. There was no time for anything, it would seem, but slaughtering draenei and mending weapons and armor so the Horde could go out again to continue the task.

He stood with dull eyes in the courtyard, awaiting his orders. Blackhand rode to the gates of the Citadel, where they could see him clearly. There was a wind today. With nothing to block it in this desolate place, it caused the banners of the various clans to snap fiercely.

"We have a long march ahead of us," Blackhand cried. "You were told to pack supplies. I hope you listened. Warriors, your weapons must be ready and your armor sound. Healers, have your ointments, potions, and bandages at hand. But before we march to war, we will march to glory."

He lifted a hand and pointed off in the distance, where the sullen mountain that jutted against the sky puffed black smoke.

"That is our first destination. We will stand on the mountain ... and what happens there will be remembered for a thousand years. It will begin a time in which the ores will know power that we have never before tasted."

He paused to let this sink in, and nodded, visibly pleased, at the murmur that ran through the crowd.

Durotan tensed. So ... it would be today....

Never one to talk more than he needed to. Blackhand ended this rallying speech with, "Let us go!"

The Horde surged forward eagerly, curious and excited by Blackhand's words. Durotan looked quickly at Draka, who merely nodded her support of his plan. Then, forcing his heavy feet to move, he followed, caught up in the tide.

There was a narrow, steep path that led partway up the smoky mountain to a large plateau. It looked to Durotan as if a chunk of the mountainside had been cut away with a clean sword strike, so unnaturally perfect was it. His skin crawled at the thought. Very little that came into his life these days was natural, it seemed. Three large slabs of black, polished stone lay in a row, partially embedded in the soil. They were beautiful, but sinister at the same time. The ores were weary* after the long climb in the hot sun

wearing full armor and carrying weapons and supplies, and Durotan wondered what the logic behind this was. There seemed little point in exhausting the warriors before the battle. Perhaps the attack would come later, on the morrow when they were rested.

To Durotan's surprise, once everyone had gathered and quieted, it was not Blackhand who addressed them, but Gul'dan.

"It was not so very long ago," Gul'dan said, "that we were a scattered people. We came together only twice a year, and then only to sing and dance and drum and hunt." He said the words in a voice dripping with contempt. Durotan looked down. For centuries, the clans had come together at the Kosh'harg festival. It was not something foolish, as Gul'dan's tone of voice implied, but something sacred and powerful. It was what had kept the clans from attacking one another. But it might have been a lifetime ago, by the way the ores around him reacted. They, too, grunted in disapproval, shook their weapons fiercely, and looked ashamed. Even those among them who had been the shaman.

"Now, look at us! We stand shoulder to shoulder, clan by clan. Laughing Skull next to Dragonmaw, Thunderlord next to Warsong, all under the strong, insightful leadership provided by Blackhand—whom you have chosen to unify you. For Blackhand!"

A cheer went up. Durotan and Draka did not participate.

"Under his shrewd guidance, and with the blessings of the beings who have chosen to ally with us, we have grown strong. We have grown proud. We have advanced further in skills and technology in the last two years than we have in two centuries. The threat that once loomed over us has been broken, and it will take only a final push to see it forever crushed. But first... first, we will pledge ourselves to this cause and receive blessings in return."

He bent and held up a strange chalice. It looked to be carved from the horn of some creature, but Durotan had never seen even a clefthoof sport so

large a horn. Too, it was curved and yellowed. Strange glyphs had been inscribed on it, and as the night closed in around them, the inscriptions seemed to glow faintly. Whatever the cup contained glowed as well. As Gul'dan held it before him, an eerie yellow-green light lit his face from beneath, casting grotesque shadows.

"This is the Cup of Unity," Gul'dan said in a reverent voice. "This is the Chalice of Rebirth. I offer this to the leader of every clan, and he in turn may offer it to anyone in his clan whom he wishes particularly blessed by the beings who have been so very, very good to us. Who will come forth first, to pledge his loyalty and receive his blessings?"

Gul'dan turned a little to his right, toward Blackhand. The other orc grinned and opened his mouth to speak when a savage, familiar voice rent the night air.

No, Durotan thought. *No ... not him....*

Draka's hand clamped down hard on Durotan's arm. "Will you warn him?"

Durotan's throat worked. He could not speak. He shook his head: *No*. Once, he had counted the slender but imposing orc who strode boldly forward as a friend. But he could not risk revealing that he knew what was going on.

Not even for Grom Hellscream.

The chieftain of the Warsong clan had made his way through the crowd to stand in front of Gul'dan. Blackhand looked a bit put out at Hellscream. Clearly, both Gul'dan and Blackhand had anticipated that the Warchief would drink first.

Gul'dan's mouth quirked in a smile. "Ever one to seize the moment, dear Grom," he said, bowing a little as he handed the cup filled with the swirling green fluid to Grom. Waves of heat and light rose up from the chalice, and Grom's face—already decorated to inspire fear in his enemies and respect from his allies—looked even more alarming.

Grom did not hesitate. He brought the cup to his lips and drank deeply. Durotan watched, straining to see the reaction. Perhaps, after all, the letter had not been sent by someone who wished him good; perhaps it had been a trap—

Gul'dan barely had time to take the chalice from Grom before the other orc stiffened and shuddered. He doubled over for a moment, and the crowd murmured in worry. Durotan stared, horrified, as Grom's hunched-over body pulsed and quivered.

Before his eyes, Grom's shoulders, slender for an ore's, broadened. His armor creaked as it settled over this newly powerful body. Slowly, Grom straightened. Tall as ever he had been, reshaped by the green liquid to be stronger and thickly muscled, he looked out over the crowd.

What Durotan could see of his face was smooth and healthy and, save for the tattooed jaw . . . completely green. Grom threw his head back and shrieked again. The

cry was louder than Durotan had ever heard it. It was almost like a knife made of sound that ripped through one's body and left one shattered and bleeding. Durotan covered his ears, as did nearly everyone else, but he could not tear his gaze from Grom's face.

Grom's eyes now glowed red.

"How do you feel, Grom Hellscream, of the Warsong clan?" asked Gul'dan with a peculiar mildness.

Grom's expression of ecstasy was so keen it was almost pain, and he seemed to grope for words. "I feci... magnificent! I feel..." He broke off and screamed a third time, as if only the primal cry would do. "Give me draenei flesh to tear and rip! Draenei blood on my face... I will drink it down until I can hold no more! *Give me their blood!*"

His chest heaved with the passion of his emotions, his fists clenching and unclenching. He looked prepared to attack an entire city with nothing but his bare hands ... and Durotan thought he would win that battle. Hellscream motioned to his clan.

"Voices of the Warsong! Come forth! Not a one of you will be denied this ecstasy!"

The Warsong warriors rushed forward, all eager to feel what their chieftain was feeling. The cup was passed around, and one by one, they drank. Each one shuddered for a moment in deep pain; each one passed through that pain to apparent delight and obviously increased strength. And the eyes of every one who drank turned a blazing red. Blackhand watched, his frown increasing. When the last of the Warsongs had drunk from the cup, he grunted. "I will drink!" he demanded, seizing the cup and swigging down a great gulp. Blackhand clutched his throat for a moment, but stayed completely silent while whatever dark magic was in the cup did its hellish duty. He had removed his armor, and the muscles rippling and growing beneath his taut green skin were clearly visible. Red eyes glowed when he finally looked up. He motioned to his sons, and Maim and Rend shoved other ores perfunctorily out of their way as they rushed forward. Durotan saw Griselda, Blackhand's only daughter, hesitate before she, too, stepped up to drink. Blackhand sneered at her.

"Not you," he snarled. Griselda drew back as if struck. Durotan, who had always been fond of the girl, breathed a sigh of relief. Blackhand intended to shame her. Instead, he was unwittingly giving her a great gift. Blackhand motioned to Orgrim.

"Come, friend Orgrim! Drink with me!"

Even now, even as his best and oldest friend was being summoned to drink the dark liquid, Durotan could not speak. But thankfully, he did not need to. Orgrim bowed his head.

"My chieftain. I will not take that glory from you. I am your second, not chieftain, and I do not seek that position."

Durotan sagged with relief. Orgrim saw what Durotan had seen, even though he was not privy to the information Durotan had been given. He was not a fool. He owned his own soul, and he would not surrender it for the sort of power that racked the body and made the eyes burn with such a sinister gleam.

Now the other clan chieftains lined up, anxious for this blessing that had so excited two of their most famous and respected chieftains. Durotan did not move. Drek'Thar leaned in and whispered, "My chieftain—do you not wish the blessing?"

Durotan shook his head. "No. Nor will I permit any of my clan to drink."

Drek'Thar blinked, shocked. "But. . . Durotan, it is obvious that this drink grants great power and passion! You would be a fool not to drink it!"

Durotan shook his head, recalling the contents of the letter. He had been skeptical at first; now he was certain. "I would be a fool if I did," he said quickly, and when Drek'Thar tried to protest, he silenced the former shaman with a look.

Unbidden and unexpected, words from the draenei prophet Velen floated back to Durotan: *We chose not to sell our people into slavery, and for that we were exiled.* Durotan knew in his bones that once the *ores* had drunk from this chalice, their will was no longer theirs. Gul'dan was doing exactly what the leaders on the draenei's home world had done. He had sold his people into slavery. History was repeating itself; now it was Durotan who defied his leaders for the sake of his people. Perhaps he and his clan, like the draenei, would soon be "exiled ones." It did not matter. What he was doing was right. He realized that now all the chieftains save he had drunk, and the moment he had dreaded was upon him.

Gul'dan waved him forward. "The mighty Durotan! The hero of Telmor!" Durotan forced his face to remain still. "Come and join with the other chieftains. Drink your fill from the chalice!"

"Nay, Gul'dan, I will not do so."

In the light of the torches. Durotan could see that a muscle twitched near Gul'dan's right eye,

"You refuse? Do you think you are better than the others? Do you think you do not need the blessing?"

The other chieftains were frowning now. Their breathing labored as if they had been running, their brows glistening with sweat.

Durotan did not rise to the bait. "It is my choice."

"Perhaps others in your clan feel differently," Gul'dan said, sweeping his arms to include the Frostwolf clan in his expansiveness.

"Will you let them drink, then?"

"No. I am the chieftain of the Frostwolf clan. And this is what I choose."

Gul'dan stepped down from the obsidian slab and strode to Durotan. He leaned in and whispered in the chieftain's ear. "What do you know and how did you know it?"

It was no doubt meant to be an intimidating gesture, but instead Durotan was filled with new hope. Gul'dan

felt threatened. But instead of sending an assassin in the night to dispatch someone he regarded as an inconvenience, he was trying to bully Durotan into submission. He had just confirmed the truth of the contents of the mysterious letter, and revealed that he had no idea who its author was. Durotan realized he could survive this and still protect his clan.

He said, equally quietly, "I know enough. And you will never discover how I learned it."

Gul'dan pulled back and forced a smile. "It is indeed your choice, Durotan, son of Garad. And if you choose to deny yourself such a blessing, then you must bear the consequences."

The words were double-edged, but Durotan didn't care. Another day, he might need to worry about what Gul'dan had planned for him.

But not tonight.

Gul'dan returned to his position and cried out to the crowd. "All who wish the blessing of the mighty Kil'jaeden, our benefactor, have received it. Think of this place as hallowed ground, for here the *ores* took steps to become something far greater than what we were born as. Think of this mighty mountain as Kil'jaeden's throne, where he sits and watches and blesses us as we do work that will purge us still further of anything other than the best of which we are capable."

He stepped back and nodded to Blackhand. His eyes glowing red, his armor catching the flickering of the torches, Blackhand lifted his arms and cried, "Tonight We make history. Tonight We attack the last remaining stronghold of our enemy. We will tear limbs from bodies. We will bathe in blood. We will storm through the streets of their capital like their worst nightmare. Blood and thunder! Victory to the Horde!"

Durotan stared. Tonight? There had been no strategy discussed. This was not some little hamlet or village Blackhand was talking about, but the draenei capital. This was their place of last refuge, and he was certain they would fight more fiercely than they had ever before, like cornered animals. He recalled the huge engines of war that had been built, and knew that Blackhand had ordered them moved—where, neither Durotan nor the others knew.

Madness. This was madness.

And as he looked at the screaming bodies surrounding him, their eyes all twin pinpricks of crimson light, he realized that the word was truer than he thought.

Those who had drunk from the tainted cup had indeed gone mad. Grom Hellscream danced closer to the fire, waving his newly muscular arms and throwing his head back, the firelight dancing on once-brown skin that had now turned green. Durotan, sick and dazed with horror, looked into glowing red eyes that were so akin to those of the enslaved creatures the warlocks commanded; that green skin, the same green hue that was already tainting the skins of the warlocks, like Ghun, was even starting to taint Durotan's own skin and that of the one he loved with all his heart.

He thought of the contents of the letter, written in an archaic tongue that few but the highly educated—the shaman and the clan leaders—would know:

You will be asked to drink. Refuse. It is the blood of twisted souls, and it will twist yours and those of all who imbibe. It will enslave you forever. By the love of all we once held dear, refuse.

The ancient language had a single word for "twisted souls.

These were the things that were held in check by the warlock's will, but just barely. The fluid that had passed the lips of those Durotan had called both friend and foe had been the blood of one such. And Durotan watched as the twisted souls that the ores now were somehow bound to danced insanely in the torchlight before racing down the mountains to run, fueled with unnatural rage and energy, to attack the most fortified city this world had ever seen.

Twisted souls.

Dae'mons. Demons.

TWENTY

I have spoken to many who were there at the destruction of the city of Shattrath. When I ask them about the event, their minds are clouded and their recall is poor. Even Drek'Thar, who remembers so much with astonishing clarity, stammers and hesitates when asked to recall the details. It is as though with demonic blood fresh in their mouths, those who drank can remember only the fury they felt and not what they did in its grasp. And even those who did not drink, that small handful of which Drek'Thar is a member—even they cannot summon the details to mind. It is as if such an atrocity was so horrific that it wants to be forgotten. That some draenei survived the assault is not in doubt; I have seen the sad, pathetic things that were once the glorious draenei with my own eyes, wandering forlornly here in Azeroth, soft and shattered, crying for home. These "lost ones" are to be pitied. So it is that this account is vague, and I regret it. Such a moment, dark though it may be, should not be forgotten or glossed over. But such is the chronicler's challenge.

The ores charged down the trail, burning with a feral need to destroy. Some were so overflowing with rage and hatred that they took swipes at the very rocks as they passed them. Sonic bellowed their fury. Others were grimly, deathly silent, all their energies contained and simmering, ready to be released at the proper moment.

During that long run, Durotan was more afraid of his own people—of individuals that he had once called friend—than of any ogre wielding a club or any herd of talbuks ... or any enraged, attacking draenei. He was cold with sweat, shaking in his boots, but not from any fear for himself. His fear was for what would happen next—not to the draenei, for their destiny was surely already written, but to the ores. He could not bring himself in those moments as they were running to Shattrath to call them the Horde.

At one point, a horrible rumbling knocked them all off their feet. As they clambered upright, they turned and looked back to where they had come.

It looked as if the mountain had exploded. Liquid fire was belched into the night sky, hurtling upward, then falling and splattering down the jagged peak- It radiated and glowed like the demon blood that the ores had just drunk, though its hue was orange-yellow and not an eerie green. More and more molten stone was spewed from the mountain. It was a glorious, mesmerizing, and horrific sight.

The ores took it as a sign, and a cheer erupted from their ranks. After a few moments of celebrating at the very mountain, the Throne of Kil'jaeden, blessing their endeavor, they turned and continued their race toward slaughter.

A mile outside the city, they slowed. An area had been cleared, and recently too, and for a moment the first ores to arrive at this site simply stared in confusion. This was where they had been told to assemble; this was where their war engines were supposed to have been quartered.

Then, with no warning, something materialized right in front of their eyes. The ores drew back, hissing. Then in the face of all sanity and logic, they started snarling at the huge being. It towered over them, three times taller than the tallest ogre, red from its cloven hooves to the tip of its lashing tail, from its jutting horns to its sharp black nails. Its size was like nothing they had ever seen, but its shape . . . Durotan stared at it, thinking that it looked like nothing so much as a gigantic, crimson-skinned draenei. The sudden realization that the ores had been plunged into a personal conflict that should never have concerned them crashed over him like a tidal wave.

"You have nothing to fear and everything to celebrate, you who have sworn your allegiance to me!" it cried, its voice penetrating to the very bone, "I am Kil'jaeden, the Beautiful One, the one who has been with you since the beginning. And I am with you now as you head to the most glorious battle yet. Once, the wicked draenei plotted against you, hiding an entire city from your eyes. But you have destroyed that city, and others, and vanquished their temple. All that remains is this one final battle, and then the threat will be eliminated.

"The green stone that once hid the city of Telmor from you now hides their doom from them. *Kehla men samir, solaylamaa kahl!*" And the illusion was dispelled. Before them were dozens of catapults, battering rams, siege weapons of all varieties. Standing beside the engines of war were the ogres, still and silent, their stupid faces filled with determination. They bore weapons suited to their size, and Durotan realized that there were at least three dozen of them ready to fight. They made the huge weapons look like toys.

"There is more, , , ," Kil'jaeden said, and waved his hands. The warlocks all cried out and grasped their heads for a moment, then blinked and grinned. "New spells have flooded your minds. Use them well. Take the draenei *now!*"

As if he had opened a gate, the bloodthirsty ores leaped into motion. Some of them made for the weapons by which a walled city would fall, pushing them forward with a strength which Durotan had never before seen them display. The ogres immediately went to the others, moving the enormously heavy weapons at a brisk pace. Other ores were too far sunk in bloodlust, and simply raced forward in the direction of the city. What they would do when they got there Durotan did not know, but he and his clan followed dutifully.

The war machines propelled by the ogres and the ores rumbled steadily on. But even before they were maneuvered into position, the walls that protected the city were under attack. Enormous, green-glowing rocks fell from the sky to slam into the city. Towers and citadels that had risen above the wall level cracked and shattered, and the wall itself was starting to crumble in several places. But it was not just boulders falling from the sky that comprised the attack—it was what rose from them once they had landed. Moving deliberately but with sickening speed, creatures that appeared made of the same glowing green stone got to their feet and charged. They hammered at the wall, joined now by more mundane stones hurled by the catapults and huge tree trunks rammed into the great gate door. Two ogres were pounding on the door with their clubs, and the timber shuddered. From within, Durotan could hear cries of fury and horror as the draenei tried to battle the creatures—"infcrnals," as he heard one warlock refer to them.

Most of the warlocks were using these new servants, but a few still had the smaller, more familiar creatures obeying their commands.

The city could not last long under such an assault. With a mighty crash, an entire section of stone wall crumbled. The tide of crazed ores and bellowing ogres swarmed through the breach thus created, shrieking and swinging weapons. Durotan remained where he was, rooted to the earth, watching as the ores fought and killed and died.

The rage and fury he had seen them display before in the thick of battle was nothing compared to what he saw now. There was no strategy, no attempt at defense, no calls for retreat when retreat was necessary. This was nothing more than murder and slaughter, dealing death and receiving it, stupidly rushing into dead ends where traps had been laid. Such was to be expected from the ogres, and as they fell heavily, blood streaming from their bodies, Durotan did not mourn them. But the ores . . . they were beyond caring about anything but the sensation of their own blood singing in their veins and the battle cries pouring from their throats.

Dozens . . . no, no, *hundreds* would die this night. The casualties would render the city unlivable. Come sunrise, blue and green bodies would litter the streets. But for now, it was carnage and chaos and the very depths of insanity. Durotan swung his axe because it was fight or die, and even now, even though he knew his people were on a dark road, he did not wish death.

Kil'jaeden and Mannoroth stood together, watching the green meteors that housed infernals crashing to the earth. "They swarm like insects," grunted Mannoroth. Kil'jaeden nodded, pleased. "Indeed. It is beautiful to watch, I am well pleased."

"What next?"

Kil'jaeden turned eyes of mild surprise on his lieutenant. "Next? There is no next, at least not here. The ores have fulfilled my purpose. They burn with your blood, my friend. It will consume them eventually unless they have an outlet for it. and that outlet is only to be found in slaughtering every last draenei on the face of this world."

He watched as fire joined the glowing green hue in the distance.

"It is well that you are done here," Mannoroth said. "Archimonde mutters that you are wasting time, and our master wishes us elsewhere."

Kil'jaeden sighed. "You speak the truth. Sargeras hungers, and he has been very patient with me. I do regret one thing—that I won't be watching as they gut Velen. Ah well. Enough to know that it happened. Let us leave this place."

He gestured, and both he and his lieutenant disappeared.

"What do you mean, he was not there?" Gul'dan shrieked. This could not be.

"What I said," Blackhand growled. "We scoured the city. Velen was nowhere to be found."

"Perhaps an overcager grunt found him first and mutilated the body," Gul'dan said nervously. This was not good news. He had instructed Blackhand to find the corpse of the prophet Velen and bring the draenei's head to Gul'dan. It was to be a present to Kil'jaeden.

"Possible. Even likely," Blackhand said. "But from what you told me, even if his body had been hacked to pieces, he could not have been mistaken for an ordinary draenei."

Gul'dan shook his head, feeling worried and slightly sick. The draenei had blue skin and black hair. Velen, their prophet, had pale white skin and white hair. As long as a piece of his skin remained whole, he could be identified.

"You scoured the city?"

Blackhand's brows drew together. "I told you we did," he said darkly. His breath started to quicken and his eyes turned even redder as anger rose in him.

Gul'dan nodded. Besotted though the ores were by bloodlust, they would not have failed to search for the body most coveted by their leader. The reward would be too great, the anger if it were overlooked and discovered intolerably furious.

Somehow, Velen had escaped. That meant that there were probably other draenei out there. In a sudden panic that made his heart race, he wondered just how many he had let slip through his fingers . . . and where in this wide, wide world they had gone.

Once Velen had had an entire temple, filled with acolytes and priests and servants, in which to meditate and pray. Now, he was in a small room, one of only a handful who even had their own room. He held the violet crystal in his hand and tears poured silent and unheeded down his face.

He watched the fall of the city. He had wanted to stay, to lend his own not inconsiderable magic to the fray, but that path would have meant death—not merely his own, but that of his people. They did not need a marshal now. The orcs, their systems permeated with demonic blood, burned with a lust for killing that would not be sated even if they slew every last draenei in Dracnor, would never be sated until death stiffened their corpses. Kil'jaeden's and Sargeras's Burning Legion of demonic forces owned them now. The ores had numbers, ogres, warlocks, and a fury that would take them physically and emotionally to places where no rational mind would dare travel. There was nothing Velen could do but let the city fall, for there was nothing he could do that could possibly save it.

Nor could the ores be saved. The only flicker of hope for the eventual redemption of the Horde lay in the single clan who had not drunk the blood, had not made the pact, whose minds and hearts were still their own. Some eighty orcs, and that was all. Eighty, to stand against over a dozen other clans, most much larger than the), whose Warchief was the worst of them all. The ores would be treated as maddened beasts now, whenever any draenei chanced upon them; things to be put down quickly and mercifully, with the

understanding that while the ores did not fully know what they did, they must die regardless.

Velen had wanted to abandon the city, to have it standing empty when the ores descended. Wanted to save as many draenei lives as he could. But Larohir, the quick-speaking, intelligent general who had succeeded Restalaan after the latter's murder, had convinced him it would not work.

"If there is an insufficient number of draenei to slaughter," Larohir had said, his voice soft and compassionate but yet hard as steel, "then the lust that consumes them will not even be sated temporarily. They will still hunger and catch our scent while it is new, and track us down. Those who flee will die. They must believe that they have slain most of us. And in order for them to believe that... it must be true."

Velen had stared in horror. "You would have me send my people to knowingly be slaughtered?"

"All but a handful of us know what we fled on Argus," said Larohir. "We remember it. We remember what Kil'jaeden did, what happened to our people. We would—we will—happily die to preserve even a handful of our race uncorrupted."

Velen had looked down then, his heart aching. "If the ores believe they have slain us, except for a trivial handful, then Kil'jaeden will be satisfied. He will depart."

"The ores will suffer greatly," said Larohir, and did not look displeased. After what the ores had done to the draenei recently, Velen could not blame him. "They will. And I have no doubt that they will continue to track us down."

"But the methods they use to track a few dozen will be different than if they suspect there are a few hundred of us remaining," said Larohir. "It is to our advantage to appear as scattered and helpless as possible."

Velen had looked up at Larohir, haunted. "It is easy for you to speak so. But the decision is not yours. It is mine. I must be the one to say, 'You—you and your family will come with me and live. But you, and you, and you—you will stay behind and let demon-crazed ores tear you to pieces and anoint themselves with your blood.*"

Larohir said nothing. There was nothing to say.

Velen had spoken with each of his people he had chosen to send to die. He had embraced them and blessed them; he had taken items that meant something to them and promised to see that these things survived. He had watched as, stoic and dry-eyed, these walking dead had repaired their armor and sharpened their swords, as if the outcome was actually in question. And he had watched as they marched off, singing the ancient songs, to enclose themselves behind a walled city and wait for mace or axe or spear to end their lives.

Velen could not go with them. He had unique abilities, and if the draenei were to survive, he needed to as well. But he had used the crystal to watch every moment of the battle, and the pain he felt was scaring and yet purifying. Not one of these people would have died in vain.

The ores did not know about the Zangarmarsh. They had not yet sniffed out this hiding place, and if Velen had anything to say about it, they never would. Here, the best draenei minds would continue to devise ways to harness energies and direct them, to keep safe the handful who had survived. Here, they would regroup and recover, heal and wait and pray they had at last tricked Kil'jaeden the Deceiver and escaped his terrible gaze.

The ores had captured three of the stones, but Velen still had four: Fortune's Smile, Eye of the Storm, Shield of the Naaru, and, of course, Spirit's Song, And although his link with the Naaru was tenuous, K'ure yet lived.

Even as tears spilled down his white face to drop on the surface of the violet crystal, even as he grieved the utterly tragic loss of so many lives, Velen, prophet of the draenei, felt hope stirring inside him.

TWENTY-ONE

We had lost everything by this point. We had abandoned balance and harmony in our world, and thus the elements had abandoned us. Demons guarded the entrance to Oshu'gun, cutting us off from the ancestors. Our physical bodies and our very souls had become corrupted from the blood that, in their eagerness for power and strength, most of the ores had gladly imbibed. And then, then—when we had done all this to ourselves under the "guidance" of GuYdan. Kit'jaeden abandoned us. Thus came what has been called the Dying Time. May its like never visit us again.

"What do I do?" Gul'dan could not believe the words were coming from his own lips, but he was so terrified that advice, any advice, seemed better than this sick fear he lived with.

Ner'zhul regarded him with contempt. "You made this choice."

"It's not as if you are blameless yourself!" Gul'dan snapped,

"Of course not. I made choices for myself, for my own advancement. But I never threw away the future of my people—my world—for it. Where is the power you were promised now. Gul'dan? The power that you bartered our people for?"

Gul'dan turned away, trembling. There was no power, and Ner'zhul knew it. which was why his words bit so deeply.

Far from rewarding his loyal servant with glories and godhood, Kil'jaeden had simply vanished. All that was left of his presence in this world were the warlocks and their demons, a maddened Horde, and a ravaged land.

No, he thought. No, that was not all that was left.

There was still the Shadow Council. There was still Blackhand, the ideal puppet precisely because he did not realize he was one such. And while the Horde was now infused with the blood of demons, and craved violence and destruction more than meat and drink, they had not gotten out of control. At least, not yet.

He would summon the Council to meet in their beautiful Black Temple. Doubtless they, too, would be searching for ways to salvage what power was left.

Yes. There was still the Shadow Council.

"The land is dead," Durotan said quietly as he stood with his old friend surveying what had once been verdant meadows and foothills, Durotan scuffed at the dirt with his boot. Powdery sand and rock were revealed as he kicked away the dead yellow grass. Wind, no longer blocked by trees, whistled past them.

Orgrim said nothing for a long time. His eyes told him Durotan was right. He looked to the riverbed where he and Durotan had swum in one of their many challenges, and saw no hint that water had ever flowed in it. What water remained in the land was filthy, clogged with animal corpses and sediment. To drink it was to risk illness; not to drink was to die.

No water, no grasses. Here and there were places that still managed to survive, such as the Terokkar forest, ancestors knew how.

The ores were growing thin, for no grasses meant no herd animals. The last three years had seen more orcish deaths from starvation and disease than from the battles against the draenei,

"More than the land is dead." Orgrim said at last. His voice was thick and heavy. He turned to face Durotan. "How is the Frostwolf's grain supply?"

To his eyes, he and Durotan looked green. Next to others, such as Grom and Blackhand, they still were more brown than green, but the damage was being done, Durotan had theorized that it was the warlock powers that were doing this to them and their world. Certainly those who had directly drunk whatever potion Gul'dan had concocted for them were a more vivid hue than others. *Strange*, Orgrim thought. There was irony in that while the land turned brown when it

should be green, the ores turned green when they should be brown, Durotan grimaced. "Several barrels were stolen in the attacks."

"Which clan?"

"Shattered Hand."

Orgrim nodded. The Frostwolf clan was bearing the brunt of the recent flurry of attacks. After the Horde had taken Shattrath, sightings of the draenei had dwindled. It had been a full six months since anyone had reported even glimpsing one of the elusive blue-skinned beings. Let alone killing one, Durotan had made the Frostwolf clan a clear target when he refused to drink from the chalice the night Shattrath fell. And even before then, his reluctance to attack the draenei had not gone unnoticed. Now that the draenei—the only focus the ores had as an outlet for their vastly increased bloodlust—were becoming scarce, many felt that somehow Durotan was responsible. Never mind that it was quite likely that the draenei had simply been hunted to extinction—that the initial goal of wiping them off the face of the earth had been achieved.

"I will bring some the next time I see you," Orgrim said.

"I will not take charity."

"If my clan were in your position, you would beat me nearly senseless and shove the food down my throat rather than let me refuse it," Orgrim said. Durotan laughed and seemed surprised that he did so. Orgrim let himself grin. For a moment, if he could ignore the dead land around them, the unnatural hue of their skins, it was as if the horrors of the intervening years had not happened.

Then Durotan's laughter faded, and the present returned. "For the sake of the children. I will accept it." He turned his head, again looking out over the wasteland. New names were cropping up—harsher names, darker names. The Citadel was becoming known as the Hellfire Citadel, the entire area the Hellfire Peninsula.

"The destruction of the draenei will lead to that of the ores as well if something is not done," Durotan said. "We are turning against each other. Stopping to stealing food from the mouths of children because the land is so wounded it can no longer nourish us. The demons capering at the heels of the warlocks can destroy and torment, but they cannot heal or feed the starving."

Orgrim asked in a low voice. "Has anyone . . . tried to work with the elements?" Such activities were still forbidden, but Orgrim knew that desperation was causing some to rethink the old ways,

Durotan nodded. "It was a failure. We have been met with stony silence. Demons guard Oshu'gun. We can find no hope there."

"Then . . . We are finished," Orgrim said quietly. He glanced down at his hammer, its shaft leaning against his leg as they stood.

He wondered if the prophecy of the Doomhammer was being fulfilled even now; if he

was the last of his line. Had he already brought salvation and then doom by using this weapon to drive the draenei to extinction?

And how could it possibly be used now to bring justice?

When all was dying . . . how could everything change again?

The will to survive was powerful, Gul'dan thought as he readied himself for sleep. He had taken to sleeping in the Black Temple, in a room he had had redesigned specifically for him. In it, he placed in a ritualized fashion all the trinkets and tools he needed to properly command the demons he summoned: shards from draenei souls, certain stones for the larger creatures, potions to help him keep his energy up when it flagged. There were skulls, too, and bones, and other signs of dominance. Certain herbs were burned in containers, their pungent or sweet aroma inducing visions.

It was to ajar of such that he turned now. He had lit a small fire in a cauldron and permitted the wood to burn down to glowing embers. Chanting softly, Gul'dan tossed the dried leaves on the fire and forced himself not to cough as the scent filled the air. He went to his bed—he liked to think that perhaps this was the same bed upon which the loathed Velen slept when he was in the temple—and quickly fell asleep.

Gul'dan dreamed, as he had not done since Kil'jaeden's departure. And even while in the strange, dark place that was the vision, he knew it to be true. The vision was that of a vaguely orc-shaped being, clad in a long cloak that obscured his face. He was slender, even more slender than an orc female, but somehow Gul'dan immediately sensed that it was male. Delicately built as he seemed to Gul'dan's eyes, the sense of power that radiated from the stranger all but buffeted Gul'dan. A shiver shook him. When the stranger spoke in his mind, the voice was masculine, oddly pleasant, and profoundly compelling.

"You are feeling adrift and alone," said the stranger.

Gul'dan nodded, cautious and eager at the same time.

"Kil'jaeden promised you power . . . strength . . . godhood. Things that your world has never even seen," continued the smooth voice from a mouth that remained hidden in the shadow of the cloak's hood. The words caressed Gul'dan, lulled him, and frightened him at the same time. But he felt more angry than frightened as he spoke.

"He abandoned me," Gul'dan said. "He caused us to ruin our world, and then left us to die with it. If you come from him, then—"

"Nay, nay," soothed the stranger in that oddly compelling voice. "I come from one even greater," His eyes glittered, deep within the shadow of the hooded cloak. "I come from . . . his master."

Gul'dan's skin prickled. "His . . . master?"

And he fell back as his mind was assaulted with images: images of Kil'jaeden and Velen and Archimonde, as they were long ago. He saw the transformation of the beings known as eredar into monsters and demigods, and he sensed, though never saw, a great presence behind it all.

"*Sargeras!*"

He still could not see the stranger's face, but Gul'dan knew that he smiled.

"Yes. The one who rules over all. The one we serve. You will soon understand, Gul'dan, that destruction and oblivion are beautiful and pure. That it is the direction in which all things must go. You can resist it and be destroyed, or aid it and be rewarded."

Gaughtously, still worried about this cloaked figure and his honeyed words, Gul'dan asked, "What is being asked of me?"

"Your people are dying," the figure said bluntly. "There is nothing left in this world for them to destroy. There is nothing left for them to survive on. They must go elsewhere. Where there is ample food and drink, and worthy prey to slaughter. The ores hunger now for so, so much more than food. Give them the blood they crave."

Gul'dan narrowed his eyes. "That sounds like a reward, not a task to which I am set," he said.

"It is both . . . but that is not the only reward my master offers. You rule the Shadow Council, and you have tasted power. You are the greatest warlock that exists among your people, and you know how that fills you. Imagine if you were ... a god." Gul'dan trembled. Such had been promised before, but somehow, he knew that this Sargeras was much better able to fulfill such extravagant vows. He thought of extending a hand and making the earth tremble, of clenching it hard and stopping a heart. He thought of the eyes of thousands trained upon him, their voices raw from shouting his name. He thought of tastes and sensations he could not yet even imagine, and his mouth watered.

"We have a mutual foe," the stranger continued. "I would see them dead. You would see your people sated with slaughter and killing." And now Gul'dan could make out just the barest hint of features, of pale skin and a thin-lipped mouth framed by black hair that curved in a smile. "It is a partnership that would benefit us both."

"Indeed," Gul'dan breathed. He realized that he was moving toward the stranger as if drawn, then stopped and added, "but I cannot believe that this is all you would ask of me."

The stranger sighed. "Sargeras will give you all this and more. Only ... he lies imprisoned. He needs assistance to escape. His body is trapped in an ancient tomb, lost beneath a roiling ocean of darkness. He hungers for his freedom, the power that once was his to express, as your ores hunger for bloodshed, as you hunger for power. Bring your ores into this verdant, unspoiled new world. Give them soft flesh into which their axes can bite. Defeat the denizens of this place, strengthen your people, and with this vast green tide of warriors join me in liberating our master. His gratitude—"

Again the sly smile, the glint of white teeth in the beard. And again that powerful buffet of power, mitigated only by the stranger's will.

". . . Well. It is likely beyond even your imaginings, Gul'dan."

Gul'dan considered. As he thought, the image of the stranger shifted and faded. Gul'dan gasped as he stood in a beautiful meadow, the wind tousling his braided hair. Beasts he had never seen before grazed their fill. Along the horizon, healthy trees towered. Strange beings, similar to ores but with pinkish skin, as slender as the stranger, tended fields and livestock.

Perfect.

The image shifted again. Suddenly he was underwater, swimming down, his lungs not burning for air despite the depth. Kelp swayed in the current, obscuring but not entirely hiding tumbled columns and a slab that bore strange writing, eroded somewhat by time and the ceaseless, gentle caress of water. A shudder passed through him as he realized that this was where Sargeras lay. Release him from this prison, and then ... and then...

It seemed like a good partnership. Anything would be better than staying here in this world, which would mean a slow death. A beautiful, ripe land, ready for plunder, would all by itself make this bargain worthwhile. And there was so, so much more to come. He gazed at the stranger raptly. "Tell me what to do."

Gul'dan awoke sprawled on the floor. Beside him on the cold stone was a parchment covered with instructions, written in his own hand. He scanned it quickly: *Portal. Azeroth. Humans.*

Medivh.

Gul'dan began to smile.

TWENY-TWO

Can a thing be at once a blessing and a curse? A salvation and a doom? For such I hold what happened next in the history of my people. From every account, the demonic energies, used so freely and with no heed given as to their cost, leached all that was wholesome and life-giving from the world of Draenor. Kil'jaeden had wanted to increase the number of orcs, so that we would become a formidable army, and he had done so, forcing the growth of our younglings and robbing them of their childhood. Now, the orc population was larger than it had ever been, and there was no way to feed the hungry. It is clear to me, as it must have been clear to those living through those terrible times, that if we had remained on Draenor, our race would likely have died out. But how we left. . . and why we left. . . this world still bleeds from the wound of that. I do what I can to heal while still safeguarding the interests of this new Horde I have made, but I wonder if these wounds will ever really close. Life for my people: a blessing. How we obtained it: a curse.

The Shadow Council had been nervous, almost as worried sick as Gul'dan had been at Kil'jaeden's departure. But now they had a direction. He called the Council and shared with them the words of the mysterious stranger who called himself Mcdivh. He spoke of the fertile fields, clean water, healthy, glossy-coated prey animals. And he spoke even more glowingly of the beings called "humans," who would fight enough to be a challenge, but who would inevitably fall to the superiority of the Horde.

"Water, food, killing. And power to those who agree to help bring it about," Gul'dan said, his voice seductive, almost purring. He had gauged them correctly. Their eyes, some red and glowing, some still brown and intense, were focused on him and he saw hope . . . and greed ... on their faces.

The work began.

First, they had to redirect the attention of the starving Horde. Gul'dan was well aware that, with decreasing food supplies and a burning thirst for violence that no longer had an outlet, the ores had started attacking one another. He had Blackhand send out decrees to all the clans, submitting their finest warriors for controlled, one-on-one or small party fights in public display. The winners would receive food from the losing clan, and a supply of pure water as well as honor and fame. Frantic for something, anything, to ease the pain of their dual hunger, for food and for blood, the ores responded well to the suggestion, and Gul'dan was relieved. Mcdivh wanted an army to attack the humans. It would not do if all the ores had slaughtered one another before the invasion.

Durotan continued to give him trouble. The leader of the Frostwolf clan, likely emboldened by the fact that Gul'dan did not cut him down the night of the attack on Shattrath, had begun speaking out more publicly. He decried the staged battles as demeaning. He called for a way to try to heal the land, stopping just short of directly blaming the warlocks for it. In other words, he danced as close to the line as was possible, and sometimes crossed it.

And, as had always been the case, some were listening. While the Frostwolf clan was the only one whose leader had not drunk the blood of Mannoroth, there were other ores in lower positions who had also refused. The one who worried Gul'dan the most was

Orgrim Doomhammer. That one could be trouble. Orgrim had never much liked Blackhand; one day, he might do something about that dislike. But for the moment, he did not side publicly with the Frostwolves, and indeed was one of the regular victors in the champion battles.

The visions continued. Mcdivh had a very clear idea of what he wanted: a portal between the two worlds. one that could be created with the Shadow Council and its warlocks on one side, and Mcdivh and whatever magics he was controlling on his side. They could not work in secret; the portal would have to be large in order for the armies Mcdivh wanted to pass through. Besides, the Horde was feeling defeated. The excitement and challenge of the arena battles and constructing this portal with high ceremony would give them something to focus on.

Mcdivh was pleased with the idea. In one vision, he assumed the form of a large black bird, perching on Gul'dan's arm. Claws dug into his flesh and reddish-black blood trickled across green skin, but the pain felt . . . good. There was a small piece of paper rolled up around the bird's leg. In his vision, Gul'dan unrolled the paper and saw a design that took his breath away. When he awoke, he sketched it on a large parchment.

He surveyed it, eyes bright with anticipation.

"Beautiful," he said.

"I do not understand your displeasure," Orgrim said one day as he and Durotan sat atop their mounts to survey the building of what Gul'dan called the Portal. Everywhere Durotan looked, ores were working. The males were bare to the waist, the females nearly so, and their green skins glistened with sweat underneath a sun that scorched the land. Some of them chanted rhythmic war cries as they worked, others were focused and silent. The road to this plateau, running in an almost straight line from what was starting to become known as Hellfire Citadel, was already well paved so that construction equipment could be easily moved.

The shapes of the four large platforms were based on draenei design. The irony did not escape Durotan. The original design had been modified, crowned with the now-familiar spikes and sharp edges that were starting to make orc architecture distinctive. But Durotan could remember walking up similar steps as a boy, and walking up those steps again with the intent of killing all he found atop them. Two obelisks pointed into the sky like sharp spears, and a statue of Gul'dan sat atop another one.

But most forbidding of all was the fourth, set a little way back from the other three. This was to be the framework for the actual Portal that Gul'dan kept promising them would manifest. Two huge slabs of stone towered into the air, a third lying across them to make the most primitive of gateways. Shapes were starting to appear out of the rock, looming shapes of cowed figures on either side, and some sort of serpent undulated atop it.

"Is this not better than having them ride into your camp and slaughter your clansmen?" Orgrim continued.

Durotan nodded. "Yes, in a way," he said. "But we still do not know what this is a portal *to*." Orgrim gestured at the sere landscape. The Hellfire Peninsula was one of the most damaged areas of the world, but far from the only one. "Does it matter? We know what it is a portal *from*."

Durotan grunted with a hint of amusement. "I suppose you're right at that."

He felt Orgrim's gray eyes regarding him steadily "Durotan ... I have refrained from asking you this, but . . . why did you refuse your clan the draft Gul'dan offered?"

Durotan looked at his friend, answering one question with another. "Why did you yourself not drink?" he countered.

"There was something . . . not right," Orgrim said at last. "I did not like what I saw it doing to the others."

Durotan shrugged, hoping his friend would not press the point. "You had the same insight as I did."

"I wonder," said Orgrim. but he did not question further.

Durotan saw no need to reveal what he knew. He had managed to protect his people from the horrors of what drinking demonic blood would do to them. He had asserted himself to Gul'dan. and thus far. no repercussions had fallen. And Orgrim, ancestors be praised, had had wisdom enough to realize that there was something amiss and had also declined. For now, that was enough for Durotan, son of Garad. chieftain of the Frostwolf clan.

"I fight today," Orgrim said, changing the subject. "Will you come?"

"I know that you do this not for glory, but for your clan," Durotan said. "You fight to win them food and water. But I will not show my face at these . . . displays. Ores should not be fighting ores. Not even in ritualized combat."

Orgrim sighed. "You have not changed, Durotan. You were ever afraid of me defeating you."

There was a hint of mirth in his voice. Durotan turned, and for the first time in many, many long months, grinned with genuine warmth.

The day had come.

All night, while a ring of warlocks stood guard lest any curious onlooker witness the dark ritual, several stonemasons had been hard at work carving the final seal into the portal's base. Once they had finished, wiping their sweaty brows and turning to smile at one another, they had been quickly slain. The blood of those who had created the seal would prime it, Gul'dan had been informed by Mcdivh. Gul'dan had no reason to doubt his new ally's wisdom. But the luckless masons would not be the last to die here.

The dawn was a fiery one, crimson and orange, and the air was thick and stale. While the portal was being completed over the last several days, other tasks had been finished as well. The war machines that had so devastated Shattrath several months earlier now were again pressed into service, repaired, oiled, and tested. Armor that had been neglected was polished, swords were sharpened, dents hammered out of chest pieces and helmets.

The great orcish army that had so decimated the draenei was being reformed.

Some clans had been requested to remain behind. Gul'dan had done his best to convince the chieftains of **the** Shattered Hand. Shadowmoon, Thunderlord, Bleeding Hollow, and Laughing Skull clans that they were needed here. Grom and the Warsong had been particularly hard to convince to remain. For a moment, as the chieftain raged at him, Gul'dan wondered if he had done the right thing in letting Hellscream drink the demon blood. More than most, he seemed to have little control over his emotions; despite Gul'dan's flattery about how valuable Grom was to him and how he needed him here, it was Grom's wildness and unpredictability that made Gul'dan want him to stay behind. He could not risk Grom getting some mad idea into his head and defying orders. Mcdivh would not like that; he would not like that at all.

Blackhand had requested that the entire Horde gather at the Hellfire Citadel. Over the last few days, several who had returned to their ancestral lands, the Frostwolf clan among them, had trickled in and camped in the area. They had obeyed the order to arm themselves as if they were going into battle, although few of them understood exactly what was going on. They assembled, clan by clan. Each clan wore their traditional colors in the form of a decorative sash or belt over their armor, and on this hot, windy day, their banners snapped proudly.

Gul'dan and Ner'zhul watched the assembly. Gul'dan turned to his former mentor. "You and your clan will be among those staying behind," he said shortly.

Ner'zhul nodded, almost meekly. "So I assumed," he said. He did not say much these days, which was just as well with Gul'dan. He had half suspected that the older orc would try to wrest control from him after Kil'jaeden had abandoned them, but apparently Ner'zhul was too crushed to even do that. Gul'dan thought with contempt about the time, not so long ago, when he had idolized and envied Ner'zhul. How foolish he had been then. He had grown and learned, even from the bitterness of deception. Although there were times when he thought he caught a faint glimmer of something in Ner'zhul's eyes, as now. He looked sharply at the other orc and decided it was just a trick of the light. He returned his attention to the assembling clans and smiled.

Even though his designs went far beyond simple bloodletting, he could not help but be stirred at the sight. They were glorious! The scorching sun glinting on their armor, their banners waving in the wind, their green faces shining with anticipation. If all was as Mcdivh promised, this could be the turning point to greatness. The drums began. Deep, primal, they shuddered along the earth, through stone, into the bones of the Horde. Many of them threw back their heads and howled as they began to march, falling naturally into step with one another, again a unified people.

Gul'dan made no move to hurry. Once they were all assembled at the Portal, he would be magically transported there by another warlock. He could enjoy watching the parade of his army march down the wide, paved road to the Portal.

Standing in front of the Portal was a draenei child.

Where had they found it? Durotan had not so much as glimpsed a draenei in months; nor had anyone else. They must have considered it great good luck to have found any draenei, let alone a youngling.

They were in the front of the crowd, standing next to the Thunderlord clan and the Dragonmaw clan. The Portal gate had been finished and looked both beautiful and terrifying. Two cloaked figures, whose eyes glowed red either from magic or clever technology, flanked the opening. A carved serpentine creature curled about the top, its maw gaping open, showing pointed carved teeth. It extended sharp, lizardlike claws and had ridges along its long neck and body. Durotan had never seen anything like this, and briefly wondered how such an image had occurred to the masons, A nightmare, possibly? He grimaced. All in all, it was a formidable construction.

But he only barely registered the skill that had gone into its creation. His eyes were transfixed on the young draenei. He looked so terribly small next to the enormous arch—small, and thin, and bruised. He stared vacantly at the sea of ores who were bellowing at him, so far beyond terror that he obviously felt nothing.

"What are they going to do with it?" Draka wondered aloud.

Durotan shook his head. "I fear the worst," he said.

She stared at him. "I saw some killing of children in battle," she said. "The bloodlust was upon them—I could not condone it, but I could see how it could happen, but surely they will not make a ritual sacrifice out of this child!"

"I hope you are right," said Durotan, but he could see no other reason for the small figure to be present. If such were the case, he could not stand by. He did not want to risk harm to his clan, so he prayed he was wrong.

The warlocks were chanting something now, and to Durotan's amazement, Gul'dan appeared right before their eyes. The Horde murmured, and Gul'dan smiled benevolently at them.

"Today is a glorious day for the ores!" he cried. "You have all seen this Portal being built, admired the craftsmanship and how it stands as a monument to the glory of the Horde. Now, I will reveal to you the visions I have had." He pointed at the gate. "Far, far away, in a land called Azroth, I have an ally. He offers us his land. It is green and lush, filled with pure water and fat creatures to hunt. Best of all, we will continue to exult in the glory of bloodshed. A race called 'humans,' the enemy of our ally, will try to stop us from taking their lands. We will destroy them. Their dark blood will flow freely upon our swords. As we have destroyed the draenei, so now we will destroy the humans!"

A cheer went up. Draka shook her head in disbelief. "How can they still feel this way? Can they not see this new land will suffer as ours has if we continue on this path?"

Durotan nodded his agreement. "But at the same time, there is no choice. We need food, water. We must go through this Portal."

Draka sighed, seeing the logic but not liking it.

"Even now, our ally is working to open the Portal on his side. And now, we will begin." He gestured to the little draenei captive.

"Blood is a pure offering to those who give us these vast powers. And the blood of a child is purer still. With the life fluid of our enemies, we will open the Portal and step into a glorious new world—a new page in the history of the Horde!"

He approached the bound child, who looked up at him with empty eyes. Gul'dan raised a jeweled dagger. It glinted in the sunlight. "No!"

The word was ripped from Durotan's lips. Everyone turned to stare at him. He surged forward. If this new venture was opened by the blood of an innocent child, no good could come of it. He did not make it three steps before he was tackled and went down hard on the sun-baked earth. The instant it happened, he heard Draka utter her war cry and the clang of metal on metal as she charged. Chaos erupted. He struggled to his feet and beheld the crumpled form of the child. Blue blood spurted from his slashed throat.

"Gul'dan, what have you done to us!" Durotan shrieked, but his protest was lost in the roar of the enraged mob of ores. The Frostwolves had sprung into action to defend their chieftain, and the shouts of battle were almost deafening. Durotan's breath was knocked out of his lungs as his attacker—he could not tell from what clan—resumed the fight. In defense, Durotan lifted his axe and swung. The other dodged, moving more swiftly than Durotan had expected, came up, and

The tenor of the cries abruptly changed as the earth rumbled beneath their feet and a deep, piercing sound shuddered along their bones. The fighting stopped and as one the ores turned to gaze at the Portal. Moments before, one could look into the area outlined by the pillars and simply see more of the Hellfire Peninsula landscape. Now there was a blackness and a swirl of stars, as if one

were looking into a night sky gone mad. Even Durotan's eyes were riveted on the sight. As he watched, the blackness shimmered and reformed itself into a scene that both startled and puzzled him, Gul'dan had spoken of a beautiful land, rich with fat preybeasts, fertile fields, blue skies. Durotan was indeed looking at a place he had never seen before, but it was a far cry from the idyllic realm Gul'dan had described. It was as moist as Dracnor now was arid, A thick haze floated above brackish water and swaying marshland grasses. A buzzing, chirping sound filled the air. At least, thought Durotan. there was life in this strange place.

Unhappy murmurs ran through the crowd. *This* was where Gul'dan wanted to send them? It was not much better on first glance than their own land. But then again. Durotan realized, water meant life. Orange though the sky was, not blue, and drenched though the land was. not filled with flowers and meadows, it could support life.

He turned to look at Gul'dan as the murmuring rose in volume. Gul'dan was obviously trying to cover his own shock. He waved his arms for silence.

"Azcroth is a large world, as is our own!" he cried. "You know how different the land can be from place to place. I am certain it is the same here. This place . . . does not look as inviting as I was . . ." His voice trailed off and he shook himself, visibly recovering. "But behold, this *is* in truth another land! It is real! You!"

Gul'dan pointed at two dozen fully armored orcs who stood beside the Portal. They snapped to attention. "You have been chosen to be first to investigate this new land. Go forth, in the name of the Horde!"

The orcs hesitated only an instant, then grimly ran forward into the Portal.

The scene vanished.

Durotan's head whipped around to stare at Gul'dan. The warlock was doing his best to stay composed, but clearly he had been rattled.

"They are our scouts," Gul'dan said. "They will return with news of this world."

And before the gathered orcs could truly begin to grow worried, the image of the swamp reappeared and the orcs hurried through. They were grinning from ear to ear. More than half of them carried the carcasses of large animals. One was a reptile of some sort, scaly, long-tailed, with stubby legs and huge jaws. The other was a four-legged, furry thing, *with* claws on all four of its feet, a long tail, small rounded ears and spots on its yellow, glossy coat. Both were obviously healthy specimens.

"We have slain and eaten both types of creatures," the leader of the scout said. "Their flesh is wholesome. The water there is pure. We do not need a beautiful land. We need one that will feed and sustain us. This Azcroth will do so admirably, Gul'dan."

A murmur went through the crowd. Despite himself, Durotan felt his gaze drawn to the beasts the scouts had brought through and his stomach growled. It had been two days since he had eaten. Gul'dan visibly relaxed. He looked over at Durotan, and his eyes narrowed. Durotan tasted apprehension, sharp and bitter, in his throat.

He and his clan were needed. He knew that. He also knew that his defense of the child—and the reaction it had provoked among the other clans, many of whom had come to the defense of the Frostwolves— would not be forgotten. He had half suspected that Gul'dan would order his execution or banishment, but apparently Durotan and the Frostwolves yet had some use to Gul'dan and Blackhand.

So be it. For now, he would fight alongside his brethren. Tomorrow would have to take care of itself. Whatever betided, Durotan knew he would die with his honor intact.

Gul'dan looked back over the crowd of expectant orcs and took a deep breath.

"This is the moment of destiny," he said. "On the other side, a new beginning awaits. A new enemy to slaughter. You can feel it, can you not? The bloodlust rising? Follow Blackhand! Listen to his orders and you will rule this new world *as is your right!* It's your world on the other side of the Portal. *Take it!*"

The cries were deafening. The crowd surged forward. Even Durotan found himself caught up in the thrill of a new world, so lush and ripe and ready for the taking. Perhaps his worry was misplaced; perhaps this would indeed be a new beginning. Durotan loved his clan, loved his people. He wanted to see them

thrive. And he, like all orcs even before this moment, reveled in the kill.

Perhaps it would all be well.

Axe in hand, hope flourishing in his heart, Durotan joined in the race toward the Portal, toward this place called Azcroth. He lifted his arms and raised the cry that was on the lips of every orc as they surged forward:

"For the Horde!"

EPILOGUE

And so began our people's history in this world of Azeroth. We thundered out of the Portal like death incarnate, a torrent of blood-mad killers intent on slaughter. It is little wonder the humans hate us so, many of them even now. But perhaps this history I have chronicled will one day be read by human, elven, gnomish, and dwarven eyes. Perhaps they will understand a little better that we, too, knew suffering and victimization.

My father's suspicion that he and his clan were marked for exile proved correct. It was shortly after the Frostwolf clan entered Azeroth that Gul'dan banished them. They were forced to make their homes in the harshness of the mountains of Alterac. The white wolves who still hunt in this place are descended from the Frostwolves who followed my clan through the Portal and whose loyalty could not be swayed by the words of one who bore a grudge.

When I was born, my father realized he had to tell the other orcs all he knew about what had been done to them. He approached his old friend, Orgrim Doomhammer, who believed him and would have allied with him had not my father been treacherously slain. When I reached adulthood, I became Orgrim's friend, as had my father before; and it is I who have fulfilled the prophecy of the Doomhammer.

In their honor, this land is named Durotar, its greatest city, Orgrimmar. It is my hope that—

"My chieftain!" The deep, rough voice belonged to Eitrigg.

Thrall stopped in mid-sentence, moving the pen so it did not drip on the parchment. "What is it?" he asked the elderly orc who was one of his most trusted advisors.

"There is news—news from the Alliance. One of our information gatherers has learned something he insists you must know." Thrall disliked the term "spy," but he had spies nonetheless, as he was certain Jaina Proudmoore had her spies in his lands. It was to be expected, and was often worthwhile. Seldom had one of his gatherers insisted on seeing him like this. Something important must be happening indeed.

"Show him in, and leave us," he said. Eitrigg nodded and a moment later, a small, scrawny, nondescript human male was brought in. He looked exhausted, undernourished, and terrified.

Thrall rose to his full imposing height without thinking, then realized he might intimidate the human. "Will you take food or drink?" he asked, keeping his voice gentle.

The spy shook his head, then amended. "W-Water, if you please." in a voice that cracked. The Warchief himself poured a goblet and handed it to the man, who gulped thirstily, then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"My thanks. Warchief." the spy said, sounding a bit calmer.

"Your news." Thrall said.

The man paled. Thrall sighed inwardly. He would never be so brutal—or so foolish—as to kill a messenger for bringing bad news. Such behavior merely resulted in no one's wanting to serve as messenger. He smiled in what he hoped was a reassuring fashion.

"Do not fear. Your news, good or ill, is welcome if it aids me in protecting my people." he said.

The man looked slightly less distressed. He took a deep breath.

"My lord," he said. He hesitated, then continued grimly, "The draenei have come to Azcroth."

Thrall was puzzled. He exchanged glances with Eitrigg, who shrugged.

"Some draenei have been in Azcroth for years." he said. "They are nicknamed the lost ones. We know about them. This is not news, friend."

The man looked stricken. "You don't understand," he said, urgently. "Not those pathetic creatures—*draenei!* There—there was ship. From the skies. It crashed like an infernal stone two nights ago."

Thrall inhaled swiftly. No one had missed seeing that strange object in the night sky. Looking like a star crashing to earth. So ... it had not been a star, nor even an infernal. It had been a vessel...

The man was still talking. "Proudmoore has agreed to aid them. There is one among them—pale, noble, his presence commanding, though he is not physically strong. They call him Velen."

Thrall stared. The draenei? The Prophet Velen? *Here?*

He sank slowly in his chair as the full significance struck him.

The worst enemy the orcs had ever known had come to Azcroth. Had been welcomed into the Alliance.

How could there possibly be peace between Horde and Alliance now?

"Ancestors save us," Thrall whispered.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Christie Golden is the award-winning author of twenty-eight novels and over a dozen short stories in the fields of fantasy, science fiction, and horror. Her media tie-in works include launching the Ravenloft line in 1991 with *Vampire of the Mists*, which introduced readers to classic vampire Jandor Sunstar and will be reprinted in 2006. Over a dozen *Star Trek* novels, including *Voyager* fiction set after the TV series, and the *Warcraft* novel *Lord of the Clans*. Original fiction includes the *Dancers* series from Luna Books. *On Fire's Wings*, reissued in mass market paperback in 2006. and *In Stone's Clasp*. Readers are invited to visit her website at www.christiegolden.com. And yes, she does play *World of Warcraft*.