Unity

by ivorytower

Summary

It is the Winter season in Kalimdor, and Garona urges Thrall to choose an heir and find himself a mate. Thrall is less than certain about this endeavour, and seeks advice from one of his dearest and closest friends, Jaina Proudmoore.

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Unity is a long running story that covers a period of about four years, just after the ending of the Bonus Orc Campaign from WarCraft III: the Frozen Throne.

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I am a terrible, lazy person. There are SO MANY characters in this thing. Also, I'm finally posting this to AO3, in optimistic hope that I'll actually finish it. As seen on LiveJournal.

Notes

Chapter 1: Late Autumn, Year 26

"What's wrong with this one?" Garona asked wearily. She disliked having to wear the heavy, gold-and-black armor of the Kor'Kron elite. It reminded her too much of Doomhammer, though she bore it grimly. There was no reason for Thrall to make a change specifically for her, so she tolerated it. She had far more important things to do, like express her concern for Thrall's habits.

"There isn't anything wrong with Sergra," Thrall said, retrieving his pants. "She's perfectly nice."

"She's going back to the Crossroads," Garona said pointedly, and Thrall paused to give her a look, half-exasperated, half-weary.

"It's where she was assigned," the Warchief of the Horde replied evenly. "She discussed it at great length over dinner. She's more than happy to go."

"It didn't occur to you to ask her to stay?" the Horde's spymistress asked, folding her arms over her chest.

"Not really," Thrall said, frowning. "Why should I? It was dinner, Garona, and sex afterward. We made no promises to each other. She wasn't offended by it. I made sure of that."

"I'm sure you did," Garona said sourly. "Are you aware you have no heir?"

"Having an heir was never an issue for my predecessors," Thrall told her flatly, pulling on his pants and fastening them, then retrieving his shirt. "The Horde isn't a monarchy. People are selected because of their strength and their influences."

"And do you think that human kings have no strength?" Garona asked, her voice shaking with emotion before stomping down on it, though not before seeing the look of worry in Thrall's eyes. "The succession of the Horde has been, so far, largely been due to two factors: assassination and intimidation. Blackhand ruled through backing from the Shadow Council, and Doomhammer because he assassinated him. Most of the time, within the clans, leadership is passed on through one strong line, until it breaks, or someone else breaks it. As it stands right now, if something should happen to you, the Horde would descend into chaos."

"I think you underestimate our people," Thrall said stiffly. "We're free of the curse of the demons, we've embraced the old ways--"

"And how much of the old ways do you think weren't soaked in blood?" Garona hissed. "Do you think that we simply fell into the demons' hands as innocents? The legacy of bloodshed has existed longer than you or I has been alive. Older than Durotan, than Garad, older than anyone in living memory. We exist in relative peaceful harmony because you desire it so. If you were a warmonger, we would be at war."

"It's what people want," Thrall said softly. "We've had enough of war, enough of conflict. Kalimdor is our chance to start over, to gather allies and make a real change to our society."

"And those who would fight the humans again in a moment if you allowed it?" Garona asked quietly. "Naz'grel? He was more than happy to fight our 'allies' when he thought they were causing trouble. What about our friends in Ratchet? Those who have to deal daily with Northwatch Keep?
It's only a word from you away, Thrall." She moved forward, a single, dextrous gesture taking Thrall's shirt from him, and rearranging it, then handing it back to him. "Listen to me. If you have an heir, you want one that will carry on your ideals, and that way, if something should happen to you, all of this--" she gestured around her "--won't come crashing down on us all, or our allies. Tauren, human and troll alike."

Thrall gave her a wordless look, one that was part frustration and part fear. "I have a meeting," he said finally. "I need to go."

Garona snorted softly, having made her point clear. "With whom?"

"One of my allies," Thrall said, tugging his shirt on. Briefly, he caressed the silver necklace that he wore. Sergra had commented on it; everyone who shared his bed did at some point or another. Garona, who had seen him naked or near-naked more often than he cared to consider, never had. Taretha's memory weighed heavily on him still. It hadn't been so long ago, and he wished he could speak to his sister about this.

"Say hello to Lady Proudmoore for me, then," Garona said, turning to leave, knowing that Thrall never once had, namely because Garona's existence within the Horde was one of the secrets that the Warchief kept from his human friend.

"Hm," was all Thrall said in reply.

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Jaina's guards had learned to expect the large figure, cloaked and wrapped in shadow, and knew precisely what to do. Two guards brought Thrall to the receiving room within Jaina's tower, and left after bowing. There, Thrall was met by Jaina's majordomo, a young human woman with dark hair and green eyes, who smiled warmly, and offered Thrall a drink. She was wise enough not to comment on the large, green hands that emerged to take whatever liquid refreshment was offered -- something cool in the summer or something warm during the winter -- but simply tell him when Jaina would be free to see him.

It was here he waited, sipping hot mint tea, and looking around. He'd been in this room enough times to remember where each map was -- there were detailed images of Kul Tiras, Theramore, Dustwallow Marsh and Kalimdor, and Thrall's eyes fell to Orgrimmar's location with perfect accuracy, and he could picture his people going about their daily lives, some selling goods, others buying. He could imagine the patrols as they moved in and out of Grommash Hold, the shamans whispering over fires that smoked from herbs, and more.

"I had the best mapmakers I could find draw those," Jaina said softly, startling him from his study of the map. "My father always said that a sailor is only as good as the map he follows and the tools he uses to navigate." As always, when she spoke of her father, there was a sad wistfulness, and Thrall turned. "Welcome to Theramore."

"Jaina..." Thrall said softly, and smiled at her gently. "It's good to be back. Your kingdom is beautiful, as always."

"I'm proud of what my people have built," Jaina replied, nodding her head. "How is Orgrimmar?"

Thrall moved forward, and let the cloak that covered him fall away. He folded it over one arm, and offered her the free one. She took it, tucking small fingers into the crook of his elbow. With a
gesture, she teleported them to her private office. She moved away from him and sat gracefully in
the chair that sat behind her desk. It was brown, and when empty, seemed to dwarf her, though she
filled it effortlessly.

Thrall set his cloak down, and sat on one of the broad, wooden couches. It supported his weight
easily, and he let his eyes wander over shelves of books, scrolls and odd, arcane artifacts. On one
wall hung what looked like the steering wheel of a ship, and raised an eyebrow.

"My father's ship," Jaina said simply, following his gaze. "We recovered it during the clean up
efforts. It's a reminder."

"Jaina..." Thrall began, his voice soft with regret. "You shouldn't--"

"It's a reminder that no sacrifice is too great for lasting peace," Jaina said, and if her voice was
slightly sharp, Thrall would not say anything. "We should begin the meeting."

Thrall sighed, very softly. "Of course." He let Jaina begin, and watched her as she went over her
notes, discussing Theramore's expansion efforts, and the state of the fishing fleets. She was
animated when she spoke, and her voice swelled with pride as she spoke of Shady Rest, the border
town between the southern Barrens and western Dustwallow that catered to humans and orcs alike,
and was expanding for comfortable quarters that would suit unusual-sized humanoids like the
tauren.

Then, it was Thrall's turn, and he too warmed to his subject matter: Durotar's farming communities
were growing, and while he had little experience with it himself, he was confident when his people
told him that they were yielding well. There was still news of the veteran warriors taking their own
lives, but Thrall had made a dozen provisions to help those old warriors. Jaina's expression had
turned sympathetic, having spoken to Thrall about it. They understood one another, and Jaina's
empathy had given Thrall the strength to discuss their future projects, including their expansion
into Stonetalon, and down into a place the tauren called the Thousand Needles, named after the
huge rock formations that had been formed by a river that had long since dried up.

"Something else troubles you," Jaina said softly, and Thrall watched as she stood, and moved close
to him to sit on the couch beside him. "What is it?" She touched his shoulder lightly. "Haven't we
always said we could trust each other?"

Thrall's mind drifted back towards his discussion with Garona. "My advisors are concerned that I
have no heir," he began awkwardly. "They're obsessed with the notion."

"Hm," Jaina said quietly. "Succession has always been an important part of human and elven
politics. Most of our lines trace through royalty, or at least, the founder of a nation. Elven royalty
traces their line back from Dath'remar the Sun Strider, the founder of Silvermoon. Dwarves were
originally ruled by a single Thane, or King, but they factionalized when he died with no heir, and
those factions went to war."

"The War of the Three Hammers," Thrall said, his heart sinking. "Resolved when two factions
sided together to eliminate a dangerous foe, that only succeeded in blowing himself and his council
of advisors up by summoning a force they couldn't control."

"Exactly," Jaina said. "The gnomes... the gnomes are very curious. Dalaran often invites gnome
speakers to lecture classes about their system of government." She paused, and when Thrall shook
his head slightly, she continued. "They are a meritocracy. Their High Tinker is the best inventor
within Gnomeregan. Every gnome must invent something, but the High Tinker is the most accomplished of them."

"How is the condition of 'best' determined?" Thrall asked curiously. "It seems very subjective."

"They come to a consensus," Jaina said. "Gnomes take innovation very seriously. It's unfortunate that so many of their inventions are unstable without constant maintenance, things would be a lot easier if we could incorporate their work into everyday life. I'm lucky that the force that came with me did... they all work very hard."

"In some ways, they sound like goblins, though their main goal is to turn a profit," Thrall said, shaking his head. "Sometimes, I wonder why they bother with us at all."

"A merchant isn't much of a merchant with no one to buy or sell from," Jaina said, smiling wistfully. "A merchant needs trading partners, and for that... negotiation and diplomacy. We're all tied together. No person is an island."

"True enough," Thrall agreed, though his mind drifted back to Garona's words. "Is it possible for a single person to be so influential that wars stop and start on their command?"

"It's possible," Jaina admitted. "If they develop enough of a cult of personality, perhaps. It's a dangerous position to be in, Thrall. When everyone starts relying on you not to make a mistake, you realize very quickly how many mistakes you have made." She bowed her head, and her blonde locks fell in a curtain around her face.

Slowly, so he didn't startle her, he moved to tuck the hair behind one of her ears. "Is there a way to undo that kind of influence?"

She looked up at him, slightly startled. "Not without hurting far too many people. You learn to live with it... and try to forgive yourself when you do make a mistake."

"I thought that might be so," Thrall said, his hand dropping to his lap with a sigh. He felt warmth against his hand, and saw Jaina's hand, resting against his fingers.

"There's more to it than that, isn't there?" she asked softly. "Tell me about it? You told me once to unburden myself to you. The least I can do is listen while you do the same."

"Could we go for a walk?" Thrall asked after a moment, letting Jaina's words resonate within his chest. "I think I'd prefer to discuss it somewhere a little less formal."

"I think I can get us down to the coast without being seen," Jaina said, standing. "You'll need to wear the cloak, I'm afraid."

"Trust me, I can understand a need for privacy." Thrall stood as well, towering over the human sorceress as he concealed the most distinctive of his features -- green skin and coarse, dark hair -- behind the cloak. Runes formed around them, and then they were away.

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The cove was not the most scenic place they could have gone. It did not have the best view of the ocean, nor was it particularly intimate. Instead, it was a stretch of grey sand that was just missed by the beam coming from the lighthouse that swept over Theramore's coast, and as far as Thrall was
concerned, that was just fine.

He walked slowly beside Jaina, their footprints leaving — deep in his case, shallow in hers — marks as they made their way down the shoreline. "My advisors are paranoid about the situation involving my having a mate," Thrall said, though the words were difficult to manage. It had been easy to be frank with Garona, but with Jaina, it took more effort. "The wrong heir could plunge the Horde back into warfare with the Alliance." And you, he did not add, but his silence implied it enough.

"Then you'll just have to find the right one," Jaina said with a smile. "They specifically want you to have a child?"

"It seems to be their belief that I will sire the best heir, like an... alpha worg," Thrall said, spreading his hands. "I don't understand it."

"You'd be surprised how many royal women are treated like broodmares," Jaina said, her lips twisting into a smile that was not entirely pleasant. "But most at least are given the option of finding someone they can care for, if not love." She fingered briefly at something under her robes, resting just over her heart before her hand fell away and back to her side. "Wild love affairs tend to get in the way of a lot of things."

"You're speaking of your relationship with the Prince of Lordaeron," Thrall said gently, and Jaina flinched, but nodded. "You mentioned that your memories of him are painful."

"Bittersweet, we'll say," Jaina said, and looked out towards the ocean. "Arthas never once lacked passion, just... restraint. I never once doubted that he loved me, or that he loved being right." She shook her head slightly. "We were to be married."

Thrall swallowed. 'I'm sorry," he said simply. "I shouldn't have brought this to you--"

"No, don't regret it," Jaina said softly. "Wait, just a moment." She reached up, pulling out a pendant, and showed it to Thrall. The pendant was a sapphire, set on a silver backing. She flipped it over, running her thumb over the inscription on the back of it. "He gave this to me. We both knew rings were impractical since I need to keep my hands free for casting spells, and this was the next most appropriate thing." She let it settle over her heart. "I'm not sure why I still wear it. What we had will never return."

"You love him," Thrall replied simply. "No matter what happened, you still love him."

"Perhaps," Jaina said softly. "But love shouldn't stop you from doing what's right. I should have stopped him, Thrall. I could have taken the risk that I could have teleported him away from Stratholme before his guards overpowered me. I could have convinced him if I'd worked a little harder. I--"

"You couldn't have known where his path would lead," Thrall said, his voice low and intense. "No more than I knew that sending Grom into Ashenvale would deliver him into the hands of the demons again, or that he would kill a demigod. You said yourself we have to learn to forgive ourselves for the mistakes that we've made."

"Have you forgiven yourself, Thrall?" Jaina asked quietly.

Thrall closed his eyes, remembering the sight of Grom's eyes, the red in them fading out first, then
"The light in them extinguishing. "Not entirely."

"We both carry burdens," Jaina replied. "But I can shed one, right now." Thrall's eyes opened as he heard the soft pop of a clasp being broken.

"Jaina?" Thrall asked. "What are you--"

The human sorceress was facing the ocean already, her broken necklace in her hand. "I can't forgive you for what you've done, Arthas. You're a monster and a murderer. I won't let you make my life miserable any more, and if I see you again, all you'll be is my enemy. I swear it, by the Light, and by my father's grave." Shifting her weight, she threw the pendant into the ocean, and Thrall noted she had both excellent form and aim. She turned to Thrall, giving him a shaky grin. "Now, let's go back to talking about your problem."

Thrall chuckled, and offered her his arm. She took it, and they began to walk again. "A mate."

"A mate," Jaina agreed. "What is it that you're looking for in one?"

"I've told you about my parents, haven't I?" Thrall asked quietly, and Jaina nodded. "Everything I'm told about my people is that our women respect strength. Power. There's nothing wrong with that, but..."

"You want to know that the person you're mating with won't be leaving you the moment you don't have the same power that you used to," Jaina guessed, and when Thrall nodded, she continued. "It's a long way to fall."

"My mother didn't abandon my father when he refused to drink the blood of demons. She didn't abandoned him when he was faced with exile," Thrall sighed. "I want to be more to someone than just a powerful leader. I want what they had."

"It takes a special kind of strength and devotion to stand by someone, even if things are hard," Jaina said, and squeezed Thrall's arm. "Not blind devotion, of course. Just the ability to see what's worth standing by, and what's worth walking away from. Any woman would be a fool to walk away from you, Thrall."

Thrall smiled over at the human sorceress, noting the way the last, stray bits of illumination from the lighthouse caught her hair. "Thank you, Jaina. I hope that my future mate will agree with you."

She smiled back, and tugged lightly at his arm. "Come on, there's a place not too far from here with a fascinating tidal pool I want to show you. There's some sea life I've never seen until I came to Kalimdor."

"That does sound intriguing," Thrall agreed, and let her lead him down the beach.

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"You aren't even seeing them any more," Garona commented. She wasn't dressed as a guard right now: clad in the dark leathers of a killer, she had her hair tied back tightly. Thrall could only regret that the deaths of some that were necessary for the good of all were kept in the shadows where the best assassins worked. "What's wrong now?"

"It's just not working out," Thrall said, looking up from his work. This spellcasting was
complicated, he wanted the far seeing spell to be permanent, and this was simply not working as intended. "There is nothing wrong with the women you're throwing at me--"

Garona straightened. "We're not--"

"You are," Thrall countered. "As I was saying, there is nothing wrong with any of them, I wish them all the very best in the future, and each is an invaluable member of the Horde, but... they aren't what I want. It would be unfair of me to imply that they were. I appreciate the time I've spent with them, but I don't want any of them as my mate, Garona."

"Your heir--" Garona protested, and Thrall cut her off with a gesture.

"Consider that I have been the Warchief of this Horde for a scant handful of years," Thrall said. "I have the time to find someone, even if I father no children." He met Garona's scowl with a steady gaze. "I know you fear another Doomhammer, or another Blackhand. I will never allow a blood-crazed dictator to rule this Horde. We have moved beyond that point, and it is time that everyone started to believe it."

Garona pressed her lips together, and he could see her tiny tusks bite into them. "As you say, Warchief."

"No," Thrall said, standing. Garona shifted. "Not because I say it, but because it's true. I'm not a dictator, Garona. If I'm wrong, tell me that I am wrong."

His spymistress met his eyes, and there was silence. He sighed, and began to turn away. "Wait," she said, her voice softened to a mere whisper. "I think you're an idealist and a fool if you believe that three decades of bloodlust and hate can be turned away by words alone. I think that you need to secure your legacy because I can't protect you from your own idealism forever. I know the danger on relying on one, charismatic leader that if you lose them, you lose the whole war..." She looked down at her hands, seeing the bloodstains there. Thrall's hands moved over hers.

"I can't promise you that I won't die," Thrall replied. "What I can promise you is that Orgrimmar will not fall as Stormwind did, if nothing else, because Orgrimmar has an extremely paranoid guardian." He offered her a smile, and she scowled at him, snatching her hands away.

"If someone gets that close to you, I'll cut their heart out, and I'll offer it to Snowsong on a spit," she groused. "I still think you're a fool."

"Of course I am," Thrall said, chuckling. "Now, then, you might want to change before someone sees you. Jaina's coming to help me with this."

"Naturally," Garona snorted. "You're not helping the rumours, you know."

Thrall paused. "Rumours?"

She snorted again. "I'm sure you'll hear them soon enough." She shifted, and then was gone, melting into the shadows as a fish cuts through water. Thrall shook his head, and began preparations to begin the spell again.

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"There, I think that should work," Jaina said. She waved her hand over the scrying bowl, and while
the image rippled, it still showed the face of Seereth Stonebreak. "You should be able to keep communications open between different parts of your holdings."

"Perfect," Thrall commented, glancing down as Seereth's lips moved in an invitation. He jostled the bowl, unbalancing the delicate spell and she disappeared. "Damn it, all..."

"We'll fix it," Jaina said soothingly, smiling warmly at Thrall. "It might be dangerous to have an unstable elemental connection. If you didn't need visual communication, I could try and find some crystal or rock that would be appropriate."

"Like the runes you made for us," Thrall noted, and she nodded, tucking a lock of golden hair behind her ear. "Would they be as reliable?"

"They might not be," Jaina admitted. "Not without a mage to maintain them."

"I could ask one of my advisors to take care of it," Thrall replied thoughtfully.

"Well, you have a number of options," Jaina commented. "We could discuss them some place more comfortable than the floor?"

"Like over dinner?" Thrall suggested, and offered her his hand. She took it gratefully and stood, stretching her back, exposing a long, bare expanse of skin. His gaze lingered only for an instant before forcing himself to meet her eyes. "I believe you haven't dined here since the winter harvests came in."

"A slight I promise to rectify," Jaina said, and resumed her natural posture, her bodice moving back into place to cover her stomach neatly. "After you, Warchief."

"Sorceress," Thrall replied, though the warmth of his tone belied the formal titles they were using. Thrall sent out orders to bring dinner to his quarters, and promising himself he would clean up the ritual later, guided her to a small, rustic table. She sat, tucking her feet back behind the legs of the chair. They chatted amiably until dinner arrived.

Thrall noted that those that brought the meal gave Jaina a curious look, and then himself, and he found himself conscious of the simple garb he'd chosen to wear when working on this particular magical problem, and the streaks of dirt on Jaina's knees and his own elbows and forearms. Immediately, he sought out Garona, who was impassive behind her helm.

"Why is it you've taken such a sudden interest in communication?" Jaina asked curiously, digging into her food, distracting Thrall from his thoughts.

"Kalimdor is a large continent, and we can't afford to have more accidents or incidents just because of misunderstandings, particularly when they only take a few minutes of conversation to clear up." Thrall watched as Jaina stiffened, but nodded. "It's why you made the runes we both carry, and it's why I want to be able to talk to our furthest outposts."

"It's a good idea," Jaina replied, and Thrall winced as he watched Jaina's expression fight to stay neutral. "Of course, I'll help however I can. I want there to be no more accidents, just as you do."

"I appreciate your help, Jaina," Thrall said, catching her gaze. "Not just because of what could happen, or what has happened, but because I believe we are friends. I enjoy the time that we spend together."
"Thrall, I..." Jaina paused, and blinked rapidly as her eyes grew bright. "Thank you. Of course we're friends. Of course."

"Good," Thrall said, letting relief trickle into his voice. "Once we finish eating, it can be my turn to show you our shoreline."

"I'd like that," Jaina said, and dug into her meal with enthusiasm.

_I must stay friends with Jaina_, Thrall thought, digging into his meal. _I can't allow something so valuable to atrophy, and I won't_. His silent vow gave him both appetite and strength, even as he felt Garona's eyes on him.
"Be careful with that!" Garona snapped, watching as two grunts carefully wrestled a large tree into Grommash Hold. She shook her head as she walked past them, moving over to where Thrall was listening gravely to a tauren elder telling him a story about Greatfather Winter. "They're going to get pine needles everywhere."

"Let those who clean worry about that," Thrall insisted. "What do you have for me?"

"This is ridiculous, for the record," Garona said stiffly, but presented him with a single, folded piece of paper. He opened it, and smiled. "Is that all, Warchief? Do you have some reindeer you want me to rescue?"

"That will be all for now," Thrall said, finding it impossible to have his mood dampened. Winter Veil was in the air, after all. The earliest parts of Winter had been hard on everyone, and Thrall wanted to bring his people closer together. A stray remark from Jaina had reminded Thrall of a yearly event that had punctuated the bitter cold that had represented Winter in Durnholde:

For years, Taretha had snuck through knee-deep snow to bring Thrall a gift - books, often enough, or a new stylus, or a bundle of paper so they could exchange letters for the whole year. She explained that this was Winter Veil, when snow blanketed the world, allowing it to rest, and in the darkest part of the year, people exchanged gifts to keep each other warm. Certainly, each gift had kept Thrall warm when the year would have otherwise been exceptionally dreary, and his first winter with the Frostwolves had been a shock when he realized his people didn't celebrate the longest night formally, and instead spent time meditating on the elements.

It had been a joy to learn that the tauren also celebrated Winter Veil, and were more than willing to teach anyone who would listen about the deeper, inner meaning of the holiday. Durotar, as predicted, was cool but not cold as Lordaeron had been, though the trolls assured him this time of the year was quite miserable to those who'd become accustomed to warmer climates, and he had it on good authority that Theramore's weather was miserable -- sleet over the Marsh and driving winds -- so his invitation would be welcome, to say the least.

Sure enough, the answer to the carefully penned letter -- there had been a second purpose behind not wanting to simply use the runestone -- was positive. Jaina would come here for Winter Veil. Carefully folded inside the letter was a note, scrawled in Garona's handwriting, telling Thrall exactly what he could give Jaina as a gift.

Thrall thanked the elder for finishing his story, though the tauren had simply shaken his head, wondering aloud if Thrall had heard most of it, and the Warchief stood, going out to examine the preparations within the city.

Winter Veil is about memory, Thrall thought. The earth sleeps to remember its strength during the summer months. The people remember what has passed over the rest of the year. He watched as people carefully fastened candles -- green for the growing, red for the warmth of fire and the sun,
white for the snow that blankets the coldest parts of the world -- into their holders, hanging wreathes made of whatever they could find that was still green on doors and more. Hesitant greetings were exchanged as Thrall listened, and he smiled more broadly. *Winter Veil is about memory, and about friendship,* he corrected himself.

"You realize that what you're planning is going to be a nightmare for security," Garona said, her presence unannounced save for her pessimistic comment. Thrall didn't turn.

"The Greatfather Winter figure is important to the celebration," Thrall replied. "He's a centrepiece, even. A necessity."

"You realize you're going to have to spend hours sitting in one place while runny-nosed children sit on your knee and tell you what they want as a gift, don't you?" Garona persisted. "A single mistake..."

"It's a holiday, Garona," Thrall said quietly, and held out his hand. She placed the jacket in his hands -- thick and red, woven in haste by the tauren -- and sighed. "Let the children be children, for once."

"Neither of us had any kind of childhood to speak of," Garona said, and hesitated. "Have you given thought to what you want?"

"I want my people to think of winter as a time of joy and rest, not of death," Thrall replied quietly, turning the jacket over in his hands. "If a word from me will change things, then I'll put those words to good use. An end to war isn't enough, we need to be able to live in a world in peace, at peace."

Garona was silent long enough that Thrall had to see if she was still there. She was, fighting for control of her expression, which usually came as naturally to her as breathing. "I understand," she said, finally.

Thrall straightened. "So then, you'll--"

"Not in your life," Garona snorted.

"It's traditional," Thrall pointed out, pleased that she was as sardonic as usual.

"Fine, if it's traditional, you can wear an undersized vest and tiny shorts, and I will sit on my behind all day, fully clothed and asking what little Grag wants for Winter Veil."

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He saw her the moment she arrived: Jaina had foregone her usual garb of blue, purple and white for long, green robes trimmed with white fur, and a thick, white-fur cape. She had a large, wrapped package tucked under one arm, which drew his interest for a moment before continuing to watch her progress. Thrall's invitation had suggested that she teleport to the entrance of Orgrimmar, rather than directly into Grommash Hold, and he sincerely hoped that she would not be disappointed.

"Greatfather Winter, you listening?" asked the child on his lap, and with a start, Thrall looked down. The children had come very reluctantly at first, both intimidated by the prospect of speaking directly to the Warchief and afraid to make requests, but it had only taken one child's courage to bring the rest, and they stood now in a loose circle, watching and waiting for their turn.

"Of course, Targ," Thrall said quietly. Despite her protests to the contrary, Garona was here, fully armed and armored, speaking quietly to Thrall, filling in details so he would know who each child
was, though she refused to wear so much as a festive hat. This was Targ, son of Glaag and Grinshka, and he had fallen asleep during the Battle for Hyjal, having been only a child then, but he was much older now. "I'll do what I can to see that you receive a leather ball."

"Thanks," Targ replied, giving him a toothy grin. He hopped off of Thrall's lap after being offered a sweet by one of Thrall's other assistants, a troll that had not been nearly as upset about wearing such a brief outfit.

"Next!" Garona barked out sharply. Thrall sat back, taking the opportunity while he was unoccupied to watch Jaina. There was an expression of wonder on her face, and joy. He watched as she touched over the rough wreathes that people had made, and stopped to hold a hand near the candles. Garona cleared her throat sharply, and then, Thrall brought his focus back to the task at hand.

A few hours later, Thrall stood wearily. Despite how Garona had claimed Thrall had the easy job, it had not been easy to sit in an increasingly more uncomfortable chair, and while he was pleased that the children had grown more bold, they bounced and tugged. He couldn't imagine doing this for more than one day a year. He stretched, groaning.

"It looked like you were having fun," he heard, and Thrall looked over. Jaina was standing a little ways away while children spoke excitedly about what the Warchief had promised them for Winter Veil. "I didn't want to interrupt."

"You're not interrupting," Thrall said, and offered her his hand. She took it. "Welcome, Jaina. Happy Winter Veil."

"Happy Winter Veil," Jaina said. "Thank you for inviting me." She bowed her head briefly, and looked up. "I must admit, I wasn't really in a festive mood until I got your letter."

"We'll change that," Thrall promised. "Allow me find clothing that's a little less distinctive, and I'll show you what Orgrimmar has to offer."

"I think I would like that very much," Jaina replied, and squeezed his arm slightly.

~ * ~

"Winter Veil seems odd without snow," Jaina admitted, accepting the mug of spiced cider from Thrall. She sipped at it carefully. "On the other hand, I didn't expect that you'd actually be able to find a pine tree here."

"It wasn't easy," Thrall admitted. "I had to send warriors to Stonetalon to find something appropriate. The communication crystals you made were a crucial part of the process. Really, this is as much your doing as anyone else's."

Jaina blushed faintly. "I was happy to help. Once you mentioned it, I started setting up networks of portals and communication crystals throughout Dustwallow. Unfortunately, the Night Elves seem fairly reluctant to embrace them, but I've managed to convince Tyranne to take a crystal in case of an emergency."

"That's good, though as you said, they'll be harder to maintain without mages," Thrall said, and hesitantly added, "I can understand why the Night Elves might be reluctant to accept even the most minor of magical artifacts."

Far from offended, Jaina nodded, "So can I. Unfortunately, little progress has been made training messenger hawks or owls; we don't have the skill with animals that they do, and carrier pigeons
were not something I thought to bring to Kalimdor. I'm glad Tyrande was willing to trust me."

"She knows you're trustworthy," Thrall said, and smiled. "As do I."

"You both place a great deal of faith in me," Jaina replied softly. "I want to be worthy of it."

"I believe we spend our whole lives feeling as if we haven't quite earned the trust people place in us," Thrall said. "But that's not what today is about. Today is about celebration."

"You've embraced Winter Veil wholeheartedly," Jaina said, her expression lightening as she sipped her cider again. "I'm so impressed, Orgrimmar is beautiful."

"As you said, it's odd without snow, but we're managing," Thrall said. "A feast has been planned. I've fielded a number of complaints about how many we're feeding, but I think the organizers have done a good job of it."

"There's a banquet?" Jaina asked, looking up at him, hope mixed with excitement. Thrall chuckled.

"There is, but that will be later," Thrall promised. "First we have a number of activities to go through."

"Tell me about them," Jaina said, setting her mug aside a moment.

Thrall nodded, and watched her expression closely. "The shamans will be performing a ritual of respect for the sleeping earth. They've asked me to participate, so I'll be sitting with them. It includes singing. Then, Elder Windtotem will be telling the story of Greatfather Winter for the children. I'd hoped you'd want to attend that, and then there will be the banquet, and..." Thrall took a breath. "A surprise."

"A surprise?" Jaina asked, watching him closely. "What kind of surprise?"

"It wouldn't be much of a surprise if I told you," Thrall said, and stood. "I promise you that you'll enjoy it."

"Well, I trust you," Jaina conceded. "But I'll have you know I don't much like surprises."

"I'll try not to disappoint you," Thrall said, and offered her his arm. She stood and took it.

"I trust you," Jaina repeated, voice barely above a murmur.

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Thrall could feel the drumming within his own heartbeat, the sound moving through his veins. One by one, the shamans lifted their heads and began to sing, and Thrall added his not-indistinct timbre to the mix. Heads began to lift as he sang, thanking the earth for accepting them here and granting them the gift of food, hearth, peace and joy. He offered promises: that the Horde would take care of this land, and never take too much, nor give too little.

Slowly, the drums fell off, only to be replaced with another kind of song: one singer began, and the others began to join in. It was not a song of Winter, but a song of heroes: they sang of Grom. Closing his eyes against the heavy feeling of sorrow, Thrall sang with them, adding his own voice as he named Grom's deeds, including the slaying of Mannoroth.

Softly, threaded through the deeper voices of the orcs, Thrall heard a soft, breathy alto join in with the chorus. He opened his eyes to see Jaina singing softly, tears shining in her eyes. He nodded to
her, and a new song began. Many heroes had fallen to bring them to this winter, and Thrall sang for each of them.

It was hours later, and Thrall's voice was hoarse by the time it ended. Windtotem began to gather the children and encouraged him to sit with him, while Thrall carefully moved out of the circle, leaving more room. He sat beside Jaina, who was wiping discreetly at her eyes.

"I miss him," Thrall said simply. "We wouldn't be where we are now without him... in more ways than one, unfortunately."

"Remember him as a hero," Jaina said softly. "It was how he died, it's what he deserved. Thrall, that was beautiful. I've never heard anything like that."

"My people enjoy singing," Thrall said with pride. "A song is something you can carry with you."

"It... it certainly is," Jaina said shakily, and Thrall gave her a sideways looks.

"What's the matter?" he asked quietly, but before Jaina could open her mouth to respond, Windtotem cleared his throat.

"Children of the Horde, our honoured Warchief Thrall, son of Durotan, has asked me to tell you of Winter Veil. Sit now, and I will speak of it." He paused, waiting to make sure everyone was settled. Thrall focused his attention on the elder, though he kept an eye on his companion, who seemed intent on listening to the tauren's words. "My people have walked this world since the golden mists receded, and we have seen many Summers come and go, and many Winters as well. In the earliest days, it is said that the Earthmother did not rest, and she became weary. As she became weary, her eyes would begin to close, and our people feared it.

"We feared that without sunlight and without moonlight, we would all die to the great, dark beings beyond the world, but to us she said, 'Fear not, my children, for I love you and would never abandon you to the darkness. See here, my son. He wears a cape that blows snow all over the world, and where he steps, the Earthmother sleeps, but he is my guardian as well as my son. He guards what sleeps, and will allow no harm to come to you. He is Winter, and he will be a harsh taskmaster but a loyal friend. Never fear him, never curse his name, for while he may bring cold, he also brings protection. I will wake once again, and he will sleep, and the cycle will begin anew.'"

The elder looked out, over the children. "I have many stories to tell of Winter, if you would listen."

"Tell us!" one of the children cried, and others took up the chorus, until the tauren nodded.

"Then I will tell you of Winter's journey across Kalimdor, when it was once a single, great continent, and how Winter guided us north across Kalimdor." He began, and Thrall sat back. He was familiar with many of these tales, having been instructed by Windtotem during the weeks of preparation, so he did not quite listen, but instead watched Jaina, who half-murmured something not dissimilar to what Windtotem was saying.

"We hear similar stories from the dwarves," Jaina whispered softly, leaning over to minimize her volume. "It's fascinating, how similar some cultures can be."

"They may have met before," Thrall replied, equally quiet. "It was so long ago."

Jaina nodded, and together they listened. Just as Thrall's stomach began to turn with hunger, Windtotem finished his story, and guards appeared. Thrall tried not to sigh, and joined his escort.

"It is traditional at this time to feast on Winter Veil, and so, the whole of the Horde will feast!"
Thrall said, borrowing the wind to send his voice everywhere. Cheers went up, and eager children and their parents stood. "It will be difficult to host every person in Orgrimmar, but it has been done. The Kor'Kron will make sure everyone finds a place."

The logistics for the feast had been insane. In the end, a large table had been set up within Grommash Hold, and several others had been placed in the largest open areas they could find, and many of Thrall's staff, including his guards, were required to make sure everything ran smoothly, but he believed the fuss to have been worth it, particularly since a chorus of voices gasped at the bounty placed before them, none the least of which was Jaina's. Everything that was on display had been made by Horde hands, or traded with their close allies. He wondered if Jaina would recognize the stuffed fish, or some of the marsh fare that graced their table.

The meal itself took hours to complete, in which there was little time to talk, only eat. Thrall let himself enjoy the meal, though snatches of conversation would drift by his ears, some of it about the company he had and had not kept, and there were pointed inquiries about some of Thrall's old partners.

He frowned thoughtfully, only to have Jaina put a hand on his arm.

"Don't let gossip ruin this," Jaina said, pausing between bites. "It always happens, no matter where you are."

"One of my advisors mentioned rumours," Thrall replied. "It's unsettling to be spoken of like this."

"It's what people do, I'm afraid," she said, shaking her head. "Tell me about the meal," she urged, and Thrall did so, letting himself be distracted from the idle conversation around him, and he felt both sated and satisfied. Thrall's staff began to clear away empty plates, and a number of people stood, complaining good-naturedly that they had eaten far too much.

"They'll work it off soon enough," Thrall rumbled, and Jaina gave him a curious look.

"Attention," Garona barked, still hidden safely behind her helm. Thrall knew she was excessively paranoid about her identity, though he let her hide herself as she would. "Warchief Thrall has fed you and sang for you, and now he has arranged for entertainment outside."

"Entertainment?" Jaina asked curiously, and took Thrall's offered arm once again. Thrall met Garona's eyes, and nodded slightly, and he was the first to venture out of Grommash Hold. Jaina gasped softly: drummers had begun a quiet but steady tune, and a thousand candles surrounded a flat perimeter, and the thing that had caused them no end of trouble to conceal.

Thrall led Jaina outside towards the specially designated area. "Surprise," Thrall said, finding it difficult to keep the pride and hope from his voice. "Lady Proudmoore... do you dance?"

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Thrall ended the dance, and excused himself from his partner, gently returning her to the arms of her parents.

"Tell Hragatha that I had a very good time," Thrall told her father. "I'm sorry she fell asleep."

"She is past her bedtime," Grunt Thoknak said, offering Thrall an awkward salute. "We are honoured by your attention, Warchief."

Thrall made an effort not to wince. He hadn't recalled his feet being quite this sore during the march across the Barrens to Stonetalon, nor his back aching quite as badly during Hyjal. Still, it
would be ungrateful and un-Warchief-like to let any of his discomfort show. "I am honoured to give it, though I think it's time to rest."

Looking around, he noticed that the dance floor had mostly cleared off, with the few that remained moving slowly. Many of the musicians had also taken their leave, and the rhythm was slow, almost soporific, and the few dances that remained moved slowly and against each other. Thrall let his gaze linger on them, just for a moment.

_That's what I want_, Thrall thought. _That easy comfort, companionship, friendship..._ He shook his head slightly. I'll find it. He moved carefully, looking for Jaina. The human sorceress had begged off some time ago, saying she was tired, and then the requests had poured in for Thrall to dance with others, and he'd accepted who he could. Now, however, he wanted to find the person for whom this had been arranged.

A word or two to Garona -- who looked happy, even for her -- pointed him in the right direction, and he followed it. Jaina was staring up at the overcast sky and from what it sounded like, singing softly to herself.

"Jaina?" Thrall asked quietly, and she half-turned. Tears streaked down her face, and Thrall was taking aback. "What's wrong?"

"I... it's..." Jaina began, and wiped at her eyes. "I'm sorry, Thrall."

"Don't be sorry, tell me what's the matter," Thrall urged, reaching to take her hands. Jaina's hands slid into his easily. "Was this wrong?"

"No, it was wonderful," Jaina said quietly, bowing her head. "It was more than I could have imagined."

"Then what's upsetting you?" Thrall paused, and then, "It's Arthas, isn't it?"

"Yes..." Jaina replied, wiping at her eyes. "He asked me to marry him on Winter Veil." She smiled, briefly, and shook his head. "He actually serenaded me."

"How was it?" Thrall asked softly.

"Thoroughly embarrassing," Jaina admitted. "His voice wasn't bad, though. I remember being very happy, we'd been together for about three years at that time. I wanted... I thought we'd be together for a long time. That I would have time to finish my studies, and do all of the things I wanted, and we'd be together." She shook her head. "Things changed. Arthas changed, and I suppose I changed too."

"I didn't mean to upset you with this," Thrall said. "I'm sorry, Jaina."

"No, don't be," she replied. "I haven't been dancing in years, and this was fun. Everything was decorated beautifully, and I don't think I've eaten a feast that impressive in such a long time. The memories are bittersweet, Thrall, and there's no helping that. I promised myself -- and you -- I wouldn't let the relationship I once shared with Arthas stop me from doing what needs doing, but it still hurts." She touched briefly over her heart. "This is still the happiest Winter Veil that I could have dreamed of."

"I'm glad," Thrall said. "You said Winter would be hard on you, I hoped to ease that if I could."

"You did, but..." Jaina gave him a pained smile. "I suppose I have to ask why."
"Why?" Thrall asked, frowning, and at Jaina's nod, he continued, still genuinely surprised she had to ask. "We're friends, Jaina. We've been through hard times together. You've listened to my complaints willingly, and knowing that you might be unhappy, I wanted to give you a gift."

"All of this was extravagant and incredible... for just one person," Jaina persisted. "Why me?"

"In truth, it wasn't all for you, but I did want you to see it," Thrall said. "All of my people deserve this. Most of them know nothing of this holiday... few of them were on good enough terms with humans to even consider learning about it." Thrall's gentle smile twisted. "I don't know if they even distinguished Winter from any other time of the year unless it directly affected their meal schedules."

Jaina's hand moved to her mouth. "Thrall, I'm so sorry, I..."

"I wanted them to learn something new. I wanted to bring a new tradition to our people, one without bloodshed or pain, just joy, and that's why I wanted to share it with you as well," Thrall continued. "I will say that the dancing was your gift. I wanted you to get that chance, since I wasn't sure if you'd get to do it again, but it made other people happy too." He gave her an intent look. "You asked for a reason. What is it? We promised to be honest..."

"We did," Jaina admitted. She wiped her face quickly. "Kael'thas."

"The elven prince?" Thrall asked. "What about him?"

"He was in love with me," Jaina said simply. "I didn't love him back. He was my friend. He claimed that was enough, but even when Arthas was courting me, he still tried to give me gifts... some of them very expensive or elaborate ones... to try and win me over. To try and be more than just friends. It was uncomfortable. I loved Arthas, but I wanted to be friends with Kael. I just couldn't quite make him understand..." She sighed. "Kael'thas said he accepted my decision, but there was still longing. I hurt him, but he hurt me back. It was unfair."

"Jaina, I would never do that to you," Thrall said, meeting her eyes. "I am your friend, and I want you to consider me to be your friend too. I never want to make you feel uncomfortable. All I wanted was to see you smile. I'm afraid that you haven't done that nearly as much as you should, I- I-" Jaina began to cry. Not loudly, but softly. Hesitantly, Thrall put a hand on one shoulder, than the other. "May I?"

Jaina nodded slightly, and he gently pulled her in for a hug, holding her as she wept. Carefully, he stroked her hair, and wondered if Taretha had ever cried while Thrall had been gone, though without anyone to hold her through the tears and pain.

"Come with me," Thrall murmured, and again, Jaina nodded. Still holding her, he led her carefully around each patrol and member of the cleaning team that was in charge of making sure that no candle lit anything on fire inadvertently and those that were in charge of delivering what remained of the great feast to those who had been unable to go, and back to Grommash Hold. Careful not to let anyone see him, he brought Jaina to his chambers, and sat her down. "You need to rest." "Thrall, I..." Jaina began, blinking owlishly at him. "I should have... Thank you for being my friend. Thank you for caring so unconditionally."

"You make the assumption there's no condition to my gift," Thrall said, the hint of a rich chuckle in his voice, trying to push away what remained of Jaina's pain and grief. "My condition is that you sleep well and deeply so you can see the remainder of the Winter Veil festivities."
"I think I can accept that," Jaina said, smiling waterily. "Sleep well, Thrall."

"Sleep well, Jaina," he replied, and left the room. He took in a deep breath and released it. His thoughts drifted, over what Jaina had told him, and slyly, over the warm feeling he'd had when she had smiled and at the bright look in her eyes when she saw what his people had accomplished in the name of this holiday.

"There are cots in one of the side chambers," Garona commented softly. Thrall looked over at her. Here, she was dressed more comfortably, and she stretched. "You're going to need somewhere to sleep unless you intend to give out gifts while sleep deprived."

Thrall resisted the urge to shudder. "No, I'll need all the help I can get. Did you know she would...?"

"No," Garona admitted. "I didn't know about the incident with Kael'thas Sunstrider, but of course, there had been rumours about something between the three of them. I didn't exactly have the desire to sneak into Dalaran."

"I don't imagine you would," Thrall replied, and shook his head. "She'll sleep, at least."

"And so should you," Garona commented, and flung something at Thrall, who caught it by reflex. He turned the object -- a pillow -- over in his hands. In one corner was stitched, inexpertly, the symbol of the Horde. He gave her a look, and she shrugged. "Sleep well, Warchief."

"Thank you, Garona," Thrall said. Taking the pillow, he went to the side room and sure enough, found a cot. He set the pillow down and undressed, thinking of the next day. I'd like to give Jaina something else... I'll find something. Something that won't be bittersweet. She deserves that much.

With that in mind, he lay in bed, head against the pillow Garona had given him. He closed his eyes, meaning to give the gift more thought, but he found himself falling asleep effortlessly.

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There was the feeling of being held in strong arms. He looked around, finding his eyesight frustratingly vague and dim. He could, just barely, recognize that a person was across the room, but before he could properly parse this information, his viewpoint shifted to a valley of green, and then up. There was a face, he recognized it well--

Mother, Thrall thought with wonder. It's impossible, I can't remember what my mother looks like, I was an infant, when--

His infant self was busy, but he looked around, straining to find some detail, something, anything... If I'm suddenly remembering my mother, if there's only some way to get my father to move in close...

Instead, all he could see was an expanse of blue with a blob of white. My blanket? Is this my?

There was a rumbling sound, and he heard his mother speak, deep and resonant, but nothing she said made sense. He felt himself be jostled, and he opened his mouth to cry out--

Thrall awoke with a start. He reached to touch his head, and found his arms bound -- no, covered -- and looked down. Covering him was a huge blanket, blue as a summer sky with the head of a white wolf in the middle. For a moment, he thought he was dreaming again, but this blanket was too real. He extracted and arm and touched over it. This wasn't the blanket he'd been found with, even though it resembled it superficially. The weave was wrong, it didn't feel orcish at all, it felt...
it felt human.

"Do you like it?" Jaina asked softly, and Thrall looked up. She smiled over at him, looking more at peace than she had the night before. "I didn't mean to prevent you from sleeping in your own bed... I was afraid you'd be cold, so I gave you your gift while you were sleeping."

"How did you..?" Thrall asked, sitting up a little. His back protested, and he ignored it.

"I had it specially made," Jaina admitted. "I wasn't sure if you remembered Winter Veil at all, but I wanted to get you something." She spread her hands. "Friends give friends gifts. I remember you told me about the blanket that you were found with, so I... had a larger one made. I know it's not perfect, but--"

"It's a wonderful gift, Jaina," Thrall said. "Thank you, for both the gift and your concern."

"I was just going back to bed," she said. "Were you having a bad dream?" She moved a lock of hair behind her ear, wrapping one of the blankets from Thrall's bed around herself a little more tightly. "Did you want to talk about it?"

"Not exactly a bad dream," Thrall conceded. "Just an odd one, of a memory I shouldn't have."

"You are a shaman, perhaps your communion with the spirits recently has helped you remember it, or gave you the memory if it wasn't one of your own," Jaina guessed. "Something the spirits wanted you to see."

If they wanted me to see my parents, why now? Thrall wondered, and touched over the blanket again. That's it... this. "I think you're right." He yawned. "I'd be happy to tell you about it once I get more sleep. I should remember it."

"Then I'll let you sleep. Goodnight again, Thrall."

"Goodnight, Jaina," Thrall replied, and settled back into sleep, and again, felt as if he was being held by something larger and warmer than himself.
Morning came all too quickly, and soon Thrall was stretching, yawning, and dressing himself in his Greatfather Winter outfit. Garona had not commented on the carefully folded blanket on the cot, and simply asked when he'd be ready to see the children.

"Now is as good a time as any," Thrall said, and stretched again. "Were we able to obtain everything?"

"Fortunately, what they wanted was relatively simple," Garona said, shaking her head. "You know this will get increasingly more difficult to top."

"One year at a time," Thrall said gently. "Did you do as I asked?"

"Lady Proudmoore's security detail has been arranged," Garona said, and smirked at him. "And here I thought you were too naive to think people might be upset that you brought a human here for Winter Veil."

"I'm not naive," Thrall growled warningly. "The last thing we need, on this of all days, is an assassination attempt."

"Of course not," Garona snorted. "We're ready when you are, Warchief. Try not to look like you've had a rough night."

"Cots aren't known for being comfortable," Thrall said. "But what are you--"

"Thrall?" Jaina called softly, and he turned. He smiled at her as she concealed a small yawn behind one hand. "Who are you talking to?"

"Just a..." He gestured, Garona was already gone. "...guard. I'm giving out gifts, would you like to join me?"

"Of course!" Jaina said, and Thrall was pleased to note much of her good humour had returned. She took his proffered arm, and went with him as he started to walk. "It's very ambitious to take care of all of this yourself. I'm used to a number of 'helpers'."

"I wanted the first Winter Veil in Orgrimmar to be memorable," Thrall said. "I won't be able to do this every year, but I wanted it to be done at least once."

"Good of you," Jaina murmured. "You never know, it might be worth actually arranging for some kind special first Winter Veil for children too young to remember this. If it's only a relatively small number of children a year, it wouldn't be as difficult, and any child would value their first gift from the Warchief."

"I like it," Thrall said, his mind racing to prepare for just that eventuality. "Particularly if I start having children of my own."
"It's only a matter of time," Jaina said graciously. "Did you meet anyone nice?"

"Ten year olds are a bit young for me," Thrall joked, and at Jaina's raised eyebrow, he continued. "A number of my partners were young children, and I couldn't say no to them when they asked me to dance. More than one fell asleep on me. I hope it's not a statement about the company they were keeping."

Jaina giggled softly. "I think it's because it was so late." Thrall walked with her past the guards, letting their conversation drift past him as they fell into step. "So, what's the plan?"

"They're going to let me get into place before the heralds start announcing to come to the tree," Thrall explained. "I suspect, however, this procession will garner some attention."

"You are dressed as Greatfather Winter," Jaina pointed out. Some of the people coming out of their homes stared, and while Thrall frowned, Jaina waved, and her attention caused some of the youngest of them to hide shyly behind her parents' legs. "They've come out to see you."

"Not just me," Thrall murmured. The procession continued towards the large tree that had been set up where Thrall had originally sat as Greatfather Winter and listened to requests. The pile of gifts was nothing short of monumental, and Thrall was pleased that he would be able to hand them out to children in need of something special after all the time they'd spend running from humans and hiding from the undead and demons.

Thrall moved to the chair that had been prepared for him -- Garona had, from what Thrall could see, added an extra cushion or two to it, and he reminded himself to thank her later -- and sat down. Already, a dozen children were waiting eagerly to get their gifts, and more were appearing as heralds roused the city. Thrall nodded to the guards, who arranged themselves around Jaina in a protective manner.

"I hope you're ready for this," Garona murmured, and Thrall nodded.

Once the children had been gathered, Thrall began, "Children of Orgrimmar, welcome. Greatfather Winter has heard your requests, and now, on the day of Winter Veil, he has left you gifts. I will call your name, and you'll come up to get your gift."

The children cheered, and Thrall's chest swelled with pride. He nodded once, to Garona, who leaned over to pick up a gift, and handed it to the Warchief. "Nakthak, son of Barnar!" Thrall called. Hurriedly, a child picked his way through the crowd, running to Thrall to get his gift. Thrall handed it to him, and smiled. "Happy Winter Veil."

"Happy Winter Veil, Warchief," the boy said shyly, and scampered off with his gift. Thrall continued, and noted that Garona would take an armful of gifts, to increase the speed that Thrall could distribute each gift. Absorbed as he was, he was startled when a mug was thrust into his view.

"Drink, you're getting hoarse," Jaina urged, and he met her eyes. She smiled at him warmly. "It won't take very long. They'd be demoralized if their Warchief lost his voice."

"Thank you," Thrall said, and took a long sip, then clearing his throat several times. "This is very good."

"I know a thing or two about taking care of people who do a lot of talking. At least you aren't lecturing."

"This way, Lady Proudmoore," one of Jaina's escort said, and urged her away from Thrall.
"I'll bring more," she promised, and backed away. Thrall smiled as she went, and went back to his task. Slowly, the pile shrank, and Jaina brought back another mug, though this time he noticed that she was juggling things to keep them from falling.

"What are those?" Thrall asked curiously.

"Some of the children offered me gifts," Jaina said. "I must admit, I can no more refuse them than you can, they're so sweet." She handed him the mug, and then showed off some bright, simple trinkets, including strings of beads, and a small wreath. "They said they remembered me as a hero from Hyjal."

"You did save my life," Thrall agreed, smiling at her. "You have the right to be recognized."

"It was the right thing to do," Jaina insisted. "I--"

Garona cleared her throat.

"I'm sorry, I'll be done soon," Thrall said, and continued. As he finished, he noted that some of the children also left gifts for him, similar in caliber to what Jaina received, and he thanked each child that gave him something, and met the eyes of their hopeful parents. I'll have to ask Garona if she recalls every person that gave me something so they can be thanked properly... gift giving is complex.

"Wreaths mean something special to humans," Thrall heard Jaina say as he was giving the last gift. "They're a promise, something special and precious. You give a wreath to someone you really care about. They're also a good reminder that Spring will come again, and it won't be cold and dark forever."

"I promise I'll be good and always eat my roots with my meat," a gap-toothed orc girl told Jaina breathlessly. "So I can grow up to be strong and serve the Warchief."

"I'm sure he can't wait," Jaina replied, patting her on the head, and the girl giggled. "Go on, now."

"Bye!" the girl said, and ran off to her parents. Jaina noticed Thrall's gaze, and met his eyes with a warm smile.

"I'll admit I didn't know that about wreaths," Thrall said, standing. He winced, despite the extra padding, his back was still sore. He made a mental note to speak to a healer about it. "Did she give you one?"

"She did," Jaina replied, and held up the small wreath. "I'll have to find a place to hang it in my office. I'm sure Tervosh will be thrilled to find that I've acquired a number of new trinkets."

"As have I, or so it would seem," Thrall said. "I don't think I can carry these the whole way."

"Will your guard mind if I teleport us directly to the Hold, then?" Jaina asked curiously. "That way nothing will be damaged."

"I don't believe so," Thrall said, and looked towards Garona. It was difficult to tell her exact expression behind her helm, but he suspected she was rolling her eyes. She made a shooing motion, and Thrall turned back. "It'll be fine."

"Good..." Jaina carefully freed a hand to place it on Thrall's wrist, and blue runes floated around them, taking them back to Grommash Hold. With no small amount of relief, Thrall immediately went to set down his wealth of gifts, only to be met by even more of them waiting for him in his
personal chambers.

"Oh... my," Thrall managed, and heard Jaina laughing softly behind him.

"It seems that helper gnomes were busy while you were giving out gifts," she said, finding a clear space to set down her own gifts. "You're well-loved, Thrall. A true testament to your actions."

"I'd prefer to leave a legacy, but this is welcome too."

Thrall stood, staring somewhat helplessly at the huge pile of gifts, and Jaina went to him, and carefully took the gifts in his arms, then led him to a place to sit. "It would be rude not to open them. Here, I'll help you."

"Thank you," Thrall said, his voice tinged in relief. "That will be very much appreciated."

Jaina sat next to him, and selected a gift at random. "Here, this one is from one of your advisors."

She read the name aloud. "Open it."

Thrall took it and did so, careful to preserve the card, so he'd remember who gave it to him. "I should write this down..."

"I'll do that." Jaina stood, and quickly selected a pen and a pad of paper, and sat back down. She wrote carefully, recording the gift. "At least you don't have to announce any more."

"My voice was getting quite sore, I hope to avoid more speeches," Thrall admitted. He set the gift aside, and Jaina handed him a second one. Heads bent together, they spent the next hour going over the gifts, making notes and sorting things. Thrall wondered, idly, where Garona was, but found that he was less concerned about his Spymistress than he should have been, not with Jaina right there for company, making clever, pointed observations and sharing anecdotes about her own experiences with Winter Veil.

"You're telling me most people believe that there is a Greatfather Winter that listens to their requests for gifts?" Thrall said, setting aside the last gift. The pile seemed less intimidating unwrapped and sorted, and Jaina's precise handwriting gave him an excellent idea what he owed and to whom.

"Most children," Jaina corrected. "Normally, you're well aware by the time you're ten or twelve that Greatfather Winter is old Stoutbeard from Drisburg, and not really a magical man who brings in both Winter and gifts."

"None of the children thought I was Greatfather Winter," Thrall observed. "They all knew I was the Warchief."

"Our tradition was very old, and when you grow up hearing it..." Jaina shrugged. "It might be just as well, some children are very crushed when they learn the truth."

"Were you?" Thrall asked, curious.

"Not very," Jaina admitted. "I'd suspected, but some..." She shook her head. "Some keep believing for a very, very long time."

"Does 'some' have a name I would recognize?" Thrall asked gently, and Jaina smiled thinly.

"It always comes back to him, doesn't it?" she asked, her tone softly bitter, even though the question was rhetorical. "Yes, Arthas believed for a very long time that Greatfather Winter was
real. It was very endearing. When he believed in something..." Jaina shook her head. "He was very stubborn."

"So it would seem..." Thrall's voice trailed off, and Jaina didn't immediately notice, her gaze far away in some memory that brought her both joy and pain. "Jaina, would you be willing to stay until this evening?"

"What?" Jaina asked, shaking off her thoughts. "Oh, of course, but why? I thought the festivities were over?"

"I thought you might be able to help me find something to do with all of my gifts," Thrall said, thinking quickly. "We could have a more quiet dinner to discuss it, perhaps go for a walk."

Jaina smiled. "I'd like that," she replied. "I'd like that very much."

"Good," Thrall said, even as he mentally tried to work out how he could distract Jaina so she wouldn't notice what he was doing.

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Jaina laughed softly, her fork paused halfway to her mouth. Thrall gave her a grin that could be considered 'wicked' by any sense of the word.

"...and then Grom storms out of his tent -- naked, naturally, because he'd been with someone -- and demands to know who keeps making that racket."

"Oh, no," Jaina said in between giggles. "What did you say?"

"We told him we were surprised he could hear us over himself," Thrall concluded, chuckling. "He thought it was funny too... eventually. After he'd ducked me under an icy waterfall. It's not as if I'd never done it before, but then I was mostly unclothed."

"You must have been a sight..." Jaina said. "Though if we're talking about awkward, there was one time, during transmutation, when we were supposed to be learning the Polymorph spell and someone managed to get a hold of a duck--"

"Warchief," Garona said, and Jaina paused. Thrall looked over at his Spymistress with a hint of curiosity. She had been reluctant earlier to provide him with a distraction so that he could craft Jaina's gift himself -- and he refused to let anyone else make it -- and now that it was mid-evening, he'd exhausted his imagination. Now, it seemed, Garona was going to help him after all. "There's an emergency. We need you."

"Oh dear, what's wrong?" Jaina asked softly. "Do you need my help?"

"No, I can take care of it," Thrall said quickly. "I have some scrolls on elementals I intended you to look over, would you do that while you wait? This may take some time, so please feel free to keep eating."

"Of course," Jaina said. Thrall stood, abandoning his meal to follow Garona, waiting until Jaina was out of earshot to relax.

"I was afraid I wouldn't have time to--"

"I'm not here to indulge you," Garona snapped. "There's an actual emergency. I've assembled your advisors."
Thrall tensed again. "What is it?"

"You'll see," the former assassin said tersely. "Not out here."

"Garona..." Thrall began, and followed her into the council chamber. He moved to sit on his great throne, and looked over his advisors. Jes'rimmon, a male troll, took the place Garona rightly should: she used the troll to conceal her identity amongst Orgrimmar's citizens, and while his advisors knew her true identity, she chose not to risk her appearance being recognized by an unexpected guest. Instead, the Darkspear troll sat on Thrall's left side. On his right sat Eitrigg of the Blackrock clan, the elder orc that had left the Horde after Blackhand's incompetence and recklessness and cost him the lives of his two sons. He'd lived a relatively peaceful life in Lordaeron until a human named Tirion Fordring had stumbled rather unexpectedly into his life, and now Eitrigg was here, advising Thrall and filling him on the details of his people's culture that he'd missed by being raised by humans.

Next to Eitrigg sat Varok Saurfang. The stern orc warrior was often taciturn, but when he spoke, Thrall listened. He was also the least likely to disagree with Thrall publicly, which often made it difficult to figure out precisely what he was thinking. Next to him sat Nara Whitemane, the young tauren druid that represented her people in Orgrimmar. Despite her youth, she was wise, and Thrall valued her advice, and appreciated having an idea what the Cenarion Circle was doing, and how they felt. Vol'jin, Sen'jin's successor, represented his own people, and Thrall couldn't help but feel guilty about Sen'jin's unfortunate death at the hands of the Sea Witch.

Rounding out the council were Shandel'zare and Naz'grel. Naz'grel was an experienced warrior, though he had also embraced shamanism, and was often in favour of ejecting the remaining human presence from Durotar. Shandel'zare was a troll mage, and in no particular order, old, cranky and racist. She seemed to hate everyone, and like Naz'grel, often opposed any efforts that Thrall attempted to implement, but Thrall knew her well enough to understand that her opposition came from her stringent support of his efforts, but that his often radical ideas needed to be justified and defended, and she was the one to put him on trial.

"Ladies, gentlemen," Garona said as Thrall sat. "We have a situation." Garona held up a communication crystal, and Thrall was startled to notice it was one of the ones Jaina had helped create, and from the soft murmuring of the council, it sounded as if they knew it too. "We've received word from Razor Hill that the humans of Tiragarde Keep are planning an assault as we speak. They want orders on how to proceed."

"They should know by now that any hostility from the humans should be met with force," Naz'grel snarled. "They shouldn't need to ask."

"Orders from the Warchief are to defend ourselves only," Saurfang pointed out, his voice low. "Though, this is a clear case of defense."

"Are they sure?" Thrall asked, his heart sinking. It would already be too late if we didn't have those crystals. No scout would have been able to ride from Razor Hill in time to stop this. Why now, of all times?"

"Very sure," Garona said grimly. "They haven't attacked yet, but they're massing for an assault. They look to be striking late at night."

"Coward's tactics," Naz'grel growled.

"Not something they be beyond," Vol'jin pointed out. "They were willing to bombard grass and wood huts when they assaulted the Echo Isles."
"We should have slaughtered their kind when Admiral Proudmoore died," Naz'grel snarled. "They've been nipping at our heels since the battle of Theramore."

"Speaking of which, Warchief," Shandel'zare interjected, meeting Thrall's stricken expression with an utterly cold one of her own. "Are we certain that Theramore's forces are uninvolved with these attacks?"

"Jaina is above reproach," Thrall said, his voice deepening with warning. "She has made enough sacrifices that anyone should be satisfied that she would not order such attack. It is unlikely her father's men would even listen to her."

"Naturally, Lady Proudmoore is not a suspect, but she doesn't always represent all of her men," the troll mage said, her expression stern. "You know that well enough, our spies report there have been deserters, even as recently as the last few months."

"There's no proof that those deserters are behind this, or that they even went to Tiragarde," Thrall said. "Daelin Proudmoore's men could have been ordered to keep attacking, even after his death."

"We have no time for speculation," Saurfang pointed out. "Something must be done before we lose our southern holdings."

"What do the spirits tell you?" Eitrigg asked, and Thrall glanced at the old orc. He had never once hesitated or shown reluctance to fight humans when needed, but his friendship with Tirion Fordring gave him the same distaste for casual slaughter that Thrall had.

"We send a force to meet them... and wipe them out," Thrall said, the words dropping from his lips like ship's anchors, and ships only brought his thoughts back to Jaina. "You're right, we can't keep playing a defensive game. We show them that the Horde are not to be toyed with. Do not slaughter them. If anyone surrenders, capture them, and do not hunt them down like dogs."

"They would do it to us," Naz'grel grumbled, but he seemed disturbingly pleased by Thrall's decisive actions. "If they return, or take shelter in Theramore?"

"I will speak to Lady Proudmoore, and make sure that she understands that giving sanctuary to those that would harm the Horde is a hostile action," Thrall replied, silencing any soft murmuring. "Varok, work with Shandel'zare to get our forces down there swiftly. If they don't know that we're anticipating their attack, so much the better."

"Yes, Warchief," they chorused, and stood. The table cleared swiftly, though Thrall caught Eitrigg's concerned look and Nara's openly worried one. Once only Garona was left, he buried his head in his hands. He felt a hand touch his shoulder.

"Thrall," Garona said, her voice surprisingly gentle. "Are you really going to tell her that?"

"Not in so many words," Thrall whispered. "Why did they do such a foolish thing? Even if they succeeded once, surely they'd realize that we'd strike back... they have to know it's a losing battle."

"There are some that all they know how to do is fight," she replied. "They challenge and fight, and fight, until they die, or their enemy is dead."

"It's a waste," Thrall muttered. "They could go home if they really wanted to."

"Sometimes, I don't think you understand just how vast the hate humans hold for orcs truly is. Yes, some humans. Just as some orcs hate humans just as deeply."
"Garona, I'd like to be alone," Thrall said quietly. "Make sure Jaina is safe. If word of this gets out, her life could be in danger."

"Of course, Warchief," Garona replied, and patted his back lightly. "You did the right thing, you know. Show of strength and show of restraint."

"Then why do I feel sick?" Thrall asked quietly. "It wasn't this bad when we were escaping from the Camps, it wasn't this bad when I had to free Grom..."

"It's different because it's hard to feel justified when you have a large, secure holding and you're fighting against people who are no better than leaderless mercenaries," Garona answered. "But no matter how many of them there are, you still have to protect your people. You're their Warchief."

"Thank you," Thrall said. He sat by himself for a long time, thinking and turning everything over in his head. Slowly, he stood, and went to collect the things he would need to give Jaina the news.

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"Is everything alright?" Jaina asked softly. Thrall smiled at her, feeling neither like smiling, nor 'alright'. Jaina was lounging in Thrall's room, and had a book propped against one of his pillows while she was curled up on his bed, the blanket she had given him tucked around her feet and legs.

"There's something I need to talk to you about," Thrall began, and took a chair, sitting it in front of her so he could look her in the eye. Jaina's expression immediately shifted to worry. "Tonight we received word that the soldiers in Tiragarde Keep were planning an assault on Razor Hill."

"What?!" Jaina cried. "What are they doing? This is Winter Veil, have they no sense of decency left at all, and to what end? Razor Hill is a farming community!"

It was difficult for Thrall to find joy in the fact that Jaina was as upset by this as he was, and instead took one of her hands in his. "I'm ordering them to be wiped out if it comes to it. There is a possibility that they will try to go to Theramore for sanctuary."

"They'll be criminals, of course, Thrall," Jaina said, her eyes troubled. "I won't let them get away with this. Your people... it's just wrong."

"I knew you'd say that," Thrall replied. Carefully, he drew out something from behind his back, and Jaina made a soft noise. "I remember what you said about wreaths, so I want you to have this, Jaina, and this promise: I will do whatever I can to preserve peace between our people. I didn't want to have to order the deaths of the Tiragarde forces, but it's the only way either of us will see peace."

"I... Thrall..." Jaina said, and shook her head slightly. "I can't..."

"Take it, please," Thrall urged. "I believe that you are above reproach, but not everyone does, and not everyone will. This is between the two of us. No matter what happens, we will never be at war."

"Never," Jaina agreed. "Thrall, I should go back to Theramore. I want to make sure that no word of this was passed between my own forces. If they have, I promise to deal with them." She leaned forward, and pressed her lips to Thrall's cheek. "The Horde could have no better leader than you."

"Thank you, Jaina," Thrall said, finally feeling the sick knot that had formed at the bottom of his
stomach when Garona had first delivered the news come undone, only to be replaced by a second, odder sensation.

"I've had a wonderful time," Jaina continued, going to collect her gifts, never letting go of the wreath. "I'm glad your people are learning so much about Winter Veil. There are other holidays, if you want to learn about them. I'd be happy to tell you anything you need to know."

"I'd like that," Thrall said, watching her. "Perhaps the next time we meet?"

"That would be wonderful," Jaina replied. She collected her shoes, and when ready, she turned around, and smiled again. "Goodbye, Thrall. Until the next time."

"Goodbye, Jaina," Thrall replied, and watched her teleport away, then he went to the bed, and touched over it, and was pleasantly surprised to find it still warm.
Chapter 4: Late Spring, Year 27

Winter's turn into Spring saw Thrall receiving more reports from southern Durotar. When they had built Razor Hill, it had been close to a Quillboar den, and while they had made an effort to keep their building away from them, Razor Hill needed to expand, and it would only be logical to expand west along the road they'd carved out to the Barrens, but virtually any approach enraged the Quillboar, and only fully armed escorts for those traveling west protected them at all.

Naz'grel had urged Thrall to clear the Quillboar out, but he could not in good conscience agree, not when the Quillboar had been here first. Even the tauren had skirmishes with the Quillboar, but Thrall had followed Jaina's advice: expand further south where there was no native population, or populations that would always be directly hostile with the Horde, like the centaur. He met with her more frequently now, and each meeting brought more need to express frustration about what went on around them.

Jaina, as promised, had taught Thrall about other holidays, and Thrall had tried to incorporate them into orcish culture, with limited success. The orcs seemed to enjoy feasting holidays as a whole, while only the shamans truly enjoyed some of the quieter, more contemplative holidays.

Candle Day is coming up soon, Thrall thought absently. Perhaps Jaina would care to come and see the hog farms--

"Warchief," Garona said tersely. Thrall looked up. He'd sent his Spymistress south to perform extended surveillance on Tiragarde, making sure that the problem with the humans was truly gone.

"Garona, what is it?" Thrall asked.

"There's been an incident on the border," Garona began, and Thrall noticed disconcertingly that Garona was shaking. "You need... you need to come. Now."

"Garona, which border?" Thrall asked, standing immediately. He whistled sharply, and Snowsong raised her head, the blue eyes of his frostwolf keenly intelligent.

"The Barrens and Dustwallow," Garona said, and Thrall's heart sank. There were few orc settlements so far south in the Barrens, due both to a lack of significant resources in the south, and because Dustwallow Marsh bordered against it, and while much of the swamp was still uninhabited by humans, they had expanded using lookout towers all the way to the border, and wherever they could manage to build a road. They had one major settlement close to the Barrens, one that Jaina had spoken of with great pride in the past.

"Shady Rest," Thrall breathed. "Garona..."

"A mage is preparing to take us there directly," Garona replied. "Come."
Thrall nodded, and went with her. The Kor'Kron fell into place around them. He met Shandel'zare's eyes as the troll mage prepared the incantation. The runes that floated in the air were not quite the ones he was used to, but they were effective enough to take him where he needed to be.

The transition to the other side was abrupt: the air was thick with smoke, and there was a sound like a thin, persistent wail, which Thrall realized was the whine of wet-wood burning. He looked around, and was immediately horrified.

The town of Shady Rest had been a pet project of Jaina's: in the transition area between dusty plain and too-wet marsh, she had encouraged settlers who were up for a challenge to make their home here, on ground that was tentatively neither orc nor human. This audacious move had been to encourage both Horde and humans to come here. Shady Rest was a trading post between their people, and boasted a huge traveler's inn, innocuously named the Shady Rest Inn, run by a man named James Hyal and his family. Jaina had spoken glowingly of him-- Jaina.

The Shady Rest Inn was gone, a burned out ruin of what it had once been. Whole sections had collapsed under the weight of the fire. Weary, soot-streaked guards and investigators were poking through the ruins. There was a man being held back by two guards, murmuring something about "Lynn" and "Jimmy". With a sinking heart, Thrall looked for Jaina. She was standing by two of her advisors, speaking quietly to them.

"Jaina," Thrall called softly, and she looked up, her expression rigid and resolute.

"Thrall," she replied, and motioned for her advisors to back up.

"I'm sorry, Jaina," he said gently. "Can you tell me what happened?" Around him, the human and elven guards stiffened, moving into place to cover the Horde guards.

"Early this morning, James Hyal reported strange noises coming from the traveler's barn," Jaina said, keeping her voice steady. "When he went to investigate, he was assaulted and knocked out. When he awoke, the Inn was on fire." There was a faint tremor. "There were no guests at the time, but his wife and son were inside. They're dead, Thrall. We're investigating now."

"Do you know who could have done this?" Thrall asked, the news like a knife to the chest. This was a symbol of peace between us, and now it's been destroyed...

"No, but there are possibilities," Jaina admitted. "The suspicion of course lies on..."

"The Horde," Thrall finished. "Jaina, I would never order anything like this. This is beyond wrong."

"I know... Thrall, I..." She met his eyes, and her expression was twisted with pain and grief, and in an instant, he was at her side, and put his arms around her, holding her and slowly, the anguish that had wound its way around her soul poured out, and she wept into his arms.

I would cry too, but she needs me, Thrall thought, closing his eyes and letting the rest of the world fall away. I would protect you from the way the world hurts us, Jaina Proudmoore, forever, I--

"Warchief, do you want us to assist with the investigation?" Garona called softly, and Thrall nearly snapped at her. Instead, he carefully looked up, noticing that only Garona would look at him directly: everyone else was carefully watching elsewhere, the smouldering Inn, the man who'd lost
everything and was too far gone to even properly grieve, the stand-off between humans and orcs, elves and trolls. A handful of gnomes and dwarves, operating some kind of pump that was an odd combination of gnomish ingenuity, dwarven practicality and magic, fussled over it unnecessarily.

_I don't care_, Thrall thought, and for an instant, he even meant it. He would have preferred to ignore them, but instead he touched Jaina's cheek lightly, tilting her head up. "Will you permit us to help you investigate? We have lost much with this, none the least of which is your trust."

"I... yes." Jaina straightened, wiping her eyes, and straining to return herself to a state of calm. "Let the Horde help you investigate, we need all the eyes we can if we're to find the true culprit." Thrall smiled at the strength in her voice. "And, Thrall?"

"Yes, Jaina?" Thrall asked.

"You never lost my trust."

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Thrall insisted on remaining while the investigation took place, sending orders back through mages to the rest of his advisors. Garona, naturally, remained with him, harassing the investigators as they worked.

The information they found would have been damning were it not so utterly confusing. The main clues seemed to be heavy hoofprints, a charred shield, and a badge. The hoofprints had been meticulously recorded and preserved, the shield cleaned, and the badge examined. Most of the investigators had left, but Thrall wanted to stay. A brief word to Jaina's advisors -- Tesoran and Tervosh -- had let Thrall convince them to take Jaina to her tower to rest. Garona had, unsuccessfully, tried to convince him of the same.

"I'm not under the same emotional stress that she is," Thrall muttered, picking his way over the ruins. "I can stay."

"As you say, Warchief," Garona said, and pointed. "Look at that, see where the footprints go?"

Thrall nodded once. "They go behind the barn. It looks like the fire started there. There aren't any fire elementals around any more, and the water ones don't know as much."

"Try wind," Garona said absently, following the footprints. "There are different footprints here, human ones."

"That's not surprising, since they live and work here," Thrall pointed out, and called out to the spirits of air. It was often difficult to get a clear response from one, but they saw much.

"These ones are too deep." She moved her finger along the edge. "The tread here, and here, is too heavy, and the stride isn't as if someone was carrying something. The weight distribution is also wrong for an orc or an elf."

"Someone human, in heavy armor, came here," Thrall finished, following her reasoning. "Were the hoofprints their horse?"

"Maybe," Garona admitted. "It's hard to say without knowing more. Either way, if this _was_ a human, this means the conspiracy comes from within Theramore's forces."
"Unless it's Tiragarde again," Thrall growled. "If they came all the way here for this..." The spirits of air felt his anger and swirled around him.

"Another possibility, it might be worth asking Jaina's forces if they've seen anything," Garona pointed out, watching him with an unreadable expression. "What do the spirits say?"

Thrall closed his eyes, letting his anger flow out of him, and opened himself to the spirits. The wind spoke to him, whispering about the elements of fire and water that had clashed here, and the one that had summoned fire in the first place. He closed his eyes, concentrating.

"Uh, L-- Mi-- Your--" he heard, as if from a great distance.

"Spit it out," Garona snapped. "You can call me whatever you like as long as you get to the point."

"Ma'am," the other voice decided on. "We've got a report about the hoofprints, and it's a little disturbing."

"What is it?" Garona asked.

"They're not hoof prints from a horse, Ma'am, they're from something else," Thrall opened his eyes to see a young human wearing Theramore's colours swallow nervously. "They're from a tauren."

"Are you absolutely certain?" Garona demanded, and Thrall raised a hand.

"He's almost certainly right, Garona. There's more to this than we thought. The fire was started by magic." Thrall sighed. "Shamanistic magic."

"Why would the tauren do something like that?" Garona wondered. "They're so peaceful most of the time that I'm surprised they don't wander around Mulgore grazing."

"Not all of them," Thrall replied. "Not the Grimtotem."

"This is a little out of their way, don't you think?" Garona asked, but she was already standing. "I'll go take a look."

"There's other news," the human interjected, and Warchief and Spymistress stared at him. He swallowed again. "It's about the badge we found. It belongs to a deserter named Paval Reethe and--"

"A deserter? From where?" Thrall demanded.

"Theramore's army," the human said nervously. "There have been some, um, people who've gotten dishonourably discharged due to their, um, behaviour. Inappropriate actions regarding the ogres. Things like that. Reethe was one of them..."

"We've been hearing about trouble, but we didn't think it was the humans," Garona said quietly. "I'm going to need to beat some intelligence into my agents."

"There must be some kind of connection between Reethe and the tauren, and I'm going to find it." Thrall straightened. "It's time to take the bull by the horns... and steer."
"You're certain you'll be alright?" Garona asked. Thrall gave her a very patient look, and indicated the Kor'Kron guard around him, as well as a rather annoying looking Shandel'zare.

"I've got enough of a guard to keep me safe for a few days while you ride south," Thrall said, letting none of his annoyance show. Really, she unveils one conspiracy that the spirits didn't catch and she acts as if I'm incompetent. "I'll be fine."

"You'd better be, or I'm going to find you and have a discussion about your failures," Garona said. She gave the harness of her riding worg a tug, and headed south. Thrall watched until even the spirits said they could not sense the half-orc assassin.

"What do we do now, Warchief?" Shandel'zare asked, her neutral, perfect orcish betraying no emotion.

"We help Jaina find out who did this," Thrall said. "Garona is investigating the tauren angle, and we should look into Reethe."

"It is unlikely that a human, particularly one hostile to Jaina's cause, will speak to us willingly," the troll mage pointed out.

"We don't need to have a conversation wherein he is willing," Thrall said, his voice low as he glanced over towards where Jaina was speaking to some heavily armed and armoured soldiers. "We just have to find him and get him to tell us what he knows."

"How very unethical of you," Shandel'zare said dryly, a wicked gleam to her eyes. "Where do we start?"

"That's a good question," Thrall said. "I intend to speak to the ogres at Brackenwall. They've lived here since Rexxar gave clan leadership to one of them, after he defeated their previous leader. They are... not the smartest, but they might know something."

"We'll have to travel afoot, I've never been there before," Shandel'zare replied, her expression making what she thought of dealing with ogres quite clear. "Where is your champion, anyway?"

"Patrolling Desolace," Thrall said. "We're scouting the coast for an appropriate place for a village. The trolls expressed some interest in expanding."

"It's a miserable hole that's full of demons and centaur," his advisor grumbled. "I don't know why."

"It doesn't matter. Kor'Kron, stay here. Shandel'zare and I will go to Brackenwall. Make sure nothing happens to Lady Proudmoore. This was a deliberate attack, we must not allow our alliance to falter." The Kor'Kron replied with an affirmative to the orc, and Thrall whistled to Snowsong. She'd been sniffing around the site of the arson, and Thrall wished that he could speak to her directly. I'm sure you've found something we've overlooked, but I wish I knew what it was.

Shandel'zare shook her head, and went over to her raptor, which looked forlornly at some of the wildlife, just out of reach of its picket. Thrall ignored her, and walked over to Jaina. He waited until she noticed him, and the sorceress made a gesture to silence the soldiers she was speaking to.

"We're going to Brackenwall," Thrall said, smiling gently. "We'll be back soon, but there's
something we want to look into. Will you be alright?"

"Yes, I'll be fine," Jaina replied. "I have matters of my own I want to look into. Send me a message through the rune when you're finished?"

"Of course," Thrall said, tapping the rune lightly. "Good luck."

"You too," Jaina replied. "Light be with you."

"Spirits guide your path," Thrall said. Snowsong nuzzled at his hand, and he prepared her saddle, watching Jaina as he did so. She seemed much calmer now, but harder. There was a set to her jaw that he recognized from when Daelin Proudmoore had claimed Theramore as his base of operations. *She knows something is going on, and she doesn't like it. We'll find whoever did this, I promise.*

"At your leisure, Warchief," Shandel'zare cut in. Thrall nodded, and mounted his frostwolf, clucking to her. Snowsong rode off eagerly, and his advisor followed. For a short time, there was simply the sky, the road, and his frostwolf.

*One could almost forget that two innocent people lost their lives recently.* He shook his head slightly. *They will not be forgotten. Lynn and Jimmy Hyal.* Focusing on his mission, he continued to ride. Brackenwall Village was less of a village and more of a loose collection of mud huts and walls, though the village itself was primarily built around a cave. It was the second ogre village -- or mound, as they called them -- within Dustwallow: the first being the Stonemaul mound, where Rexxxar had encountered them.

Thrall rode up to the village, and was surprised by the rather large number of ogres there. *I though this was a small village...*

"Who goes?" demanded a large ogre. Thrall was not a small orc by any stretch of the imagination, and the ogre loomed over him, even astride Snowsong.

"I am Warchief Thrall of the Horde," he replied, letting the spirits give his voice strength. "I want to speak to Chieftain Mok'Morokk."

"Mok'Morokk busy. He no care for Warchief or Horde," the guard said, and Thrall frowned, looking over at Shandel'zare.

"Someone should speak to Rexxxar about the exceptionally short memories of ogres," she grumbled. "Hopefully he didn't inherit it."

"Don't be racist," Thrall said quietly. More loudly, he continued. "If Mok'Morokk won't speak to us, perhaps someone else--"

"You have a rock for a brain," said a deep voice, and Thrall turned. The speaker was a not-quite-as-tall, blue-skinned ogre with two heads. Unlike the ogres speaking to him now, this ogre spoke in complete, cultured sentences. "This is Rexxxar's chieftain. You recall what he freed us from, do you not?"

"Bad ogre chieftain," one agreed, scuffing a huge foot against the ground. Thrall would almost have found it endearing. Almost. He could understand why the humans had found Horde troops so intimidating, since ogres like this one and his smarter brethren had once composed a small but
powerful part of first Blackhand, then Doomhammer's army.

"You are not entirely stupid. Go back to watching for crocolisks." The two-headed ogre gestured imperiously. "If you would come this way, Warchief Thrall. We will discuss why you are here."

Thrall nodded once, and decided not to quibble about mounts. Shandel'zare simply picketed hers on the outside of the wall, away from where it could potentially bite anyone, and Thrall took off Snowsong's saddle, and carried it with him, his frostwolf close on his heels. The ogre led them both to the cave. Within was a scattering of tanned hides in various locations, and Thrall noticed there were various arcane symbols written on them in some kind of dark substance.

"You're a mage," Thrall realized, and the ogre nodded pleasantly, with both heads.

"I am," he said. "It is an honour to meet you, Warchief. Despite what those meatheads said, we have not all forgotten you or your deeds. Please, sit down, and we may discuss this."

"Can we take him back to Orgrimmar with us?" Shandel'zare muttered. "He'd make an excellent addition to the council. We can send Naz'grel to Tanaris to make nice with the goblins instead."

Thrall hushed her. "I will admit to my surprise at meeting such an eloquent ogre, though I know many humans express the same sentiment about me."

"Indeed," the ogre said. "My name is Draz'Zilb. I do recall your predecessor, Orgrim Doomhammer. I am sorry to hear of his passing, though we left the Eastern Lands long ago."

It shames me that a race that still defecates outdoors on the ground can make warships to travel away from Azeroth and we cannot, Thrall thought ruefully. Orcs are not, and will never be, sailors. The journey to Kalimdor was proof enough of that. "Thank you, I miss him a great deal. What I came to ask you is unrelated to my first question... what happened here? It seems like there are many more ogres in this village than we were led to believe."

Draz'Zilb's second head pulled a face, but remained silent. "We have come under attack by a terrible, dangerous enemy. They've been very active lately, and after we were defeated, the survivors of the Stonemaul mound came here."

"Enemy?" Thrall frowned. "Did they have hooves, and horns?"

"No," Draz'Zilb replied, surprising them both. "They were not tauren. They were dragons."

"Dragons," Shandel'zare interjected, sounding incredulous. "What are dragons doing here--"

"In this miserable mudhole?" the ogre mage finished dryly. "I do not know. What I do know is that our Chieftain, Mok'Morokk is a lazy, indolent coward that is too incapable to even go back there and get the tobacco he whines constantly about, since he no longer has it to smoke." His second head snorted. "It is not enough Brackenwall is raided by the humans inhabitants for what few supplies we have, but Mok'Morokk actually expects people to try and get his things back. Do not let him talk you into it."

Thrall and Shandel'zare exchanged another, startled, look. "You've been raided by humans? Why was word not sent to Orgrimmar? We have a treaty with the humans, and this village is protected by it, like any other Horde holding."
"Aside from the fact I feel that Mok'Morokk is not fit to wipe your frostwolf's behind--" at this, Snowsong yipped in annoyance "--your pardon. Mok'Morokk is not worthy of the power Rexxar granted him. We also felt that..." He seemed to search for words. "That to admit that we were defeated would be humiliating. I'm sure you understand. Humans are soft. Weak. Their skulls are easily crushed by our weapons, but these humans were swift and clever, coming under the cover of darkness and the bad weather that plagues this place. They took the supplies that we hadn't bothered to guard because we simply assumed no one would be foolish enough to steal from us. We were wrong. They have not come again, though if that has something to do with our security measures, or because something happened to those thieves, it's difficult to say."

"Security measures?" Shandel'zare asked curiously. The ogre considered her.

"We dug a very large hole, put our supplies in it, and covered it with a rock. My people often feel that simple, straightforward solutions are the best ones."

"I don't doubt it," Thrall said, his mind racing. *Jaina mentioned nothing about this, but she did mention dissent within the ranks of her soldiers. There could be a connection. *Could anyone here identify the humans? Either visually, or from something they overheard..?"

"You will find that many of my kin are extremely stupid, and that extends to their ability to describe what they refer to as 'puny men'. However, I did myself hear some of their conversation. There was a name mentioned." He paused.

"A name?" Thrall pressed.

"I believe the name was Reethe. He was called 'Lieutenant' by one of the others."

"Paval Reethe," Thrall said, sitting back. *It doesn't quite make sense yet, but it may yet. We need to talk to Jaina. Why didn't she tell me there was this kind of trouble?"

"The name disturbs you," Draz'Zilb observed. "You came here for a purpose, and I do not believe it was to help us fight the dragons."

"You're right, I didn't, but I'll see what can be done to help you regain your home," Thrall admitted. "There was an incident within a human settlement, one that was open to members of the Horde as well. An inn was destroyed, and two people died. We're trying to find out who might have been responsible, and Paval Reethe's badge was found on site, as well as some other, unusual things. Footprints of tauren, and a very large shield."

"Hrm," the ogre said, thinking. Thrall wished he could claim it was the oddest thing he had seen, but strangely, he felt comfortable with this ogre who was as odd amongst his own people as Thrall had once been in regards to his own.

*At least he speaks their language.* Thrall reflected, recalling some of his earliest memories.

"There have been tauren within Dustwallow relatively recently," Draz'Zilb said finally. "They settled further north, and they are exceptionally secretive. Not that most of my fellows are interested in such things, but the tauren tend to elude our patrols, or any efforts to speak to them."

"Have you seen these tauren?" Thrall asked, making mental notes so that he could contact Garona through communication crystal.
"I have interpreted the reports of the others, who report them to be very dark: they dress in dark leathers and furs, they have dark fur themselves, and have dark manes, though I am given to understand this is not unusual."

"The Grimtotem are very dark," Shandel'zare pointed out. "They seem to be intent to live up to their name."

"So are the Ragetotem," Thrall argued. "It's unfair to judge based on appearance, but this is the second time they've been mentioned. It could be coincidence."

"For now," Shandel'zare said darkly. "If you believe in coincidence, you aren't paranoid enough."

"Indeed," the ogre mage interjected, calling their attention back to him. "I can give you the location of their village if you wish to investigate."

"Subtlety isn't my strong suit, but I will commune with the spirits and see if they recognize any of them," Thrall said, and stood. "Thank you for your time. I'll send a force south to help clear out the black dragons."

"Actually, I would prefer it if you didn't." Thrall raised an eyebrow, and the ogre mage continued. "Mok'Morokk only proves his weakness by being so reluctant to retake his home. He is a coward, and a fool. It is my hope that enough of this will rally a champion. I have my eye on a scout named Ogron. He is not as physically strong or large, but he is clever, and mastered the human gun with great speed. It's simply a matter of motivation."

"If that's what you prefer," Thrall replied. "If you have a map..."

"I do indeed," Draz'Zilb said, and from amongst the painted skins, the ogre mage took out a particular map. It was not poorly detailed considering the medium, and Thrall took it. "They are this way." He tapped north of Brackenwall, along the mountain range. "I wish you good luck, and that your spirits serve you well."

"May the spirits guide your path," Thrall replied, and left his cave. Off to one side of the village, Thrall could see a very large, well-armoured ogre, speaking to a 'captive' audience. *That must be Mok'Morokk. He doesn't seem weak at first glance, but it's dangerous to judge someone by looks alone.*

"You see, he gossips while he could be killing dragons," Draz'Zilb said from behind him. "I suggest leaving before he removes his head from between his own legs and notices you. He is still fierce when he doesn't have to leave home."

Thrall nodded, and they slipped out, going back to Shandel'zare's mount, who'd finally managed to catch something, and chewed on it happily. Shandel'zare whacked it on the snout, frowning disapprovingly.

"No eating between meals, you. Behave yourself."

Thrall could have sworn that it whined in reply. He looked down at Snowsong, who gave him a doleful look. Sighing, he slipped her some meat, and then went to saddle her again while she gnawed happily.

*First we look into this tauren encampment, then we ask Jaina why she didn't tell me of any of this.*
There was a sick, worried feeling in the pit of his stomach, and it wasn't abating.

~ * ~

"Are you absolutely certain you want to do this?" Shandel'zare asked. "I do have spells that may get me past their defenses."

"You also said that the Invisibility spell has a high rate of failure," Thrall pointed out. He added more herbs to the fire, taking in their heady scent. "Just guard my body while I spirit walk, and everything will be fine."

"As you say, Warchief," the troll mage replied. "The perimeter is secure."

In this case, secure meant that Shandel'zare's raptor had been given permission to hunt anything that came near the glowing arcane runes drawn around Thrall and the fire. At the moment, Thrall watched it chase a swamp rat gleefully through some rushes, and was glad that they had chosen a very remote location to do this.

Thrall nodded once, and sat cross-legged in front of the fire. It helped to have as few distractions as possible, so his armor had come off, one piece at a time, then his shirt, and finally his shoes. He could feel the wind against his skin, and the moistness that came with being in a marsh. There was always the hint of rain in the air, and the two elements whispered to him. Earth was solid beneath his feet, and Snowsong's warm presence was close enough to feel, but not enough to distract him. In front of him, of course, was fire.

Breathe in. Spirits of Fire, I call to you. Breathe out. I present myself before you, a humble student of your arts. Breathe in. I ask of you a favour. Sprinkling herbs again over the fire, he waited. I offer you a gift, to show my respect for your power. He waited. The fire flickered, and no wind touched it, his breath still held.

We are listening, Son of Durotan, the spirits replied. We accept your gift. Nourish us with your breath, and we will hear the favour you ask of us.

Thrall breathed out slowly, letting the air within his lungs feed fire instead of destroying it. There is a location I need to go. I must walk as a spirit. I ask that you guide me. He took the map that Draz'Zilb had given him, and placed it over the fire.

We will guide you, follow our light. The fire brightened, and then extinguished. Thrall closed his eyes, and then opened them again.

Everything has a spirit, Thrall reflected, standing up as he left his body, and began to walk. In the distance, he could see winking torches, and each flame held a spirit of fire. As he walked, he could feel the spirit of earth beneath his feet. It supported fire, though it could smother it as well, and was worn away by water, or gave it form, and stood against air. Air nourished or destroyed fire, and shaped water, and water extinguished fire. Life needed all four elements to function. And while there is much death in the cycle of life, there are some things that even the spirits will not bear.

Carefully, he continued to follow the torches. He could sense the lives he passed as he walked into the village. There were not too many here, and many of them had lives that felt hardened by time and by experience. If that makes any sense at all, Thrall thought. Looking around, he attempted to locate a large hut, but it seemed as if there was nothing, just smaller homes. He frowned, looking around again, and still his gaze found nothing, sliding from one small hut to the next.
I'll simply have to find what I'm looking for in another one of these huts, he thought, and went to each one, letting the tiny hearth guide him. The spirits of the wind carried commentary and gossip, but nothing useful. These were Grimtotem, and they had come from further south, that much was certain, but to what end it was impossible to say. It would be far too simple if people simply discussed their plans at a time when it was convenient for me to hear. Still, perhaps he could at least find some proof of what had happened. He continued on, looking through each hut while fire encouraged him, and air brought more whispered. There was some kind of conversation going on, but what the air brought was scattered, only half of a conversation.

Odd, even air isn't usually this vague, Thrall thought, and called out to the air spirits. Can you take me to where you heard this?

We can, but there is badness there, the air spirits replied. We don't want to go.

Thrall frowned. You don't have to, just get me close so I can listen. As he felt them hesitate, he added, Please. I will offer you sweet-smelling gifts when I return to my body.

Very well, they replied. But we won't go very close.

Thrall nodded his assent, and the air spirits guided him. There was a large building, and even as the spirits guided him, he wanted to look away from it. Finally, he got in close.

"--and our other problem?" ----- "You know where Reethe is? Why wasn't this taken care of earlier?" ----- "I don't care what that human does, they're not welcome here. Kalimdor belongs to the races of the Earthmother, not some puny pink things. Do your duty, Ansolm."

Thrall stilled. He could not see who the voice was talking to. He couldn't hear their replies. It was almost as if, in the spirit world, not only did they not exist at all, but the spirits themselves rejected what they saw, meaning he could not see them directly. As far as Thrall was concerned, that meant only one thing, and it was one of the last things he wanted to believe.

Forsaken.
Chapter 5: Late Spring, Year 27

The Forsaken.

The Forsaken deserved sympathy. Once citizens of Lordaeron and Quel'thalas, they had been murdered by Arthas Menethil and brought back as the Scourge, only to break free when the Lich King's grip on the Scourge weakened. In looking for a new purpose, they had found it in revenge, and reclaimed the ruins of Lordaeron from the Scourge, led by the Dark Lady, the fallen Ranger-General of Silvermoon, Sylvanas Windrunner. The Forsaken could not go home, assuming they had one to go home to, and in so many cases, their homes were destroyed by the Scourge, or their own murderous rampages while they had been controlled by the Lich King.

It's not so different from our time being the thralls of demons, the Warchief of the Horde reasoned, carefully moving back to his body. Clutched in one hand were battle plans -- the spirits had not guided him to them, but he'd found them by watching the tauren move around, and used personal reserves of power to bring it into the spirit world with him. This would not last long, and he hoped he could move fast enough not to be caught. Except...

The Forsaken were cold. Where the orcs had been fierce, angry, hot-blooded at their betrayal, the Forsaken had an anger that was icy, bitter like the winds of Northrend. They were not vocal about their anger usually, but instead were quiet. They plotted and waited, and none so much as their Banshee Queen. Thrall had not met the former elf before she had died, so there was little room for comparison, but she was very frigid. She was often quiet, but when she spoke, her words held a great weight, and she was both beautiful and terrible to behold. Her people doted on her endlessly at a level that had discomforted Thrall. Sylvanas had sent him messages over the course of Winter, and the spirits had been vocally displeased at the presence of the heavily cowled and wrapped messengers.

Thrall had considered carefully the implications of Sylvanas' carefully penned letters: the Forsaken hated the Scourge, and feared the living. The surviving paladins of the Silver Hand had reformed under a new banner, that of the Scarlet Crusade, and they were bent on wiping them out, regardless of the fact that the Forsaken were no longer Scourge, and worse yet, even attacked the living if they were suspected to be infected by the Plague, and sometimes, the suspicion of infection went along with disagreement with Scarlet Crusade leadership. That had been worrying enough, because Thrall knew what it was like to deal with those who would always believe you were monsters, but Sylvanas had delivered news about Arthas and the Lich King, and her suspicions therein, which Thrall has naturally shared with his allies, including Jaina Proudmoore.

Bad enough to hear about Arthas' fall from grace after her departure to Kalimdor, but this...Thrall shook his head. And of course, having to explain where I got the information from. That had been during the Late Winter, and now, the Forsaken and the Horde had a tentative treaty of shared information, and mutual protection. The problem lay with actually having the Forsaken anywhere near Kalimdor.
The spirits were always more active in areas that were wilder. The spirits disliked being tame, and they were sparse amongst the carefully plowed and groomed fields of Hillsbrad or Tiriskal, but not so in Kalimdor: Kalimdor was wild, a haven for unruly elementals and helpful spirits, but with the spirits, came caution and restraint. Whereas a greedy and unwise leader might encourage expansion across the continent and clear out trees, this would drive the spirits away, and here, where their presence was stronger, it might even incur their wrath, something Thrall never wanted to do. So instead, their expansion was cautious, but the spirits were driven away by other things, like the undead.

Thrall did not understand precisely how one created the undead, and even Sylvanas' information was incomplete and riddled with guesswork. What did seem to happen is that it created a void within the spirit world, something about the state of the soul of the victim of the plague of Undeath, and it sent spirits fleeing. A Forsaken that spent too much time in one place outside of the Plaguelands caused the spirit world to bend and warp slightly. More, and this effect amplified. A population like the one in Undercity, the name of Lordaeron's underbelly that housed the Forsaken, would create a blight that would destroy a huge area in Kalimdor.

Thrall had done his best to explain this to Sylvanas, who had watched him with a shuttered expression and cold, dead eyes, and her lips had quirked in an upwards twitch, and simply said that she wouldn't want to upset the spirits or her new-found allies. This had been enough to keep most of the Forsaken away from Kalimdor, though an odd one cropped up now and then. The communication crystals that linked one part of Thrall's nation to another also let him get regular updates from Sylvanas. Their alliance was a very tentative, uncertain one, and now Thrall was regretting even agreeing to it.

If the Forsaken are involved in this travesty, then something needs to be done about it. Innocent lives were lost, but I don't see why this would interest them, it doesn't further any of their goals, and it's not something I would ever have condoned. It was murder, plain and simple. Making his way back to his body, he settled into it with the sensation of trying to fit something large into something small. He could feel his spiritual sense wiggle into place before he opened his eyes. The chill of the air hit him first, and he inhaled sharply.

"You're back, good," Shandel'zare said sharply. She was sitting in front of him, and appeared to have been watching him intently. "I've received word from Jaina Proudmoore that she has located Paval Reethe."

"Where is she?" Thrall demanded. Quickly, he grabbed his boots, and shoved his feet into them, fastening them quickly. He stood and handed her the battle plans. "We need to analyze these and see what they yield. Take care of it. I need to find Jaina."

"She's tracked them down to the northern watchtower, it's south of here," Shandel'zare replied, and frowned at him, taking the plans. "You found these?"

"I found a number of interesting things," Thrall replied tersely, and whistled sharply to Snowsong. "I'll deal with that later. This is important." He saddled his frostwolf immediately, and swung into her saddle. "You'll find me there."

"Warchief, I--" Shandel'zare began, but he was already riding off. Distantly, he heard her say, "But what about your clothes?"

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The tower was easy enough to find: it was the one surrounded by human and elven guards. A lone dwarf stood at the entrance, standing at attention, both hands on his blunderbuss and his eye to the swamp. He gave Thrall a very unimpressed look as he rode up. The orc Warchief dismounted from Snowsong, and whispered to her, "Rest for a time, you've earned it, the spirits will protect me."

Snowsong gave him a canine sneeze, and loped a distance away, which only served to make the soldiers more nervous.

"What can I do fer yeh, Warchief?" the dwarf asked, and his dour expression could have been caused by a dozen things.

"I need to see Jaina," Thrall said without preamble. "Excuse me."

"She's a tad busy with Reethe," the dwarf replied evenly. "Ye'll have ter wait."

"This concerns him, there are things she doesn't know," Thrall insisted. "This is a waste of time. Please."

"Since ye asked so pretty," the dwarf muttered, and jerked his head towards the door. Thrall stepped into the tower. Guard towers were not meant to be large, or comfortable, and this was no different, but Thrall noticed that this one was extremely cold.

What could be-- Thrall thought, letting his eyes adjust to the dark. There was something glimmering in the semi-dark, and as his eyes adjusted, he could see what it was. There was a thin layer of frost covering everything, including the lamps that would have illuminated the inside of the tower. Within the room there were a half-dozen very large ice blocks which contained, as Thrall noticed with a start, human beings. A seventh, less complete ice block was in the middle of the room, with the man's head and neck exposed, and the rest of his body was totally encased in ice.

"You're going to tell me what's going on," he heard Jaina say, her voice as icy as the room. He watched her eyes glitter dangerously in the dim light, and he felt something constrict, rather sharply, in his chest.

"Not in your life, you traitorous bi--" An icicle slid closer to the underside of his chin, and the trapped human swallowed heavily.

"People are dead, Lieutenant Reethe," Jaina replied. "I'm not here to play games with you. I want to know what happened after you were sent to Lost Point Tower."

"I defected," Paval Reethe said, speaking carefully around the icicle. "That's all."

"He's lying," Thrall said quietly, and Jaina turned, though her concentration never wavered.

"I didn't think he was telling the truth..." Jaina replied, and he noticed the way her eyebrows raised, and her expression changed. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine," Thrall said, and moved to stand beside her. "I suggest you answer Jaina's questions."

"Filthy orc," Reethe spat, and the ice shifted and swirled, causing him to cry out.
"Jaina isn't the only one who knows how to break the ice," Thrall warned. "Excuse me for interrupting, Jaina."

"Not at all," Jaina murmured, and returned her gaze to Reethe, and she lost much of her good humour. "You were part of the agitators in Theramore, Reethe, and loyal to my father. You didn't like the treaty we have with the orcs, so you flaunted the rules by raiding an orc protected ogre village and stealing their supplies. I gave you one last chance, I sent you out to Lost Point to secure the area near Shady Rest. It was close enough to the garrison there to offer you help if you needed it. You and your men defected and you never came back. I want to know what happened."

Reethe twisted a moment, but found the ice utterly unyielding, and Thrall watched Jaina's expression. She never wavered in her attentiveness as Reethe spoke. "We... we were sick of you. Sick of licking the orcs' boots. We were talking about it, one night. It was raining. It's always raining in this stinking hole. We were going to do it, and take the tower. Some of the boys were still trying to get up the stones to do it when she came."

"'She'?” Jaina asked quietly, her eyes widening.

"The Lady. She came right into the tower. She wasn't afraid of us -- she wouldn't be afraid of you, either -- and said that if we defected and worked for her, she'd make sure we never had to put up with orcs or orc-lovers again. She said for us to take the tower and wait for more instructions. She would give us things we'd never dreamed of..." Reethe trailed off with an odd, dreamy smile that Thrall found disconcerting on an older human man who hadn't shaved in three days, and hadn't bathed in two.

"I'm sure you've dreamed of them at least once or twice by this point," Jaina murmured, and shared a brief smile with Thrall. "What instructions did you get?"

"We were supposed to help servants of hers. She said we'd know them because they had her mark."

"What does her mark look like?" Thrall asked quietly.

"Three lines, two white and one red between them," Reethe replied. "Like claw marks, almost."

"What did her servants do?" Jaina asked quietly.

"They were going to destroy your precious treaty," Reethe said. "They were going to start things up, so people would open their eyes and see how wrong it really was. All I had to do was make a little noise so they could start a fire."

"Two innocent people died because of you," Jaina said, her voice steady, but loud, angry. "Another is so traumatized that he may never be normal again, and there would have been countless casualties if another war had started over this."

"How many do you think died already because of this stupid treaty?" Reethe demanded. "How many more do you think will die when we can't defend ourselves against the green tide? Your father was proud of you once, how could you betray him like this, for the feeling of an orc--"

"Enough," Thrall growled, shifting. "We need a name."

"A name?" Reethe asked, laughing. "For what you do?"
"No, for the woman who contacted you," Jaina said, a hand touching against Thrall's arm lightly, stopping the advance that he didn't quite realize he'd begun. "I want to know the Lady's name."

"It's--" Reethe began, and then there was a sound like a soft crack that made Thrall spin and grab for Jaina, pulling her to the floor.

"Get down!" he bellowed. Through one of the windows flew two bullets, the first splintering the back of a chair, and the second went through Reethe's throat, spraying the ice that encased him with blood. The ex-soldier choked as he died, burbling incoherently.

"Get him! Get him!" Thrall heard the dwarf yell, and rolled to his feet, running towards the door. The dwarf was pointing, and Thrall saw something flit through the trees. He whistled sharply, and Snowsong went bounding after the shadow. A moment's concentration and the howl of a wolf brought spirit wolves to help.

"Follow the wolf," Thrall snapped to the guards. "Hurry." Thrall could sense Snowsong, and he could also sense the exact moment when his spirit wolves winked out of existence, and moved faster with a feeling of impending dread. He watched as the shadow faltered, and Snowsong leapt, pulling the shadow down. She snarled as she ripped something, and Thrall caught up to her.

There was a dizzying feeling as the spirits deserted him, leaving him feeling emptier, bereft of their companionship. At his feet was a twisted corpse that could have been dead for weeks. It was wrapped in a dark cloak, and even now struggled against Snowsong's jaws, and one twisted, emaciated hand reached towards his frostwolf, attempting to retrieve its other arm.

"Snowsong, hold," Thrall commanded, and knelt down. "Are you Ansolm?"

The reply that came out was garbled and strange, and Thrall found it incomprehensible. Sylvanas' messengers and representatives had always been able to speak Common, though with varying degrees of slurring. This was nothing like that, and Thrall noticed that Ansolm didn't have a lower jaw, and a twisted, blistered tongue flicked out as he tried to speak.

"Was this what you woke up with?" Thrall muttered. "Why did you shoot him? Who was he working for?" The Forsaken shifted, and with one hand, placed it over his heart. Thrall noticed a mark under his fingers, one with three claw marks, two white and one red. "Is this... you work for her too, and do those Grimtotem work for her as well--"

"Thrall, look out!" Jaina cried. He felt her arms around him, squeezing him tightly, and then a sick, disorienting feeling before righting himself.

"Jaina, what--" Thrall asked, meeting her frightened eyes, and there was the sound of something too wet to be an explosion, and Thrall turned. The Forsaken was little more than scattered pieces of meat and fragments of cloth. Snowsong still had the Forsaken's arm, and the largest remaining piece of Paval Reethe's assassin. "--thank you. That would have injured me a great deal if I'd been at point blank range. How did you know?"

"He made an arcane gesture," Jaina murmured. "Are you alright? What was that?"

"It's complicated, and something that would be better off discussed in private. Is there any hope for Reethe?"

"None," Jaina said softly. "I'm going to have his effects searched, but for now, this is no place to
"investigate."

"What about the other soldiers?" Thrall asked. "You froze them."

"They tried to stop me," Jaina said, straightening carefully. "They're going to be brought back to Theramore and interrogated before their trial. Unfortunately, I think Reethe knew the most, and now... he's dead."

"We have a great deal to discuss, none the least of which is why you didn't tell me that there were dragons in Dustwallow," Thrall chided, only to see Jaina's eyes widen.

"There are dragons in Dustwallow?" Jaina demanded. "Where? Do you know what they're up to?"

"You didn't know," Thrall said quietly, absorbing this. "We need to talk."

"Of course," Jaina said. She kept her eyes on his face, but there was hesitation in her voice. "Thrall?"

"Yes, Jaina?" Thrall asked, noting the faint flush of her cheeks that may have been from the effort of casting a blink spell repeatedly.

"What happened to your clothes?"

~ * ~

"Here you are, my Lady," Jaina's chamberlain said, setting down a tray. She smiled politely at Thrall. "Is your blanket comfortable, Warchief? It was the largest one we could find."

"It will be fine, thank you," Thrall said, nodding back. Jaina leaned over, and gave the woman a brief kiss on the cheek.

"Thank you, Ariana. Make sure no one interrupts us." The young woman nodded, and Jaina went to the window, staring out it for a moment, over the ocean. It was raining, and the spirits told him that soon this would move over Jaina's island kingdom. "Where do I begin?"

"Why didn't you tell me that you were still having problems with defectors?" Thrall asked. He shifted, and picked up one of the mugs, holding it in his hands. "I had no idea..."

"What could you have done?" Jaina asked softly. "Some people will only follow you so far..." She shook her head. "I suppose it's only right. Blind loyalty is wrong, even though... I don't think what I'm asking of people is unreasonable. It's not Stratholme."

Stratholme. Arthas again. "We didn't know that it was humans raiding the ogre camps, though I didn't know about those raids at all until recently."

Jaina turned, and raised an eyebrow. "They didn't tell you?"

"Something about pride," Thrall said. "They have an ogre mage that is both intelligent and subtle, and it's interesting that he doesn't want to lead them himself. He seems to have all the answers."

"Not enough personal strength," Jaina commented. "Ogres can only take force of personality so far before they need to physically crack skulls, and his magic isn't as effective as, say, mine."
"You spoke to Draz'Zilb?" Thrall said, raising an eyebrow. Jaina nodded.

"I returned their supplies personally. I just cannot believe how utterly selfish someone like Reethe is... and now he's dead, and his answers with him." She sighed. "At least we have more of an idea what's going on."

"Defectors, dragons," Thrall said, "and the Grimtotem."

"The tauren tribe that refuses to formally join the Horde?" Jaina asked. "What about them?"

"From what I've been able to gather, they may be responsible for what happened." Thrall said, and sighed. Jaina stiffened, then moved to sit next to him. "I spoke to Draz'Zilb, and he mentioned that the ogres had been chased out of their home by black dragons. He also said that the Grimtotem had moved into the north of Dustwallow and did their best to evade ogre patrols, and wouldn't speak to them. I performed a spirit walk to find out what they were doing, and I overheard them speaking to the Forsaken that I believe killed Reethe. I have the Forsaken's name, but of course, no proof that it was him, since he destroyed himself rather than be caught. The Grimtotem that was talking spoke of Reethe as their 'other problem'. It's possible that whomever this woman was that spoke to Reethe intended to betray him all along, and that the Grimtotem and Forsaken are her more valued servants."

"Or that she'd betray any one of them to get what she wants," Jaina pointed out, looking upset. "I suppose I can understand the Grimtotem's lack of trust for us, but why kill innocent people? Just to destroy what we have created? It seems so..."

"Unfair," Thrall said softly. "Sometimes, things are just unfair. I wish they weren't, but we can do something about this. I'm going to contact my forces. I've already sent someone south to speak to the Grimtotem, but I can go directly to Thunder Bluff to speak to their matriarch. Cairne does his best to try and convince her to join the Horde, so she is a guest there."

"Do you think she's involved?" Jaina asked, tilting her chin up to look him in the eye, and he couldn't help but smile back more confidently.

"I don't know, but I hope not," Thrall said honestly. "It's hard to control a clan of rebels."

"Almost certainly." Jaina sighed softly. "I'll be getting a report from Doctor VanHowzen after he examines Lieutenant Reethe's body, and what remains of that Forsaken, and Reethe's soldiers are being held in lock up until we can interrogate them properly." She shook her head. "This is such a mess. I'm sorry I didn't tell you about the raid, Thrall. I wanted to handle it myself. I thought this would be enough, and I was wrong."

"Don't..." Thrall began, reaching to take her hand unthinkingly, and only barely stopping in time. "Don't blame yourself. You didn't know about the dragons, and we all have our problems that aren't easily solved."


"Exactly like," Thrall replied, nodding, and hoping Jaina couldn't hear the thundering of his racing heart. Distantly, around the sound, he could hear her promise help with them when he needed it, and heard himself agree that he would ask. There was a feeling, an intense one, like what he'd felt when he'd held her. He couldn't quite identify it, and he wanted to consult the spirits before he did..."
anything utterly foolish...

Like kiss the human woman that sat before him.

Oh... damn.

~ * ~

Damn and double damn, Thrall thought, pacing. Jaina had honoured his request to speak to his contact privately, and that gave him time to not be utterly controlled, to not flinch when she'd touch him casually. I can't do this. Not to her, not to the Horde. He felt his stomach twist at the idea of one more casual encounter with one of the candidates, and thought, absurdly, Garona would kill me. He shook his head, trying to clear it, but it seemed as if there was a ringing in his ears that wouldn't quite stop since the reaction -- the realization that had come to him: he cared for Jaina Proudmoore. More than the promises of friendship he'd sworn at Winter Veil, more than just an ally... Possibilities swirled within his mind. No, I need to take care of one disaster at a time.

Thrall thumbed on the communication crystal, and waited. Garona always had a very strict policy about letting her speak first, mostly because if Thrall needed to use the crystal, she was almost certainly in a position where speaking to the crystal would mean being caught. He paced, letting himself work off emotions that were half fear and half dread, and after a few moments, felt the crystal warm in his hand.

"What is it?" Garona asked. "I'm at Darkcloud Pinnacle. You will not like what I have found."

"You won't like what I've found," Thrall countered. "You first."

"I found several Grimtotem missives that imply they have an alliance with an unnamed, powerful force, and that they were planning a summit to meet with their agents from Lordaeron. I did a little more digging, and all three of the individuals that signed the notes are Forsaken, though they're not placed anywhere in Sylvanas' guard."

"There's definitely a connection between the Forsaken and the Grimtotem," Thrall agreed, and quickly detailed what he'd learned. "Reethe is dead, but they're looking into his effects. The assassin is dead."

"You're an idiot for forgetting your armour," Garona snorted.

"That isn't the point," Thrall replied, standing on his dignity. "If I'd taken the time to put on my armour--"

"Jaina wouldn't have seen your half-naked body when you tackled her to the floor?" Garona finished, and Thrall recalled the odd look on Jaina's face when she'd seen him, and suddenly wondered if 'odd' was positive or negative. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

"I'm going to try for a meeting with Magatha Grimtotem to resolve this," Thrall said. "I want you back by then."

"What, so you can watch her deny everything?" Garona asked derisively. "She's a snake, Warchief."

"Garona," Thrall said warningly.
"I'll be back, if nothing else to make sure you remember to wear pants for the meeting," Garona promised. "Who knows, Jaina could get a splinter and you might forget again."

"Garona," Thrall growled, and stopped when he heard a soft knock. "Yes?"

"I apologize for interrupting, Warchief Thrall," called Jaina's chamberlain, Ariana. "Someone is here to deliver some personal items."

"Shandel'zare, Thrall groaned mentally. Maybe she won't berate me too much. "Garona, I need--"

"Your clothes back. Have fun, Warchief." Thrall thumbed off the crystal, and sighed. He went to the door to open it, and sure enough, Shandel'zare was there, holding his shirt, while another heavily cloaked figure held his armour.

"Warchief Thrall," the troll mage said, her expression only barely containing amusement and exasperation. "You forgot something."

"Thank you," Thrall said, ignoring her smile as he took his shirt, and turned to the cloaked figure. "And you..?"

"This is Scout Logrosh, I was fortunate enough to run into him while I was cleaning up the camp you abandoned," his advisor told him dryly. "He helped me carry it."

"You're welcome," the cloaked figure growled out, all but pushing the armour into Thrall's hands and turned away. Thrall raised an eyebrow at Shandel'zare, who shrugged.

"Please, Warchief, make yourself comfortable," Ariana said politely. "I have something I need to take care of."

"Thank you," Thrall replied. The young human woman nodded to him and turned, and the scout followed, leaving Thrall, unfortunately, with Shandel'zare.

"Warchief," Shandel'zare began. "I suggest that the next time you decide to ride off half-cocked, you think about what would have happened if that sniper had taken a shot at you and not a very stupid, very greedy human."

Thrall refused to flinch at her tone. "I wasn't in danger, but Jaina could have been."

"You're right," Shandel'zare agreed, stopping him in mid defensive response. "The human who faced down the second most powerful demon in the Burning Legion could have been in danger, and she absolutely has no defensive spells or instincts of her own, nor did she have an armed force right outside to protect her. Surely, you're the only one who could help her."

_When she puts it that way..._ Thrall thought. "I didn't think about any of that."

"No, Warchief, you didn't think," Shandel'zare agreed. "But I'm sure you are now. My understanding is that you'll need to go to Thunder Bluff soon. I'm going to arrange that. I'll return when I'm done."

"Thank you," Thrall said with a sigh, and she left. He sat down, turning his shirt over in his hands several times. _She's right. That was reckless of me, but I..._ He closed his eyes, and he could hear it,
the crack of the shot, and the sound of her fear, and then his, of that moment, that potential of losing Jaina to something so mundane as a sniper. I could have warned her. I should have, but the interrogation seemed more important. That was careless. He pulled on his shirt, and sat back. Slowly, he let everything spill out of him. Deep breaths in and out flushed away uncertainty, leaving only clarity behind.

I need to say something to her, he thought. Not immediately, it's inappropriate when this is still so fresh and painful. I promised her that all I wanted was friendship. I still want her friendship, but that's not all that I want. I want to know how she feels about me. If she feels the way I do. He frowned slightly. However it is that I feel. Again, he could hear the shot firing, and that moment of pure, blind panic over losing Jaina. I care for her, as a friend, and more. He felt his mind shift gears slowly. Could I even...

He felt the spirits of air move around him, bringing in snatches of conversation. Some of it was about fishing, others about trouble near the lighthouse and someone spotting a sea monster, something about no one being able to see Doctor VanHowzen, which seemed odd.

I hope there's nothing wrong, Thrall thought, and listened to more:

"Is it as bad as they're saying?" Ariana asked, her voice soft even through the wind.

"Worse," Logrosh said tersely. "Everything is a mess, and everyone's plenty paranoid and angry enough about what's going on. Some don't like being automatically thought of as the culprits of this. There's even been some talk about a preemptive strike."

"That's ridiculous, we won't attack them."

"Stupid people don't make sense, they just do things. I want you to be careful. Don't let anyone catch you wearing this."

"I keep your wedding token hidden," Ariana replied, startling Thrall. "Lady Jaina will protect me, she understands that love comes in all kinds of forms."

"That reminds me, the rumours--"

The sound of the teleportation spell, amplified by the spirits of air, nearly knocked Thrall to his knees.

"Thrall!" Jaina said urgently. "You need to come right away, something's happened."

Thrall shook his head to clear it. "What's wrong?"

"Doctor VanHowzen was attacked... and Reethe's body was stolen!"
"I apologize, Lady Proudmoore," Doctor Gustaf VanHowzen said, pressing a bandage to his arm. "I'm no soldier, I couldn't hold them off."

"It's not your fault," Jaina assured him. "Thrall..."

"Let me see," Thrall said, and reluctantly, the human doctor released his death grip on the bandage, giving Thrall a moment to get a peek at the deep wound. He gave him a look of sympathy, and let his fingers rest on either side of the wound. He called on the elements to bring healing to this brave man, and VanHowzen hissed softly as the wound began to knit closed. "You'll still need to wear a bandage, but--"

"It won't get an infection, and it will heal faster," VanHowzen finished. "Thank you, er, Warchief. I've been in the acquaintance of a number of healers, though I'm not one myself. Lady Proudmoore, what did they want?"

"Evidence," Jaina said grimly. "I should have searched Reethe sooner, or maybe even his body was damning enough. There's a conspiracy at work, Gustaf. There are traitors and I need to deal with them. Did you find anything before they took the body?"

"I found some papers I couldn't read, but they had a seal on them like the symbol you described," VanHowzen replied, and reached up to wipe the brow of his rapidly balding head. "Strangest language I've ever seen."

"Do you still have them?" Jaina asked eagerly. "They might not have--"

"They destroyed my office, Lady Proudmoore," the doctor replied, sighing heavily. "All of my patient records -- including yours -- are gone. I'll have to start from scratch, they even destroyed the archive."

Jaina glanced, almost nervously, over at Thrall, and he raised an eyebrow in reply. "Well, I'm sure you'll manage it, but I'll understand if you don't hurry. You need to take care of yourself. Is there anything at all left?"

"No, I'm sorry," VanHowzen replied, sighing again. "They even took the chunks of that Sc-- Forsaken that you brought in, but I don't even think we had the whole body. It seemed like it was missing too much."

"I couldn't get the arm away from Snowsong," Thrall murmured, only mildly sheepish. "She earned it."

"Did you see what they looked like, at least?" Jaina asked gently, distracting the doctor from the
rather horrified look he was giving Thrall.

"I saw masks, my Lady, and dark clothes. They were well-disguised." He shook his head. "It was
strange, though, to wear such dark clothes and such bright red masks. Seemed besides the point."

Jaina went still, and Thrall watched her. "Jaina, what is it?"

"Gustaf, I want you to report to the healers." The older man opened his mouth to protest and she
lifted a hand. "No, don't argue. You need to be taken care of. Your assistants can clean up the
mess. Warchief Thrall and I are going to investigate this further. This is getting out of hand if
trouble is being brought within these walls."

"Jaina," Thrall said softly.


Thrall nodded once, and Jaina patted the doctor's shoulder. VanHowzen gave Jaina a long look,
then Thrall, and it rather disturbingly resembled something his advisors would have given him.
Jaina stood up, taking one last look around the morgue, and crooked her finger slightly at Thrall.
He followed obligingly, and blue runes floated around them as Jaina completed her spell.

"What is it?" Thrall asked. "This is upsetting, but his description of the assailants bothered you."
Jaina was silent, and she moved over to her desk. She gripped it, her knuckles going white, and
emotion played across her face, going from upset, to angry, to disturbed, and back again. Thrall
moved to her side, and gently, reminding himself that he was not to act in a way that was
inappropriate for friends, took her hands, and encouraged them to relax. "Tell me."

"You must not use this," Jaina whispered. "I know you have spies in Theramore. I have spies in
Orgrimmar. We know that our friendship cannot ever exclude politics."

Thrall stiffened slightly, but nodded. "No, Jaina, I won't use what you tell me."

She nodded, paused, and then nodded again. "Let me show you," she said, and took her hands from
his, but Thrall thought there was hesitation there, though the reluctance could have been anything.

*Focus*, he told himself sternly. *Now is not the time.*

Jaina reached under her robes, and unlike the last pendant she wore, this one was simply a key. She
undid the clasp, and made an arcane sign over the key, and Thrall watched in fascination as the
key's shape altered, and then she reached down, pushing it into the lock of the bottommost left
drawer. She turned the key, and opened the drawer, which was deeper than it looked, for reasons
that Thrall could only assume were magical. Jaina lifted a small stack of papers, tied with a red
ribbon out of the drawer, and slid the drawer closed again, locking it once more.

"These are letters I've received from Stormwind," Jaina said, her voice holding a hint of worry and
fear. She slid the ribbon off of the pile, and opened the first one. "In them, they mention a problem
they've had. Stormwind's rebuilding project was actually started before the true end of the Second
War. Believing that the Dark Portal would never open again, Stormwind's king, Varian Wrynn,
returned there to start rebuilding the city, though that was delayed when Stormwind was raided for
the Tome of Medivh by first the remains of the Perenolde house and then the old Horde's Death
Knights. Eventually, though, the city was proven to be truly safe, and Varian commissioned a
staggering number of architects and artisans to bring his capital back to its former glory."
Thrall nodded, and a sense of unease grew within him. He knew quite well who Varian Wrynn was -- there was little Garona truly regretted, and he'd seen her kill more than her share of men without hesitation, but Llane Wrynn's death haunted her still -- and he didn't like where this might be going.

"The Stonemason's guild was, at that time, led by a man named Edwin VanCleef. His father was also a stone mason, though not as well known, and Edwin was a brilliant architect. He managed to restore Stormwind, and make it better. The canals alone are a work of art. When it was done, he submitted a bill."

"This doesn't sound like it's a problem," Thrall said. "I have no doubt it was very expensive. Our debts are not insubstantial due to the construction of Orgrimmar. I believe it bothers some of my advisors to consider budgeting within our meetings."

"Varian and his council refused to pay it."

Thrall stared at her. "What? Why?"

"I don't know," Jaina whispered. "I really don't. I thought Varian was smarter than that -- we're not close friends, but I knew him well enough, or so I thought. The official claim was that VanCleef and his employees were to have done it for free, in the name of patriotism." Thrall was silent, and Jaina nodded. "I know what you're thinking, and I agree. I think it's stupid too. It gets worse. VanCleef started a riot, and a lot of people died. Varian threw VanCleef and the Stonemasons that supported him out of Stormwind with nothing. The reports in the letters indicate that they formed a group of bandits calling themselves the Defias Brotherhood. Most of what's in those letters details their crimes to date. No one knows where they're based, but they believe it's somewhere in Westfall."

"I'm not sure what this has to do with--"

"Read the letters, Thrall," Jaina whispered. "Just... do it."

Thrall frowned, but nodded, and picked up the letters. He found himself genuinely appalled by the arrogance at some of it, but there were hints of something else as well: instability and grief. He made a mental note to ask Jaina about it, and continued to read. "There are descriptions of what the Defias use as their calling..." He paused. "Red bandit masks. It's distinctive."

"Yes," Jaina whispered. "No other criminal organization disguises themselves that boldly. If Gustaf saw them, it must mean that the Defias, along with the Grimtotem, some of the Forsaken, and this woman are all connected."

"What do they gain from this?" Thrall asked. "You aren't on the best terms with the other human nations."

"No, I'm not," Jaina sighed. "And Varian holds grudges deeply and bitterly. I'm concerned that the Defias being present here will bring Stormwind's army to Kalimdor... and they will not like what they find."

"Jaina..." Thrall whispered, reaching for her hand, and she took it, squeezing his fingers tightly.

"I can handle Varian," she said. "But if I can't investigate this further, you must. Please. Justice must be served."
"You can't offer yourself as a sacrifice," Thrall objected. "None of this is your fault."

"Nothing so dramatic," Jaina replied softly. "But I still answer to the Alliance. I can distract Varian from any march he may make into Kalimdor, but I won't be able to leave Theramore. This is only a precaution. It doesn't have to come now, it could come in a year's time, or two."

"You'll always have sanctuary with me," Thrall said, and instantly regretted his wording, but plowed on: "I won't allow one of my allies to be harmed. Come to Orgrimmar and you'll be safe."

"Thrall, I..." Jaina began, and tears swelled in her eyes, and Thrall watched her blink them away rapidly. She leaned over, and pressed a kiss to his cheek, her lips warm against his skin.

Don't... don't... he warned himself. "I mean it."

"I know you do," Jaina replied, and quickly wiped at her eyes. "Thank you."

"Now, this connection with the Defias leaves us exactly... where?"

"There's a connection between at least some of the conspiracies," Jaina said, sniffling slightly. "The deserters here don't believe we should be allied with the Horde, and I'd imagine many don't even want to be in Kalimdor."

"The Grimtotem believe that the tauren should leave the Horde, and that it was a mistake to join at all," Thrall added. "And the Forsaken hate the Scourge and fear the living."

"Living that are still citizens of Lordaeron," Jaina murmured. "The Defias, if they're involved at all, would hate Varian and his council, and may very well hate the citizen of Azeroth in general."

"From the sounds of their raids, they do, if they're attacking farmers," Thrall growled. "So that leaves this woman, and the dragons. I doubt they could possibly have let her live in their land unmolested. They drove out the Stonemaul clan."

"It could be that the dragons are controlling this woman and using her by proxy," Jaina offered. "There are all kinds of horror stories about the magic dragons can wield."

"My understanding of the dragons used by the old Horde is that they were very... straightforward in their methods of destruction." Jaina flinched, but nodded. "We need to find out who this woman is."

"I can try to interrogate the prisoners," Jaina said. She carefully folded and resealed the letters, returning them to their hiding spot. "They might know something. At this point, even a nickname might do."

"I'll go with you," Thrall said. "I've been known to be intimidating, from time to time."

"Only to those who don't know you," Jaina murmured, almost inaudible. "Alright, let's go."

Thrall tried not to smile, and waited for Jaina to cast another teleportation spell. This one brought them to Theramore's Keep. Outside, there were several people shouting loudly.

"No, I said--"
"--you didn't, Sergeant Alliston said--"

"--he's on leave, don't even try--"

"Gentlemen," Jaina said loudly, and the soldiers immediately stood at attention.

"Lady Proudmoore, we didn't see--"

"Me here, because you were too busy arguing. What's going on?" Jaina gave them both a stern look, nipping any excuses they may have tried to make in the bud.

"Well, Roland here said that Sergeant Alliston ordered him to move some prisoners," the first one said. "But Alliston is on leave because he's having -- his wife, that is -- is having a baby, and he wants to be there."

"I swear it was him," the second insisted. "Came right up to me, he did, and said that the prisoners from your Ladyship's raid of Lost Point Tower needed to be moved--"

"No," Jaina whispered and ran past them. "No!"

"Jaina..." Thrall called, and ran after her, leaving both soldiers to stare in utter bewilderment. It wasn't difficult to find the holding areas. There was only one other person there, and a cursory glance -- and sniff -- seemed to indicate that he was arrested for overindulgence rather than dangerous criminal activity. A much larger cell was totally empty, though it had not been unoccupied long. "Jaina?"

"They're gone," Jaina cried in frustration. "They could have known something, and they're gone!"

"This could go even deeper than we thought, if someone can fake orders to your own me--"

Jaina screamed wordlessly, in anger, frustration and misery, and Thrall couldn't help but flinch at the sound as it echoed, startling the drunk out of his stupor.

"Y'mind keeping it down?" the man slurred without opening his eyes. "You're as bad as them that came in here. Yammerin' on and on about how they was gonna die, and how Lady On-yee or something was gonna kill 'em."

Thrall froze, and looked towards the drunk. "Lady what?"

"On-yee," the man mumbled. "Somethin' like that. Somethin' like black."

"Onyx," Jaina muttered. "There are black dragons in Dustwallow, and there is another possible connection between them and this mystery woman."

"Dragons? Whare?!" the man sat up with a start, banging his head on the bars, and then, bleary-eyed, looked at Thrall. "Youse is an orc, ain'tcha?"

"I am, yes," Thrall said warily. "What of it?"

"Ain'tchoo supposed ta be wearin' armour?"
Thrall and Jaina exchanged a look, and unexpectedly, burst into laughter, though it was tinged with hysteria.

"Armour ain't no laughin' manner," the drunk said indignantly. "Not when it got all them spikes."

Impossibly, they laughed harder.

~ * ~

"Their lair must be somewhere here," Jaina said, pointing to the map. Thrall bent his head closer a little, admiring the detail on it. One of Jaina's hands pinned her robe closed while the other traced a line along the southern mountains. "The area wasn't well scouted, because we thought it would be hard to defend, and we mostly wanted to know where the ogres would be anyway."

Thrall nodded and frowned, tapping the mark representing the Stonemaul mound. "That's what the dragons were supposed to have destroyed. I believe there's a nest of caves nearby."

"Could they be interested in what's in those caves?" Jaina wondered. She sat up, and reached carefully for a short, pointed stick. She delicately poked it into a chunk of a banana, and dipped it into a pot of melted chocolate. She popped it into her mouth as she considered. "You know. It could be that they're looking for something. There are all kinds of things under the earth. Prospector Khazgorm tells me there are a number of fascinating artifacts in the southern Barrens."

"You know, their presence upsets the tauren a great deal," Thrall pointed out, though he kept his tone light. Holding his own short, pointed stick, he acquired a chunk of a strawberry, and ate it with great relish. "Mm."

"I do know, unfortunately," Jaina said, her tone apologetic. "The tauren believe it upsets the Earthmother, but the dwarves have strong evidence that they're from the earth itself, and that it's right for them to be digging and tunneling. It's hard to say who's right and who's wrong."

"It's true," Thrall admitted. "Fortunately, that part of the Barrens is mostly unoccupied. I hear some grumbling, but we mostly worry about the Quillboar."

"Fortunately, I don't deal with them, I mostly worry about murlocs," Jaina said. She picked up a mug, sipped her hot chocolate thoughtfully. "Disunity."

"I beg your pardon?" Thrall replied, giving her a curious look.

"This is about disunity," Jaina repeated. "Each of these groups is dividing a group of people, and in doing so, forces people to deal with smaller, individual threats. If I were this mystery lady, I'd take advantage of it to push my own agenda as far as I could while they were still distracted. My enemies wouldn't see it coming."

"You wouldn't do that in the first place, though," Thrall remarked absently, and retrieved another strawberry. "Your reasoning is sound. We need to fight this, and that means presenting her with a unified front."

"And that means solving all of this." Jaina sighed softly. "I've sent scouts to look for Reethe's men, but they could be anywhere."

"They could be at Lost Point Tower," Thrall pointed out.
"That's where I found them," Jaina argued. "It would be madness to go back to where they were caught."

"You assume sanity."

"That's a good point," Jaina agreed. "Catching them is a poor option... they'll just escape. Poor Alliston... he's been sweating the past few days."

"He's as blameless as we can find him to be," Thrall said, shaking his head. "But I suppose a good man feels guilt."

"I wish he wouldn't, it makes it hard to get him to work, and we need all the good men we can get, considering how many of them may be corrupt." Jaina sighed softly, and Thrall patted her hand in sympathy, the rush of chocolate making him less cautious. The past three days had uncovered a corruption that ran deep as a number of deserters had not been as vocal or obvious as Reethe, but instead had undermined Jaina's efforts.

"You're still supported by the majority," Thrall encouraged, and hesitantly added, "like your young chamberlain. She seems friendly and open-minded, particularly with one of our scouts--"

Jaina's stick fell out of her hand with a clatter. "Ariana? She's very kind. Both of her brothers and her father served at Hyjal and survived, by some miracle." She bent to retrieve her stick, and Thrall frowned, even as he let his eyes slide past the part of her neck and shoulders that weren't quite covered by her lounging robe.

"Is something wrong?" he asked quietly. "You seem nervous, and... I did overhear some of their conversation. I wasn't aware that any of my people had married a human."

Jaina's intake of breath was sharp. "How did you--"

"The spirits, though I'll admit it was by accident. I was meditating when I overheard them. Why didn't you tell me? Why didn't they? I've been visiting you regularly and none of you said a word."

"Thrall, I..." Jaina began, and licked her lips, toying with the stick. "They asked me to keep it a secret when they asked for my blessing. They knew that even now, most people don't accept humans and orcs being anything other than enemies, or tentative allies. Love... is unheard of. For some, there's too much violence between our people to even consider it." She lowered her voice, and Thrall could barely hear her. "It happens anyway. They're happy, even if they're apart a lot, and they have to hide what they share."

"So it doesn't bother you?" Thrall asked hesitantly, trying not to sound like he was hopeful, but something must have come through. Jaina raised an eyebrow and laughed shortly.

"Not at all," she replied. "More people need to be happy. Does it bother you?"

"No," Thrall replied honestly. "I admire the fact that they have such a strong relationship that it's overcome difficulties both obvious and not." Like anatomy-- He gave himself a strong, mental shake. "We've become distracted."

"We have," Jaina said lightly, seeming to relax. "I think I'd like to investigate Lost Point Tower more thoroughly, and more subtly. If Reethe's men really have gone back to it, that woman might
"That's dangerous, particularly if there are more of Reethe's men there," Thrall objected. "At least going by yourself. Bring more men--"

"She probably won't come at all, and even if she did, she wouldn't fail to notice so many people," Jaina argued. "I can protect myself. I did it before--"

"We don't know what this woman is capable of," Thrall replied. "You need to be careful. Promise me that you won't do anything foolish--" The communication stone warmed against this thigh, and he sighed, taking it out and thumbing it on. "Yes? Speak quickly, I'm in the middle of another meeting."

"Your meeting with Magatha Grimtotem has been arranged, Warchief," Shandel'zare said. "And the agent you wished to be present is also available. It's tomorrow morning."

"I'll be ready," Thrall said wearily. "Thank you."

"Lok'tar ogar, Warchief," Shandel'zare replied, and the stone cooled.

"Do you think she knows more?" Jaina asked curiously, and Thrall nodded.

"That's what I hope," Thrall said. "It's difficult to say, but I hope I can discern if she's lying. The Crone is difficult to deal with from my understanding, and most fear her."

"Good luck," Jaina said honestly. "The fondue is cooling."

"That will never do, there are still more strawberries," Thrall remarked, and reached for another. Jaina smiled warmly at him, and later, when he went to bed, his mind buzzed from the chocolate, and realized that Jaina never had answered him.
Thrall inhaled, taking in the deep, earthy scent of Thunder Bluff. Despite some misconceptions about cows and tauren due to their rather unfortunate resemblance, the orc Warchief often found that it reminded him of the camps that the orcs had set up when they’d been traveling across first Lordaeron, then Kalimdor. Some places had fixed longhouses that were far larger and more open-air than anything an orc would live in, and in other places, there were tents, some large and elaborate, others only large enough to house a single tauren, and all ready to be taken down and moved in a matter of hours, if not minutes.

The tauren braves that escorted them wished the blessings of the Earthmother on himself and Garona -- Shandel’zare had declined to join them, but she remained with the Kor’Kron in Dustwallow, keeping them in line -- and Thrall blessed them in the name of the spirits. He did not know the tauren as well as his own people, but what had drawn them into an alliance of chance motivated Thrall to keep their relations friendly. Here were Runetotem and Ragetotem, Lightning Hoof and Windreaver, all living peacefully high atop the mesa that kept their capital safe from the centaur, gnolls, quillboar and anything else that would harm their children.

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"They spent millennia traveling across this continent to avoid the centaur, not because they were cowards, or pacifists, but because while even a toddler might be able to defend itself for a moment, an infant cannot, and they must protect their children, and their clan's future. Thrall felt a chill move across his back, between his armour and his shirt. Not now."

He felt Garona shift next to him, and wondered if she couldn't detect his thoughts. They moved across the rope and wood bridges that linked the main rise of Thunder Bluff to the Elder Rise, the residence of those that instructed students in the ways of druidism, shamanism and the home of the tauren elders. The Grimtotem compound was not difficult to find, since it was composed entirely of movable structures, unlike all of the other homes, which were built with a sense of permanence.

"Someone doesn't want to be here," Garona commented dryly.

"Maybe she's got a prickly temper, like someone I know," Thrall replied, his tone equally dry.

"If I didn't want to be in Orgrimmar, Warchief, nothing you could do would keep me there," the former assassin replied airily, but Thrall heard genuine emotion behind it.

"I wouldn't dare to try," Thrall countered, though he was touched. "What do you think she has hanging in her tent?"

"The skulls of her enemies, obviously," Garona replied, and then fell silent. An honour guard of Grimtotem braves stood outside the main, large tent that housed Magatha, elder of the Grimtotem tribe. While the orcs respected their elders, the Warchief's position hinged on personal strength and force of personality. The tauren, or Shu'halo as they called themselves, were a gerontocracy, with
only the oldest and the wisest being qualified to lead. Cairne himself was very old, and his son would not take his place for many years. Rather than the young and ambitious, clan leaders were venerable figures such as Hamuul Runetotem and, of course, Magatha Grimtotem. The Grimtotem elder had taken over upon the death of her husband, and led what was known as a troublesome, quarrelsome clan with an iron fist.

A brave opened the tent flap to let Thrall and Garona inside. Despite Garona's pithy remark, Magatha's home did not have skulls, or anything remotely violent within it: there were cords that hung from one side of her tent to the other, and from each cord hung lengthy hanks of spun and dyed wool of various colours, which Thrall ducked around carefully as he moved. Here and there there were more balls of yarn in bright hues. Magatha sat at the back of her tent at a loom, and for a few moments, it clacked.

Disconcerted, Thrall exchanged a brief look with Garona. She gave him a slight shrug, and he knelt down, sitting quietly, and Garona did the same. More time passed, but Thrall let himself fall into a semi-meditative state. He would not misstep, not with this powerful, dangerous woman before him.

"You are Thrall, leader of the orc clans."

A statement, not a question. Thrall remained silent. The loom shifted, and Magatha set down her shuttle and stood, moving to where Thrall was kneeling, forcing him to look up if he wanted to meet her eyes. He noted that across each cheek were three marks, similar enough to the ones that were the sign of their enemy, and he tensed. Garona tensed as well, but less obviously. Thrall made a gesture, and she moved her hand from her side.

"What is it you want from me, orc child?"

Thrall forced himself to pause, because it was essential to appear both patient and deliberate and not spontaneous and thoughtless as the tauren elders believed so many of the young to be. *I wish I'd brought Drek'thar, despite how he complains that politics disinterests him. He has a mind like a hunter's trap.* "I want to speak to you about other members of your clan."

"I am not my children's keeper," the venerable crone said evenly, and moved to a chair. Like everything within her tent, it was simple: it was a glorified stump, both easily replaced and easily packed away. She sat, tucking her tail away safely. "What of them?"

"I wanted to know what interest Dustwallow Marsh holds for your children," Thrall began. "They do not speak to the other residents of the Marsh."

"There was a time we roamed all of Kalimdor, when what you call the Thousand Needles was a river, and Tanaris was a lake. My children will roam where they will." She gestured to Thrall. "Your people do not dictate to us where we may go. Nor do the..." Her lip curved in a sneer, "humans."

"Were it not for the humans, not just Kalimdor, but all of this world would have been destroyed when the Burning Legion came--"

"The demons came because of the Kaldorei being foolish and touching magic from the great Chalice of Life left to us by the Earthmother. I would be just as happy to see the arrogant elves pay for their foolishness." She made a soft, derisive noise. "I hope you didn't expect me to find this interesting, orc child. This is a waste of my time."
"Very well," Thrall said, and stood. Garona moved to stand, and he made a slight gesture that kept her in place, and moved to speak to her, meeting her eyes as an equal. He watched the tauren crone's lips curl back in anger, and let it fuel his own. "Your children, the Grimtotem, are responsible for the deaths of two humans and the destruction of an Inn that was built with the purpose of creating a bridge between the humans and the orcs."

"What proof do you have of that?" Magatha asked shortly, derisive laughter in her tone.

"The spirits themselves have told me that shamans were responsible for the fire that destroyed the Shady Rest Inn, and tauren hoofprints were found on scene. There were no guests in the Inn when it burned down, so only the owners suffered," Thrall returned. "Furthermore, I investigated the encampment that the Grimtotem have in northern Dustwallow, and I found these." He removed the scroll that contained the original copy of the battle plans he had taken. Nara Wildmane had worked quickly to translate them, and from his understanding, was heartbroken by what she had read. "There are more plans... more assaults on human holdings... and on tauren ones. Camp Taurajo and Mojache."

Magatha frowned at him. "I have no doubt you obtained this from my children peacefully."

"They didn't even know I was there," Thrall countered. "The spirits brought me exactly what I needed, and that includes this." Thrall took out a cloth, and carefully unfolded it. Garona and Magatha inhaled sharply at the same time. "We know that this is the symbol of someone who approaches malcontents and promises to make their problems go away. How badly do you want us gone from your continent, Magatha?"

"We tauren believe in the spirits, not as ephemeral concepts, but as real beings and threats. One of them is named Arikara. She is the spirit of vengeance, and comes in on the winds of unfavourable change. She has been seen by my children in the Thousand Needles." Her lip curled into a sneer. "She appeared not long after Mulgore was established, and it is for that reason we refuse to join your Horde. It is wrong, and we should have never agreed to any kind of pact."

"So was it wrong for me to save Cairne and his forces?" Thrall asked, his voice angry, his volume increasing at the end of the question, and only got louder. "Is it wrong that your people -- all of your people -- no longer fear the centaur? That you have a real home, and not something you'll need to abandon on a moment's notice."

"This permanence is weakness!" Magatha cried, and waved around her. "We've survived for millennia traveling--"

"And mine survived by destroying every enemy we came across, burning their homes and soaking their lands in blood," Thrall countered, his voice now low with such menace that made even Garona look at him. He ignored her. "Just because something has always been one way doesn't mean that it should always be that way, particularly when it costs lives needlessly. Maybe you don't want us here. Maybe this Arikara doesn't like it. We're here to stay, and the tauren are the Horde's allies. Even you." He took in a deep breath, letting the spirits of air attempt to calm him, and not fan the flames that stirred within his heart. He had never been corrupted by the demons, but there was something different there. Passion. "So tell me, who was it that helped your 'children' murder two innocent people -- a young boy and a woman -- who could have easily been your child and mate?"

Magatha sat, quiet and still. For a moment, Thrall could only hear his own heartbeat, and his own breathing. Garona was utterly silent, and may as well not have been there at all. Even the spirits
were silent now.

"At the beginning of the world, there were the golden mists of dawn," Magatha began quietly. "The Earthmother walked among us, and blessed our work. The green plains of Mulgore were our home, and that is the name we gave it -- Home. We worked as one, though some families became more powerful than others, but we all supported one another. The Earthmother promised to protect us from what could harm us." Her tone hardened. "She failed. There was something that lived beneath the world, a dark and terrible being. It touched the minds of some of the Shu'halo, those that lived on the edges of Mulgore, and they became discontent. Rage grew within them, and they took up the arms that allowed them to hunt, and turned them on their more fortunate brethren. We warred. Mulgore's grasses began to die, sickened by what we'd done. The Earthmother tried to stop the war. We didn't listen, and she became so upset that she tore out her own eyes rather than watch her children fight."

Thrall blinked. Cairne had told him as much, though it was different hearing it from the Grimtotem's perspective.

"With that, we were the Grimtotem. With that, we were damned. With that, we were driven out of Mulgore. We were the first to roam. The Ragetotem were once Grimtotem, but they left during the journey and returned to Mulgore to beg for forgiveness." She curled her lip. "The Earthmother was not the all-powerful protector that the others would believe. There are things beneath the earth that do not sleep, that overpower any protection the Earthmother gives when her attention wavers. Better to understand that now than be disappointed when she fails to shield us again." She stood, briefly, to select a drop spindle, and began to work. "The symbol is the mark of Awn-yee. She is the daughter of darkness and the earth. She can wear many faces. She came to my children asking for help ridding our home of intruders."

"So you said yes," Thrall began, but Magatha shook her head.

"I said no. Just because the Earthmother is weak doesn't mean the darkness is strong. We all have a piece of the darkness inside of us. Surrendering to that darkness means madness. I warned my son, Arnak, away from that path, but we are, as you know, a clan of troublemakers and rebels." She bared her teeth briefly. "If I've spoken my piece as the leader of the clan, if I strike him about the horns, and he doesn't listen to me, there is nothing more I can do except watch him die in an exceptionally stupid way." Thrall watched as raw, unspun wool moved through her fingers. "I can speak to them again, but if they will not listen, they will need to be dealt with."

"He's your son," Thrall said, his tone outraged. It was Garona's turn to put a restraining hand on him, and it startled him.

"I have other sons," Magatha said evenly. "And grandchildren. Sometimes, the herd must be culled by the wolves." Her eyes met his, and hers held no emotion and no regret. "If they are loyal to Awn-yee, they are no longer my children."

"What about the Forsaken?" Garona asked quietly, while Thrall was too stunned to say more. "There were correspondences with them, and the Warchief witnessed a conversation between the Grimtotem and a Forsaken assassin who recently killed a Theramore deserter named Paval Reethe, preventing him from being interrogated."

"There are Forsaken here in Thunder Bluff," Magatha said. "We correspond. They're here to rekindle their spirituality, to discover why it is they create such a blight on the spirit world. They are carefully warded. If there are others, they are not here as part of the cooperative effort between
the Dark Lady and the Grimtotem. You should be aware, though, that there are Forsaken who resent their treatment by the living, regardless of what excuse they may use."

"They aren't mistreated by the Horde," Thrall said quietly. "We do what we can for them, but our allegiance to the spirits is no less important than our alliance with them."

"There is a reason why they are warded while they are here, and guarded within the most spiritually powerful place in Thunder Bluff, but their resentment is not cooled by logic."

"What about the ones that are here?" Thrall asked. "Do they feel this way?"

"They wouldn't be here if they did, child," Magatha said shortly. "There are also lonely Forsaken, who have lost everything they have known, and are resented by their former neighbours, and feared by them. They want to know why the Light has abandoned them, or want to cling to their faith, which failed them much like the Earthmother failed the Grimtotem."

"I don't believe that's the way that faith works," Thrall said evenly. "Not to the Light, nor to the Earthmother."

"The fault of the young is naivete," the crone said dismissively, and paused. "You may leave now."

Thrall gestured, and Garona stood, and together they walked out of the tent.

"That was more informative than I'd hoped," Thrall said in an undertone. Garona nodded slightly, replying with equal volume.

"We were being watched."

"I know," Thrall said. "The spirits fled, but it was subtle."

"So it could have been a Forsaken," Garona replied. "I heard no breathing, it would make sense. Do you believe her about their avatar of vengeance?"

"I might," Thrall said. "But the question is, when exactly did this Lady Awn-yee contact them? There are many mistakes that the tauren could have made, and if Arikara is angry with Cairne... why has it only appeared to the Grimtotem?"

"You make a good point, though it may not be one Magatha is willing to believe," Garona replied, and Thrall drew out his communication stone and thumbed it on. Some of the tauren gave him disbelieving looks, and he ignored them.

"Shandel'zare, we're finished here," Thrall said. "Has Jaina finished her inquiries about the Defias?"

"Warchief, Lady Proudmoore departed for western Dustwallow hours ago," his advisor replied. "She's not in Theramore."

*She never said she wouldn't go... I warned her... "I need to go there. Now."

"Warchief--"

"Now."
"I'll be there momentarily, Warchief."

"Thrall--" Garona began, and Thrall turned on her.

"If you're going to tell me she'll be fine..." he growled, and Garona held up her hands.

"No," she replied. "What I'm going to tell you that if she's in any way under the effects of a disguise or invisibility spell, a large force arriving could tip off whomever she's managed to contact." Thrall was somehow unsurprised that Garona knew about the private conversation he'd had with Jaina, and reminded himself to lecture her about what privacy meant. Later. When she wasn't busy being right.

"So how do you suggest we approach this?" Thrall asked, and was surprised by the hint of desperation in his voice.

"Why, Warchief Thrall, with subtlety of course," Garona said, a slow, dark smile spreading across her face.

Thrall sat before the fire, just as he had before. The spirits of air caressed along the backs of his bare shoulders, and the spirits of fire watched him curiously.

Shandel'zare stood by his side, and as he fell into his trance, he saw the spirits of water around her, remembering that her calling, like Jaina's, was frost magic.

I'm going to sneak into the tower, Garona had said, braiding her hair tightly, the hints of grey in it gleaming in the firelight. You're going to follow me in by spirit walking. If you can distract our enemies, even for a moment, Jaina will teleport us away.

Assuming she trusts you, Thrall countered, but he'd already been undressing, which had caused Shandel'zare to roll her eyes.

Of course she will, Garona said, wrapping a cowl around her face, sweeping her hair into it, and showing only her eyes. The cloth muffled her voice, distorting it in a way that was almost magical. She loves orcs.

Thrall made a face at the memory, and forced himself to calm, to not simply sprint towards the tower that was within visual range. The Kor'Kron formed a protective circle around him, and he closed his eyes, inhaling deeply. Spirits of air, carry me. Spirits of fire, guide me. Spirits of water, help me. Spirits of earth, protect me. There was a feeling of warmth against his thigh. She's in place.

There was a rush of power, and Thrall opened his eyes, stepping out of his body. He ran, though distance had little meaning within the realm of spirits. It wasn't difficult to find the tower, and sure enough, Jaina was there, bright with magic to his spiritual vision. He could also sense Garona, who was strong but muted, warded by the clothing she wore. There was one other powerful presence, and it was standing very close to Jaina.

"--the next stage is to properly drive out the ogres from Dustwallow. Their kind is filthy, disease-ridden, and disgusting," she was saying. Despite what Thrall could see, he could not tell what she
was, and her voice sounded oddly distorted.

*She must be using very powerful magic to distort her form, Thrall thought. Awn-ye, daughter of darkness and earth.* He heard the soldiers cheer, and Jaina echo them. He moved to stand behind her, and put a hand on her shoulder. *I'm here.*

Jaina didn't react, though he didn't expect her to. The woman smiled warmly at the forces, and began to name soldiers, assigning them to different tasks. Momentarily, this left only Jaina within the tower, and Thrall tensed. He could see Garona lurking in the shadows, and knew it was only a matter of time.

"I'm afraid that I didn't catch your name," Awn-ye said, and Jaina hesitated. "Don't be shy, we're both human."

"Adalia," Jaina stammered. "Adalia Crestfall." He felt Jaina gather power, but it was still faint, nearly undetectable. "I'm sorry, this is my first time here."

"You don't need to be afraid," Awn-ye said smoothly. This close, Thrall could see her human features. She had brown eyes and long, black hair, and wore robes of red and black that were quilted in an odd way.

*Almost like scales,* Thrall thought, and missed Awn-ye's question.

"They murdered my brother, during the Second War," Jaina was saying, her voice strong with anger. "I don't see why we should just forgive them because they say they're sorry."

"You shouldn't, but Jaina Proudmoore will never see it that way," Awn-ye replied. "She's too blinded by her infatuation with their orc leader. What is his name? Slave... Serf..?"

"Thrall," Jaina replied. "His name is Thrall."

"It hardly matters, because all the orcs will pay soon." Awn-ye's hand rested on Jaina's shoulder, moving along the side of the concealing armour Jaina wore, and up her neck, fingering the bottom of her helmet. "Don't you agree?"

"Yes, of course," Jaina replied, and with one, swift motion, Awn-ye pulled Jaina's helmet off, and the human sorceress' hair tumbled out of its pinning to rest around her shoulders. "I--"

"That was a nice try, Lady Proudmoore," Awn-ye said. "But you're no soldier, just a very foolish, naive girl. Get out of my marsh."

"No," Jaina said steadily, and now her power was obvious. *You get out of mine.*

Awn-ye laughed harshly. "You have no idea what you're getting into, little girl. You have no power compared to me." Her hand tightened around Jaina's neck, and pulled her close, her face inches from Jaina's. "You can't hope to fight me."

*Garona, now!* Thrall called through the spirit realm, and saw Garona leap through the shadows. He gathered power, preparing to channel spiritual energy into a burst.

"What are you--" Jaina began, and Awn-ye closed the distance, pressing her mouth to Jaina's. Thrall froze as Jaina made a panicked noise, but Garona didn't, and Awn-ye broke away from her
with an angry, almost animal scream. Garona grabbed Jaina's wrist and spun her away from the other woman.

"Jaina Proudmoore, go, now!" Garona bellowed, and Jaina cast her teleportation spell.

*Well, that was utterly stupid of me,* Thrall thought numbly. He watched Awn-yee curse and gesture wildly, and Thrall sighed in relief. *At least Jaina is safe, and I can--*

"Do you think you can spy on me, you filthy orc?" Awn-yee hissed. "Your people are failures, and you will all come to the same end in death and fire!"

*How can she--*

Awn-yee gestured, creating huge glyphs in the air that smoked as they appeared.

*Fire!* Thrall thought, and retreated back to his body, and when his eyes opened, he gasped for air, feeling as if his skin was burning.

"Warchief!" Shandel'zare called, and knelt by his side. "Are you hurt? What happened?"

"Our enemy is more dangerous than I believed," Thrall mumbled. "I need to see Jaina... I..." He attempted to stand, and nearly fell again. *She could have destroyed my spiritual self. What would have happened to my body? Would they have waited forever?*

"You will calm down, and tell me what happened, or you will walk to Theramore," the troll mage said sternly. "What happened?"

Thrall told her, pausing only to drink the water she offered him from a flask. It was difficult for Shandel'zare to look grimmer than usual, but she managed. "We'll have to warn Brackenwall, proceed very cautiously, and prepare for the potential of a major assault."

"Contact the ogres, tell them what's coming," Thrall said, and with more strength stood. "I need to see if Jaina's alright. If she was harmed." There had been a strength to one of Jaina's statements, something that made it more than a lie, greater somehow. *There is so much about her I don't know. It's difficult to start a conversation about her past when people like Arthas and her father lurk there.*

Shandel'zare handed him his shirt wordlessly.

~ * ~

Thrall was amazed by two things. One, that Garona hadn't immediately fled the moment Jaina was safe, which meant that she felt this was slightly more than an inconvenience to her time. Two, that he had not yet seen Jaina at her angriest. He had seen her fury in several forms, but this was different. This was recklessness and anger that bordered on madness.

"I should go back there," Jaina was saying, waving off Ariana's offered blanket and worried look. "If she's managed to capture Thrall in his spirit form, he could die."

"Warchief Thrall is perfectly capable of defending himself," Garona said, her tone neutral. Her eyes shifted, and noticed Thrall. "Here he is." The guards with him bowed and left. Garona's posture shifted, relaxing from her tense, rigid pose.
Nice try, Thrall thought sourly. "Jaina, are you hurt?"

"Thrall!" Jaina cried, and moved towards him. "Did she hurt you?"

Thrall nearly laughed, but restrained it at the risk of sounding hysterical. "She couldn't catch me. Let me see your neck..." His hand moved to cup over it, checking for bruises or swelling. "Why did you go alone? She could have killed you."

"It was too dangerous to risk anyone else," Jaina said, submitting to his inspection. "If she hadn't... startled me... I could have gotten away in time, even without your help."

"She assaulted you," Thrall replied with a frown. While Garona's facial expressions were largely covered by her cowl, he could tell that she wanted to say something. He glared at her. Don't be inappropriate, Garona.

"I'll be fine," Jaina murmured. Thrall applied healing to her neck anyway. "Assuming that she didn't just make everything up, I can find, arrest and prosecute all of those soldiers, and they won't cause more trouble. I might not be able to stop her directly, but no more lives will be lost due to my oversight. I'll be sure of that."


"What?" Garona asked.

"You know what," Thrall growled. "Go."

Garona snorted, the sound all but lost, and left. Thrall took one of Jaina's hands, and led her to sit.

"Thank you for coming to rescue me," Jaina murmured. "I do appreciate--"

"Was your brother really murdered by the orcs?" Thrall asked unthinkingly, and cursed mentally when Jaina stiffened. Orc child, indeed. Stupid, son of Durotan, very stupid.

"I..." Jaina began, and sighed. "One of them, yes. I had two older brothers. Derek wasn't so much murdered as... killed during a battle where he had no chance, and no way to fight back against what killed him."

"Murder," Thrall commented quietly. "What happened?"

"Derek was the captain of the Third Kul Tiras Fleet, under my father's command," Jaina said, her voice soft. "During one of the battles near Khaz Modan, the Third Fleet was entirely wiped out by dragons. No one survived."

"Jaina, I--"

"Most of the orcs here weren't even responsible," Jaina said, her voice trembling. "The Dragonmaw clan was wiped out by agents of the Kirin Tor during the Second War when they freed the Dragon-Queen Alexstrasza. I was a child when it happened... an infant. I don't remember what he was like at all. Tandred does, but that's because he's so much older than I am."
"What did your father do?" Thrall asked quietly.

"He ordered more ships to be built to replace the old ones," Jaina replied. "He fought until the end... but he hated the orcs so much. It's amazing that he supported Terenas' plan for the Internment Camps. There was a time when I was afraid that..."

"Afraid that?" Thrall asked quietly. Jaina shivered, and Thrall retrieved the blanket Ariana had left behind, and put it around her shoulders. Quite naturally, his arm stayed there, and she leaned into him a little.

"I was afraid that Terenas and my father had some kind of a bargain." Her lips twisted. "To sell me to his son. I asked Arthas about it once, he was surprised that something like that could even happen, and swore it wasn't true. I guess it wasn't, but... I was always afraid. Arthas' sister was nearly married off to a near-stranger, but something happened at the last minute, and it went away. Tandred told me about it. It's just so... frustrating. To think that you could be manipulated by forces stronger than you."

"You can't be," Thrall said, and Jaina looked over at him. He swallowed, conscious of how close their faces were. "No one is stronger than you are."

"Thrall, I..." Jaina began, and very slowly, he brushed his lips against hers. She flinched, and he pulled away.

"Jaina, I..." Thrall began, and stood. "I must go. I..." He moved towards the door, cursing himself and the control he seemed to be lacking. "I'm sorry. I'm very..."

Jaina blinked in front of him, and he was brought up short. "Thrall, wait." She put a hand on his arm, and the other reached up to snake around his neck. Very firmly, she pulled him down until their lips met in a kiss.

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Thrall's arms moved around Jaina, and he tilted his head a little. He was conscious of a dozen things -- that Jaina had just been traumatized, so this was inappropriate; that humans had softer, more delicate skin and that she'd be bleeding if his tusks scraped the wrong place; that the blanket had fallen to the floor around them; that he was pulling her closer, and their bodies were pressed together; that he'd promised her friendship without burden, and this...

"Jaina..." he murmured against her lips, and reluctantly broke the kiss. There were a dozen things he could say, and they swirled in his mind, until they coalesced into one statement. "I wasn't lying to you."

Jaina blinked. "What?"

"When I said I wanted unconditional friendship, I meant it." Carefully, he thumbed over her cheek. "I didn't expect this. It just..."

"Happened," Jaina murmured. "It just happened." Thrall nodded, and kissed her again, and this time there was no hesitation, and her lips were warm and firm against his. "It sneaks up on you."

Thrall closed his eyes briefly, picturing every reaction he'd questioned, and some he hadn't. "I thought I would upset you. I didn't want to hurt you. I knew what you'd been through."
"I was afraid of offending you," Jaina admitted. "I don't know everything you've been through with humans, particularly not in regards to the Camps and... Blackmoore."

Thrall shivered involuntarily, remembering the bruises on Taretha's neck, the ones she'd tried to hide from him, and her staring, empty eyes... "Nothing quite that bad, but it was bad enough. We can take things slowly."

"Yes," Jaina agreed. Hesitantly, she let her hand rest against his wrist. "There won't be any obligations," she said, the reassurance in her voice almost forced. "We don't have to take this very far, and we can stop whenever we need to."

"That's just what I was going to say," Thrall replied, putting a hand over hers. "I have some time, if you wanted to talk."

"Let me give orders to my forces, and then we can talk," Jaina said warmly.

"I'd like that," Thrall said honestly. "A great deal."
The heat was sweltering, coming off of the ground in waves beneath him but Thrall remained still, his eyes closed. Around him, he could hear the shamans chanting. Midsummer was a time to honour the spirits of Fire, and Thrall was not so forgetful, despite what the last few months had been like.

The trials of the deserters from Theramore had been swift and decisive. Jaina had overseen their executions personally, and requested that Thrall remain in Orgrimmar, though they had discussed it at length later. James Hyal had still been unwell, but Jaina had taken a risk and sent agents to the Eastern Kingdoms to find his brother, Vincent, and urged him to come to Kalimdor. Vincent Hyal had been willing to run the new Shady Rest Inn that had been erected in a slightly different location. Jaina had ordered the site of the original Shady Rest Inn to be consecrated and made into a memorial for those who'd been lost. Jaina had personally warded the new Inn against fire and sabotage, and promised that no more lives would be lost in the name of peace.

The ogres of Brackenwall had anticipated an attack that had never occurred, and shortly afterwards, Mok'Morokk had openly fled a challenge by another ogre. From what Thrall understood, Draz'Zilb was quite pleased with Overlord Ogron. The Grimtotem were still seen occasionally in Dustwallow, but there was nothing more of Awn-yee or the Defias. Despite this, the past few months had been exceptionally busy, and Thrall had only had time to see Jaina a scant handful of times before duty demanded their attention.

Memories of that time made Thrall smile, though, and he had to be careful not to let his attention waver from the task at hand. He and Jaina had spoken more openly about personal matters, and those conversations had been in every way just as awkward as their first meetings after Daelin Proudmoore's death. Still, he looked forward to seeing Jaina after the fire dedication ceremony, as she had promised that she had time to visit Orgrimmar.

First, though, fire. Thrall felt a rivulet of sweat run down the middle of his back catching in the hairs. He ignored it, and instead reached towards the fire. The elementals within it produced no heat, and settled against his hands.

"Spirits of Fire, we honour you, on this the longest day of the year. We thank you for the warmth you bring us in cold times, the weapons we need in difficult times, and the power we need in weak times. Bless us with your power, guide us with your strength. We have fire in our blood."

"The blood is our power, and there is fire in our blood," the other shamans echoed back, one by one. Thrall felt the flames lick against his fingers.

We are glad to bless you, and may you keep the fire in your hearts strong, the fire spirits replied, and abruptly, the fire went out, then reignited, and Thrall had to pull his hands back. He opened his eyes, and smiled at his fellow shamans. It was good to see them, Zor and Seereth, and many of the others. Sergra had declined, but promised to honour Fire in her own way.
There's too much to be done out here, she'd said when he protested. There will be so many other shamans that you won't miss me.

I will always miss you, Thrall said sincerely. There is no greater hunter in Orgrimmar.

Flattery is a human quality, she'd growled, but sounded pleased despite that. I will visit again soon, Warchief, for dinner.

For dinner only, Thrall thought, but smiled. Jaina's company, as scarce as it was, was making the more pointed glares from some of his advisors -- namely, Naz'grel -- more tolerable. Garona had been oddly quiet.

One of the shamans offered him his arm, and he took it, standing. He groaned softly and stretched as the other shamans all stood, discussing the next part of the Midsummer festival, which involved fireworks, and mating.

It will be good to have Jaina here, Thrall reflected. We can spend time together while everyone else is busy--

"Warchief Thrall." Thrall looked over and frowned thinly. The speaker was wearing a loose cloth robe of red and black cloth, and his hair and beard were touched with red. There was a wild and intense look in his eyes.

"Neeru," Thrall said evenly. "Are you here to celebrate Midsummer with us?"

The other orc's expression twitched, and Thrall was not surprised. Neeru was a warlock, though not a servant of the Burning Legion... or so he claimed. Thrall was neither foolish nor stupid, and even without Garona's reports on Neeru's extracurricular activities, he would know that Neeru was the leader of the Burning Blade and a pawn of the Shadow Council. The Burning Blade were originally a loose, anarchist group of orcs that recognized no leader, and instead simply killed what got in their way. Somehow, their clan, if not their members, had survived the years between the closing of the Dark Portal and the trip to Kalimdor, and they caused trouble whenever they could, unconcerned about harming fellow orcs as well as humans.

"Not quite," Neeru admitted. "Though I can certainly appreciate fire... there is a matter I wish to discuss with you."

"I have time," Thrall said simply. "Walk with me."

Neeru nodded once, and they began to walk. Despite the heat, there were huge bonfires everywhere, and brightly coloured ribbons that had arrived from Ratchet adorned makeshift poles. Thrall caught one of the ribbons briefly between his fingers, letting them wrap around his wrist.

"Would you like one, Warchief?" asked one of the teenagers setting up blue and orange ribbon clusters. "We've got extra."

"Certainly," Thrall said gravely, and they gave him one, smiling and giggling. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Neeru frown briefly. He secured the cluster in his pocket, and continued to walk. There was an odd kind of chill as they passed closer to the Drag.

"It's very festive, Warchief," Neeru commented. "Is it safe to?"

"Naturally. The spirits will warn me of any unfriendly presence," Thrall said shortly. "Speak."

"As you know, I've been performing research about the Burning Legion on your behalf, and I've
discovered something of the utmost importance," Neeru began. "I have learned that the Searing Blade have summoned a powerful demon that could potentially cause a great deal of trouble." Thrall frowned at the mention of another, smaller group of Legion worshippers. "At some expense, I have found out that this demon is known as Taragaman the Hungerer. I believe they hold him there, ready to unleash him at any time from Ragefire Chasm."

"I'll have my agents look into it, thank you," Thrall said, a thin frown on his face. Neeru saluted, and Thrall walked past him, and out of earshot. "He's not lying entirely."

"Not entirely," Garona agreed, stepping out of the shadows. "My agents report that Taragaman's failed to be useful, and the Shadow Council's intention is to sacrifice him to appease you."

"Any word on Fel'dan's location?" Thrall asked, his lips curled into a snarl.

"None so far," Garona replied evenly. "Azeroth is only so big, we'll find him soon enough. Give it time."

Thrall closed one hand into a fist. "They shouldn't have come to Kalimdor in the first place. They were hiding within the Horde."

"There's a reason I told you the spirits couldn't be everywhere," Garona murmured. "You can't solve everything by yourself, Thrall."

"Can't I try?" Thrall asked, relaxing slowly.

"You can try, but then someone else has to remind you that you're not a god when you fail," Garona replied tartly. "Your escort will arrive shortly."

"I thought you were too comfortably dressed for a walk," Thrall observed dryly, gesturing to her matte black clothing and the cowl that covered most of her features. "Where are you going?"

"The happiest place on Azeroth," Garona answered.

"Undercity?"

"Alright, the second happiest."

"Hyal."

"Remind me why I waste so much time talking to you?" Garona grumbled.

"You'd be lonely without me," Thrall reminded her. "Felwood?"

"There you go," Garona replied. "I'm investigating rumours about some kind of cult there. Since the place is actively demon corrupted, I thought that the Shadow Council might be sticking their noses in there."

"Watch out for the Night Elves, I believe there are active Sentinel patrols in that area," Thrall warned her. "The Kaldorei are only sometimes friendly."

"Might have something to do with the Warsong lumber mill in Ashenvale," Garona murmured and Thrall winced. "They're here, and now I am not."

"Warchief Thrall." Varok Saurfang and Eitrigg of the Blackrock Clan were standing with a large patrol of Kor'Kron, and Thrall greeted his advisors politely. "We're ready to escort you to the ribbon pole dedication."
"Thank you," Thrall said, and fell into step. He smiled at the way the ribbons fluttered from every window that could support them. This holiday was understood by the Horde. Celebrating the elements, particularly fire, appealed to them, and not only that, fire suited the orcs. Orcs are passionate. Fire burns within us. That fire can strengthen us or make us blind.

Orcs and trolls waved from their windows. The trolls seemed to be enjoying the heat and taking this opportunity to don as little clothing as possible. Most of them seemed to wear only simple bands around their chests if they bothered with upper body clothing at all, and loincloths that hung low on their hips. Some of the more adventurous orcs had taken up the same style of dress, and it made for a somewhat distracting walk, but a pleasant one.

The ribbon pole had been erected in the same location as the tree had been placed for Winter Veil, and his people had wasted no time starting to dance. The drummers, also half-naked, were creating a steady, addictive rhythm. It was like the heart of the earth itself was beating, and Thrall could easily believe in the Earthmother, laying below them, listening as those that walked the surface worked.

"Who are we waiting for, Warchief?" Eitrigg asked quietly, and Thrall smiled.

"You'll know when you see her."

Saurfang frowned thinly. A scout came up and whispered in his ear, and his frown deepened. Thrall, on the other hand, watched with anticipation. From Orgrimmar's gates came a small procession. There were two, tall Night Elves astride nightsabers, and their mounts growled softly at the worgs that were stabled by the entrance. There were soft, mechanical sounds of a device that resembled a plainstrider, but was actually a machine, and the gnome that sat on it looked around curiously through his goggles. A ram bleated as it passed by the worgs, and its dwarven rider soothed it, but Thrall's eyes fell to the human woman that was not on foot, but floating on an invisible wind.

It doesn't surprise me you couldn't get a horse to carry you, Thrall thought fondly, remembering the tales of woe that were her equestrian experiences. The human woman met his gaze, her blue eyes sparkling with pleasure. Like many of Orgrimmar's citizens, she was wearing a minimum of clothing, and the thin, white cloth clung to her curves in the heat.

"Arriving from Theramore Isle, and Ashenvale, Lady Jaina Proudmoore, Explorer Dwaena Ironboot, Tinker Melvin Fizzywidget, High Priestess Tyande Whisperwind and Ranger-General Shandris Feathermoon."

"Excuse me," Thrall said, and moved to meet them. From behind him, he heard Eitrigg's chuckle, and Saurfang's pointed response:

"Don't encourage him."

~ * ~

"How did you manage to convince Tyrande to come here?" Thrall asked between kisses. Jaina's fingers, which had been tracing a pattern against his chest, paused when she did.

"I pointed out that you were just as much responsible for the victory at Hyjal as I was, which meant you would welcome her as you would welcome me." She smiled. "Well, probably not quite the same way you welcome me."

"Probably not," Thrall agreed, taking one of her hands and kissing over her fingers. "It's still a step
in the right direction for diplomatic efforts."

"They're still upset about Ashenvale," Jaina sighed softly. "I wish there was more we could do."

"I'm doing everything I can to make sure the trees are restored, but unfortunately, we do still need lumber." Thrall closed his eyes, and lay back against the pillows. "I understand how valuable those trees are, even if not all of my people do."

"You can't be everywhere, unfortunately," Jaina said, and brushed her lips across his forehead. "Nor can the spirits."

"Which is what my advisors tell me when I attempt to take care of everything myself," Thrall grumbled, but it was half-hearted. "I'm surprised you didn't bring a high elf with your retinue."

"Fiora was busy, she's running errands for me in Darkshore," Jaina replied. "And I couldn't very well force someone to come." She sighed softly. "I had no volunteers, though I don't believe it was personal. I think it has something to do with the fact you could bake pies on Durotar's streets."

"It is the longest day of the year," Thrall said, though he frowned. "It's not unprecedented. Is it bothering you?"

"I've hiked through worse," Jaina said, her tone honest. She reached up and traced along the sweat line that cut through the hair on Thrall's chest, and the combination of her voice and gesture making him smile. "Also, it's the first time in weeks I haven't had to field complaints or proxy meetings from Stormwind."

"Varian is upsetting you?" Thrall asked, a low rumble to his voice.

"Varian is concerned," Jaina corrected gently. "I'm not upset, but it's difficult to convince him of anything when we work through proxies. We don't even have the luxury of communication stones or scrying spells. He mentioned something about interference due to the Golden Spire Academy's magical aura."

"Is that common?" Thrall asked, half sitting up.

"It's not uncommon," Jaina admitted. "I couldn't be sure that was the actual issue unless I went there to check myself, and..."

"You don't want to go," Thrall finished. Thrall held out his arms, and Jaina settled into them. Jaina's apprehension was entirely justified: her own actions had placed her in a very precarious position involving the rest of the Alliance, and only the fact that the Alliance was now in tatters prevented greater action against her. Jaina's diplomatic efforts were constant attempts to prove that her actions had been justified, most of which were concentrated on Varian Wrynn. She won't even talk about trying to contact Kul Tiras...

"It would be best not to," Jaina said softly. "What does the Warchief of the Horde have planned for this holiday?"

"A shipment of fireworks arrived from Ratchet just recently," Thrall replied, accepting the change in topic with grace. "There are plans to launch them late tonight. The goblins setting them up have been strictly instructed to launch them outside Orgrimmar's gates."

"It would be terrible if something caught fire," Jaina said sincerely. "But I can't wait."

"Nor can I," Thrall replied. He leaned forward, and kissed her firmly. One of Jaina's hands moved
to cup his cheek, stroking over the smooth part just above his beard. He shifted her against him, and moved one hand down to trace the curves of her back and hips, and then rested lightly on the small of her back. He groaned, low in his throat as she shifted against him, and her breasts pressed against his chest through the thin cloth of her dress.

The knock on the door caused Jaina to jump, and she bumped awkwardly against his tusks, and he swore softly.

"Warchief Thrall, there is news from the Barrens." Thrall growled softly, too softly to be heard, but he wondered if Eitrigg had heard it anyway, or if he was simply that predictable, because his advisor added, "It can't wait."

"I'll wait here," Jaina began, and Thrall shook his head once.

"Join me," Thrall said. He stood up, and with regret, found a towel to dry himself roughly before putting on a shirt while Jaina smoothed her hair and clothes. When they'd collected themselves, Thrall opened the door. Eitrigg was waiting politely, and Thrall reminded himself that the older orc was very patient, but not without his limits. "What is it?"

"This way," Eitrigg said, gesturing. Thrall nodded, and followed him to the meeting chamber. Only Saurfang awaited him, and he frowned. "We felt that as those who were officially on call, we didn't need to call in the others, and we believed you wanted the matter to be private."

"Jes'rimmon isn't here," Thrall pointed out. Saurfang and Eitrigg exchanged a look.

"He's investigating another manner, but this came to us directly," Saurfang said finally. He presented Thrall with a report that was splashed with blood. Thrall touched over it briefly, frowning deeply. "There's been an incident in the Crossroads."

"Who brought this, Sergra?" Thrall asked, skimming the report.

"No, Sergra is..." There was another exchange of looks, and Thrall growled impatiently. "Sergra Darkthorn has been captured by agents of the Burning Blade and taken to parts unknown."

There was a loud, grinding noise, and Thrall realized with a start that it was his own jaw. "What happened?"

"According to the reports, a matter of importance and secrecy was brought to Sergra by Ak'Zeloth, who's normally stationed at Far Watch Post. She went to investigate and was captured." When Thrall frowned, Saurfang continued. "Ak'Zeloth is one of Neeru's subordinate warlocks."

"Thrall is aware of Neeru's true loyalties," Eitrigg was saying to Jaina, and the confused expression on her face cleared. "Ak'Zeloth may be responsible for Sergra's disappearance--"

"We're going to speak to him, now," Thrall said, his voice quiet with menace. "The Shadow Council may play their games, but this is deliberate. How long has she been gone?"

"Our messenger relays brought this through the watch posts over the course of the last day and a half," Saurfang said. "Warchief--"

"And where is Ak'Zeloth now?" Thrall asked. The orcs were about fire, and right now, that fire was burning within him. *If Sergra's in danger because of what we shared... I will not let Neeru get away with this, and may the spirits help Ak'Zeloth if this was truly his doing.*

"I believe he's still assigned to Far Watch Post," Saurfang said.
"Warchief, is it safe to take care of this personally?" Eitrigg asked quietly. "It could be as much of a trap for you as it was for Sergra, and even with Shandel'zare's assistance, we cannot bring an entire army with us via mage portal."

"We don't need to bring an entire army," Jaina interjected quickly. "A small but powerful force could take care of it, couldn't it?" Both orc warriors turned to stare at her, and she met their looks with confidence. "I'll help you. After what the Horde has done to help Theramore in general and me personally, I wouldn't even think to stand by and let a good friend of Thrall's be harmed."

"Her reasoning is sound," Thrall added. "We need to take care of this quickly. The Shadow Council is not known for its mercy."

"Sentient sacrifices," Jaina murmured. "Humans, orcs... anyone."

"I have been instructed that if you're to go off and do something reckless, you're to be properly dressed for it first," Saurfang said, a touch of dryness to his tone. "We await your command, Warchief."

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"Thrall?" Jaina called softly, and he turned. His armour was hot to the touch and uncomfortable to wear, but he bore it grimly. Jaina had been offered light robes by the troll mages that resided in Orgrimmar, and it made her look a bit wilder, though the blue and white robes were loose on a frame that was more slight than a troll's. Jaina had a worried look on her face, her lips set in a slight frown. "Who is Sergra?"

"Sergra is a shaman of the Earthen Ring," Thrall explained. "They're a group of shamans that have no direct political affiliation in Orgrimmar, but instead go where the elements need them. Most of them are hard to pin down, but Sergra enjoys her assignment in the Barrens."

Jaina nodded a little. "Perhaps I should rephrase. Who is Sergra to you?"

Thrall paused. "Sergra was one of the women that my advisors encouraged me to mate with. We were together several times before she went back to the Crossroads." He moved to pick up the Doomhammer, and held it, feeling its weight and history. It wasn't a mace in the strict sense that a human would see or understand, this weapon was a hammer with a jagged spike coming from the top, rough and almost unfinished. Orgrim had once told him that on long nights, it still felt wet with Blackhand's blood. If he closed his eyes, he might even be able to imagine Orgrim's pointed, dry observations. He should have been here, and so should Grom.

"You like her," Jaina observed quietly. "You're afraid for her."

"I do, and I am," Thrall said honestly. "That's why I want to rescue her as soon as possible. Are you ready to go?"

"I am," Jaina replied, and straightened. "I believe I've been to the Far Watch Post on our tour."

"I believe you have been as well," Thrall said. Unthinkingly, he moved to offer her his arm, but she moved away slightly. "I'm sorry, the armour is hot to touch."

"That's fine," Jaina said with a smile. "I should keep my hands free."

Thrall nodded, and led her out of his room. Saurfang and Eitrigg waited within the meeting chamber, though this time fully clad for war. Saurfang's blade was a thing of legends even within the Horde, and a number of extremely odd stories about his High Overlord's prowess in battle had
reached his ears. Eitrigg, by contrast, wore arms that were unobtrusive, and yet still totally effective. Eitrigg's tendency was towards defense, having once claimed that if an aging paladin could get through his guard, he needed to work on it more.

Eitrigg nodded politely to Jaina, and Saurfang frowned slightly.

"Gentlemen," Jaina said, nodding back. "Are you all ready?"

"By my Warchief's command," Saurfang replied evenly. Eitrigg nodded, and Jaina's eyes met Thrall's. She then began to cast the spell to teleport them to Far Watch.

_We're going to find her and bring her back safely_, Thrall vowed grimly. _And the Shadow Council will regret their actions._

~ * ~

Far Watch Post was the first watch tower on the east-west road that existed between Razor Hill and the Crossroads. This watchtower overlooked the Southfury River that was home to two fearsome, dangerous things: the current and crocolisks that plagued the coastline and had cost the Horde the lives of many of their young, incautious sons and daughters. Thrall had often thought that he would dislike having to deal with one directly, since they were fast and deadly on their six legs, and with their strong, snapping jaws.

It was late afternoon, and the sun over the Barrens was no less relentless than it had been in Durotar. The grunts at Far Watch nearly fell from their posts when Thrall appeared, giving them a grave greeting.

"We're looking for Ak'Zeloth," Eitrigg said while Thrall looked around.

_There must be an impressive bonfire in the Crossroads if I can see the smoke from here_, Thrall thought, and with a thought, requested a spirit of air to offer his greetings and sympathy for Sergra's absence. As it raced off, he listened:

"The warlock?" one guard said. "He went down to the river to collect water."

"How long has it been?" Saurfang asked sternly. "He's wanted for questioning--"

"Here I am, High Overlord," called a voice, and Thrall turned. He was younger than Neeru, and Az'Keloth was slight where most orcs were bulky. The hem of his purple robes were damp with water, and he did indeed bear two buckets that sloshed slightly as he set them down. Thrall narrowed his eyes.

Did you send Sergra to her end? Thrall asked him silently, and the warlock noticed his Warchief's gaze, and knelt.

"What is it that causes me to be the focus of your attention, Warchief?" he asked politely. "I believe it's the Midsummer festival in Orgrimmar, and I understood that you were busy."

Thrall frowned thoughtfully, and Jaina stepped forward. Thrall noticed a coil of magic in her hand. She reached out to touch the warlock's shoulder, and it uncoiled in a flash.

"We had some questions for you," Jaina said, a slight smile on her face, as if there was nothing at all strange about speaking to an orc warlock. "Will you answer them truthfully?"

"Of course," Ak'Zeloth replied. "You must be our ally, Lady Jaina Proudmoore. It's an honour."
Around him, there was a faint aura of light, and Thrall glanced at Jaina. She nodded back, though there was a slight expression of strain on her face, and Thrall realized she'd cast a spell.

*Let's see how good your spell is,* Thrall thought. "Did you know Sergra Darkthorn has gone missing?"

Ak'Zeloth frowned. "I'd heard something had happened, a relay came through here recently, but I didn't know she was gone. What happened? Is she alright?"

The glow remained steady, and Saurfang answered: "She was kidnapped after investigating a matter you brought to her attention. Can you tell us what that was?"

The warlock shifted, and glanced over at his fellow guards. "It was to be a secret, I was told--"

"This is an emergency," Jaina said softly. "Please, you must understand that this is to help her."

Ak'Zeloth nodded once. "My mentor, Neeru, recently set me to the task of destroying some demonic artifacts. In the process of doing so, I overheard a conversation through one of them. Like a kind of... of..."

"Communication crystal," Jaina supplied, and he nodded. "I've made a number of them myself."

"The conversation mentioned a demon that was being summoned somewhere, and thinking it was important, I reported it to the nearest member of the Earthen Ring," Ak'Zeloth finished. "She said she would look into it... I didn't think it was anything she couldn't handle. I volunteered to go with her, but she said it was better she investigated on her own. That was a few days ago."

Silence. The glow didn't waver, but the orc warlock's expression of worry deepened.

"Where was the demon being summoned?" Thrall asked, his voice a deep, angry rumble.

"Dreadmist Peak," Ak'Zeloth said. "I want to help, this is my mistake. I won't run like a coward."

"Maybe he can help us, if he's more familiar with demonic magic than I am," Jaina said quietly. "We're running out of time."

"Saurfang, Eitrigg, escort him and watch him," Thrall commanded. "We'll ride to Dreadmist Peak and--" One of the guards straightened suddenly, and Thrall's eyes fell to him. "What is it?"

"Communication stone," the guard replied, and thumbed it on. "Speak. The Warchief listens."

"The Crossroads is under attack!" the voice on the other end said without preamble. "We're defending the city, but we need reinforcements now!"

Thrall winced as the spirits raced back to him, repeating the warning. "Centaur. Jaina--"

"Immediately," Jaina agreed. "Tell them we're coming." She began to cast the teleportation spell, and a shadow fell across them. Thrall looked up, and saw the sky was streaked with red as the sun began to set. To the west, Thrall could now see that the smoke he'd believed to be from a bonfire was a fire in truth.

*Another delay... Sergra, we're coming. I promise.*
Chapter 9: High Summer, Year 27

Once the teleportation spell ended, Thrall was immediately assaulted with the scent of burning. Everything was aflame, from the apothecary shop to the main Inn. Immediately, Thrall called to the spirits for help, and oddly, huge chunks of ice began to fall from the sky, beating down the flames. Thrall turned, and Jaina was concentrating on the blizzard that was extinguishing the fire. He smiled briefly, and turned to the task at hand.

Saurfang charged past him, bellowing a battlecry, and simply began to cleave through them. Thrall paused at the sight, and so did the centaur, their red-tinted brown eyes wide with panic. Eitrigg waded into battle next, twisting and turning, agile despite his age, and striking centaur in the face and chest with his shield, his blade flashing in and out, leaving the centaur to fall to their knees. Thrall's eyes met those of a female centaur, her face and breasts both roughly covered by the same kind of ragged cloth, and her gaze flashed defiance. He smiled at her.

Lifting a hand, he called out to the spirits of the earth, and beneath her, the ground began to rumble and shake. She called out in her language, her fingers twisting and Thrall winced at the thundercloud that formed above his head, but kept concentrating. Lightning struck him twice, raising the hair on his neck before the earth swallowed up his adversary.

The centaur attempted to break and run. Saurfang didn't let them, and momentarily, they were all dispatched. Thrall moved to examine the dead, and frowned. Centaur wore little in the way of clothing, mostly bandoleers, but these ones wore armbands. He traced over the symbol: a golden sword surrounded by flame.

"That's the symbol of the Burning Blade," Eitrigg observed. "I didn't think the Legion employed the centaur."

"I don't believe that they do," Thrall growled. "This was a distraction. We need to find Sergra."

"I think I have an idea," Ak'Zeloth said quietly. "There's red dust on their fur. It's different from the brown dust of the Barrens. There's a place I know that has red dust, but... I don't know why they'd go there."

"Where?" Thrall demanded, turning on him. "Where did they go?"

"Dreadmist Peak," the warlock replied. "It's north of here and not too far. I'd made some observations and reports to my mentor that there was something wrong up there, but nothing ever came of it. The whole top of the mountain is dying."

"Your mentor--" Thrall began, but Jaina's voice cut in.

"It might be worth telling him," she said quietly. Thrall glanced over at her, and she smiled past her
strained expression, and Thrall noted she'd nearly single-handedly put out the other fires. "He probably doesn't know."

"Doesn't know what?" Ak'Zeloth asked, looking between the human sorceress and his warchief.

"We have little time," Thrall said, and whistled sharply. "Neeru works for the Shadow Council. He always has."

Az'Keloth's eyes widened. "He said we were working to help the Horde. To understand what controlled us for so long--"

"He lied to you," Jaina said softly. "But you can still help the Horde. Take us there. There is still time."

Az'Keloth nodded once, though his expression was still troubled. "Of course. For the Horde."

"Thrall, if you can scry a location near the Peak, I can teleport us there," Jaina said. Thrall frowned thoughtfully.

"Are you sure? You've expended a great deal of energy--"

"I'm fine," Jaina replied, and he noticed her cheeks had a slight flush to them. "As you said, we should hurry."

He nodded once. There was little time for formality or ceremony, but Jaina created a frozen, reflective surface and he concentrated on the mountain, parting heavy, dust-laden clouds to see the top. A half-dozen Burning Blade agents walked back and forth, patrolling and waiting. Just within the scrying spell, Thrall could see Sergra, bound and gagged. She had been beaten badly, and that was nearly enough to shatter his focus, but Jaina put a hand on his arm, her touch light.

"There. Is that enough?" he murmured, and she nodded.

"They'll take care of this," Jaina said quietly, indicating those within the Crossroads that they had saved. "We must go."

Thrall nodded, and his forces gathered. Jaina cast the spell, and they were away.

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The scrying spell hadn't shown him that it was going to be impossible to see. Thrall held a hand up to his eyes, trying to see past the thick, nearly choking smoke. Beside him, he heard faint coughing. He murmured to the spirits of air, speaking around the grit that surrounded them, and then there was clear, sweet air.

"Thank you," Jaina murmured, wiping her mouth carefully. "We'll have to be careful that they don't notice."

"I want them to," Thrall said simply. "Varok. Eitrigg."

"I believe the honour is yours, Warchief," Saurfang said, though there was a warmth to his tone that belied any apparent reluctance. "Go ahead."
"Thank you," Thrall said. Taking in a deep breath, he opened his mouth and... howled. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Jaina and Ak'Zeloth shiver slightly. He smiled grimly. This was the sound of the Frostwolf, and even before that, it had been the sound of the wolf pack, calling the hunt. It was different from Grom's hell-scream, and different from the raging cries of a frenzied orkish army. No, this was calculated. Planned. Come, you servants of the Legion. Come and face us...

Almost immediately, there was the sound of rushing feet. Saurfang and Eitrigg exchanged a look.

"After you," Eitrigg demurred.

"No, after you," Saurfang growled, drawing his axe again, drawing his thumb across it, and blood dribbled down it.

"I insist," Eitrigg said, and with a deft gesture, Saurfang charged in, bellowing a battlecry.

"Why did he do that?" Jaina asked, her voice soft with awe.

"To make sure worthy blood touched his blade," Thrall explained. "He thinks little of the Legion or its minions."

"Indeed," Eitrigg agreed. "I think little of them myself. I think I've given him a decent enough head start. For the Horde!" The older orc ran into the fray, and together, both warriors faced the Blade's guards, who may not have been more reluctant to fight them if there had been demons here.

"We need to hurry," Thrall said. "Come, Jaina. Ak'Zeloth." Jaina nodded quickly, and moved to follow Thrall. Ak'Zeloth hesitated, watching the Blade's forces fall to axe and sword. "What is it?"

"Did he lie to me all this time?" Ak'Zeloth asked, a hint of desperation in his voice. "I was nothing until he found me. Even after the Camps, I wasn't wanted. My mother... she did everything she could to keep me safe. The others never understood."

"Thrall..." Jaina murmured, and he put a hand on the young warlock's shoulder.

"Neeru Fireblade is not unlike Aedelas Blackmoore," Thrall said, his voice rough with emotion. "He seems to give, but he only takes. He used you, as Blackmoore used me. Come. I believe we can still learn much from your studies, as unorthodox as they may be, and you will be able to deal with any demonic issues we have."

Ak'Zeloth nodded once, and the young warlock stepped forward. "Their cave shouldn't be far. I've never been further in, there were always too many inside. Now, though, they're distracted." He gave Thrall a wolfish grin, and moved up. As Thrall had seen, Sergra was tied up and gagged, making noises against the binding that was little better than a dirty rag.

Knowing her, she's probably telling them that they'll all die, Thrall thought fondly. He moved quickly over to her, and with careful fingers, removed her gag, and letting his hand linger to offer her the same blessing of sweet air. "Sergra." She sucked in one breath, and then another.

"Thrall," she replied. "What are you doing here?"

"Rescuing you," he said, smiling. "Enjoying Midsummer?"
"I'd bite you if I weren't tied up," Sergra said with rough affection. Thrall knelt, untying her, and she hissed softly. Jaina knelt next to her, and began to rub the feeling into her arms. "This is?"

"Lady Jaina Proudmoore," Thrall said. "Sorceress and leader of Theramore. I believe I've mentioned her."

"I think you have," Sergra said, and studied the human sorceress through narrowed eyes, and Jaina concentrated on her task. Thrall checked his fellow shaman's wounds. "They're summoning a demon."

"Are they?" Thrall replied, his voice dropping to a low growl. "How soon?"

"Any minute now," Sergra sighed. "They used my blood, I couldn't--"

"Thrall, look at this," Jaina murmured, pulling up Sergra's shirt. There was a rough bandage over half of her right side. Thrall put his hand over it, feeling the orc shaman wince.

"How bad is it?" Thrall asked of Sergra, and when she shook her head, he cursed softly. "Jaina. I need you to take her to Orgrimmar immediately. I don't have time to heal her." He offered Sergra his hands, and helped her to her feet. Jaina immediately moved to offer her shoulder, and the orc leaned heavily on her, though the sorceress produced no word of complaint. "If you can come back, please feel free, but I believe you should rest too. You've carried us over half of the Barrens and saved lives. No sensible Warchief would expect you to do more."

"I'll come back as soon as I can," Jaina said, and Thrall resisted the urge to chuckle at the stubborn set to her chin. With her free hand, she carefully drew the arcane teleportation runes in the air.

"Of course," Thrall replied. "Sergra..."

His former lover smiled at him. "So, you've made your choice. It was a wise one."

"What do you--" Thrall began, but was cut off by the chiming of teleportation runes, and both women disappeared. "What did she mean?"

"I couldn't say, Warchief," Ak'Zeloth said, and looked around the cave. "I see no ritual, where could it..."

"Zineth xi nalek rhan Rathorian..."

"What was that?" Thrall asked. The words had made the hair on his neck stand on end, but it was more than that: the words were filthy, tainted somehow, in a language Thrall didn't recognize, and instinctively, felt good that he didn't recognize it.

"It's Demonic," Ak'Zeloth whispered. "Whoever it is, is saying--"

"That there are intruders within the chamber, and to deal with them," said a deep, rumbling voice, and as one, Thrall and Ak'Zeloth turned. The speaker was a fel guard, one of the Burning Legion's shock troops. It towered above them in the entrance to the cave. The demon's gray skin was nearly entirely covered by pointed, intimidating red and black armour, and in one hand he bore a wicked looking sword that curved at the top, and was nearly as tall as Thrall at the shoulder.

"You will, in fact, need to deal with the intruders," Thrall replied, and unslung the Doomhammer.
"Ak'Zeloth, do you know what binds him here?"

"I have an idea, but it will take time," the young warlock. The demon looked past Thrall, towards his companion, and its lips twisted into a smile. "You'll need to distract it."

"I believe I can do that." Thrall extended his arm, and lightning began to crackle around the Doomhammer. His grip shifted, and he moved to impose himself between the demon and the warlock. There was a sound not unlike thunder when their weapons met.

The spirits of air helped Thrall. When he'd been a gladiator, there had been no soft whisper on the wind to let him know where a sword might swing down, and the earth had not told him where it was safe to dodge, and warned him of potential missteps.

A rock behind me and to the left... Thrall stepped backwards quickly, around the rock. Cave wall juts out here, when he swings I can duck around it... A shower of sparks as the sword came around, and a chunk of it flew towards the altar, clattering off of the back of the cave. Ak'Zeloth is moving... He was putting his hand on the device.

"Master Neeru?" the young warlock called into the device, and the demon smiled again.

"Ak'Zeloth?" Neeru snapped through the other side. "What is it? Did Rathorian come through? The demon."

"Yes, he's here," Ak'Zeloth replied. "Master, is it true? Do you serve the Shadow Council?"

"What?" Neeru demanded. "Is that what you're using the Demon Seed for? It's a priceless artifact!"

"I want to know," Ak'Zeloth insisted, and Thrall twisted around the demon, crushing a section of its shoulder armour. "I think it's important."

"Of course I do, don't be a fool," Neeru replied crankily. "This new order will fail soon enough. We draw our strength from the Legion, not this elemental foolishness. The demons will win out."

"I see," Ak'Zeloth whispered. "The strength is in our blood."

Thrall gritted his teeth, and swung the Doomhammer hard, and it crashed against the demon's arm. He bellowed, and began to chant in the same, terrible language they'd heard earlier.

"Are you going to stop wasting my time?" Neeru demanded. "I have things to take care of."

"Yes, Master, I'll stop wasting time," Ak'Zeloth replied. Thrall turned again, and out of the corner of his eye, he saw Ak'Zeloth reach for the rock. He muttered, and in his hand the rock turned red, burning his skin. The young warlock gritted his teeth, and raised it above his head, a dull, reddish tint to his eyes. "Our strength... is in... our blood!" He brought the rock down and it shattered what Neeru had called the Demon Seed.

The demon cried out, and Thrall watched as fel runes appeared along its arms and legs, swirling to bind it. Thrall backed away, and looked over towards the young warlock. Blood trickled down his face, and his eyes burned bright and red.

"No... why..?" the demon gasped out.
"The strength... in our blood... comes from the elements..." Ak'Zeloth forced out, "And our
Warchief. Not... from you. Never... from you!" Quickly, he traced fel runes in the air, and Thrall
was reminded of Jaina's teleportation spells, though this seemed reversed somehow. "Be...
banished... back to the Nether... and tell them... we are not all weak!"

The demon snarled something, and winked out. Ak'Zeloth stood, one hand still out, breathing
heavily. Carefully, Thrall moved towards him, and carefully put a hand on his shoulder. Contact
seemed to break his resolve, and Ak'Zeloth slumped against him, though Thrall shouldered his
weight easily. Thrall moved to heal his cheek, and he saw that what had been bleeding had healed
in a scar that moved straight down along his cheek, and with a start, he realized that he had seen
these kinds of worn scars before, on Neeru and on some of the others.

This must be the sign of a great working, Thrall thought. It marks them. He shook Ak'Zeloth
lightly, and the young warlock moaned. "You did well, but now we need to--"

"Warchief, we have disposed of the Burning Blade here," Saurfang called, and Thrall saw him
salute. His weapon was slick with blood, though he himself seemed to be largely uninjured. Quite
the opposite: he seemed to be more alive than he usually was.

Politics don't suit a warrior, Thrall thought ruefully, though he noticed that Eitrigg was just as
energetic, though he seemed to be more subdued about it. "Did you take prisoners?"

"There are a few," Eitrigg said. "Most of them made it difficult to capture them."

"I'm sure our Spymaster will find something to do with them," Thrall muttered, though he looked
down towards the young warlock. "Ak'Zeloth?"

"I'm awake, Warchief," he muttered. "I'm sorry."

"You did well," Thrall told him. "I have a proposal for you in regards to the advisory council..."

"Why don't you just ask the human, too?" Saurfang muttered, but before Thrall could comment,
there was a sound like chiming, and Thrall turned his head towards it.

"Jaina, I--"

"It's good to see you too, Warchief," Shandel'zare replied, giving him an exceptionally stern look,
her gaze sweeping over her fellow advisors, and the warlock leaning heavily against Thrall. "I see
you've gotten into trouble while I was visiting with my sisters."

"How are Sergra and Jaina?" Thrall asked, ignoring her recrimination. "We'll need to see another
healer."

"Sergra is being taken care of by healers," Shandel'zare said. "Lady Proudmoore is with her, and it
was felt that she should rest. She's keeping Sergra company."

"That's unfortunate," Eitrigg murmured, and Thrall turned slightly, even as Saurfang dragged one
of the Burning Blade agents over to the troll mage.

"Why do you say that?" Thrall asked curiously.

"Think about it," Eitrigg said, grabbing a second Burning Blade agent, slapping him hard, and
hailed him to his feet. The agent groaned, and Eitrigg nodded with satisfaction. "You had an intimate relationship with Sergra."

"Yes..." Thrall said, and watched as Shandel'zare began to cast the teleportation spell.

"And now she's speaking to Jaina," Eitrigg continued, and Thrall made a noise in the back of his throat.

*I dislike that everyone seems to know my business, and if this is Garona's fault...* There was a sound within his mind like a click as something fell into place. "Oh. Damn."

"Indeed, Warchief," Eitrigg said, and the spell completed, taking them all to Orgrimmar.

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*There it is... the door...* Thrall thought apprehensively. *The gateway to ultimate humiliation.*

"You have to go in some time," Shandel'zare said sternly. "Face your destiny."

"Maybe it won't be so bad," Thrall muttered. He glanced at his advisor briefly, though she offered him no succor. Sighing, he knocked on the door, interrupting a peal of laughter.

"Come in!" Sergra called, and Thrall was pleased to note her volume, despite his trepidation about this, and opened the door. She was laying in bed, bandaged expertly, and there was good colour to her skin. Jaina was perched on a chair, sipping some kind of pungent liquid. She smiled over at Thrall warmly as he looked between the two of them.

"This is your idea of resting?" Thrall asked, his lips twitching and threatening a smile.

"It's very restful, Warchief," Jaina replied, looking up at him with eyes that sparkled mirthfully. "Sergra and I were just discussing you."

"Of that, I have no doubt," Thrall said, his sour tone belying what had to be a smile. His cheeks hurt too much for it to be anything else. "How are you both feeling?"

"Well enough," Sergra said. She let a hand rest on her side, and sighed. "I take it that fighting the minions of the Burning Legion wasn't challenging?"

"Not very, once you'd weakened them all for me," Thrall replied, and moved to sit on the bed. "I'd like you to stay in Orgrimmar for a few days to make sure you recover fully. We can have dinner."

"Just dinner, I'd imagine," Sergra replied lightly, and looked over at Jaina, who concentrated very hard on her mug. "I'd like that."

Thrall began to reply, but there was a look in Sergra's eye. It wasn't anger, or resentment, just a genuine fondness. *I'm sure she has the wrong idea about us, that things have progressed further than they actually have,* Thrall thought with a touch of exasperation. *But Sergra was never one to be argued with...* "Jaina, we should let her rest." He leaned forward, and gave Sergra a kiss on the forehead, keeping the gesture platonic, and she gave him a kiss on the cheek in reply. Thrall offered Jaina his arm, and she took it.

Thrall walked with Jaina out of the room, and closed the door behind him, though not before
catching the suggestive gesture Sergra was making. He glared at her before closing the door firmly.

"She's very nice, and very knowledgeable," Jaina murmured as they walked. "And she seems fond of you."

"I usually consider her to be a good friend," Thrall replied, though his voice was a low growl. "Usually. I'm concerned that her mental health has been compromised."

"She wanted to know about us," Jaina said quietly, and Thrall shivered slightly. "Thrall, when you were looking for a mate, why didn't you choose her?"

There wasn't silence, but only because Thrall could hear his heartbeat pounding in his ears. Distantly, he could hear the popping sound of fireworks, and realized that it must have been near midnight. Unthinkingly, he let Jaina lead him to his own chambers, and sit him down. Slim hands took the Doomhammer from him and set it aside, then began to unbuckle his armour. As each piece was taken off, a different kind of weight settled onto him.

_It's a simple question_, he thought as Jaina divested him of the last of it, leaving him in his shirt and pants. _I didn't want Sergra to be my mate because something was missing. Just say that._ "Jaina..."

"We were talking," she said, and moved to stand in front of him, and reached out to touch his cheek, thumbing over the smooth part of it. "I like her, and she seems nice, but I remember what you said, and what you were afraid of. Did you ever tell her?"

"I... no," Thrall admitted. "I should have, I just... didn't feel comfortable doing so."

"I see," Jaina said, and gave him a half-smile. She leaned down, and kissed him, and one of his hands came around to rest against the small of her back. Her lips moved slowly and carefully against his mouth, and he opened it carefully, making sure his tusks didn't scrape against her tender, human flesh. His thumb stroked over her lower back, and despite the warmth that still lingered, she shivered, moving closer, pressing the curves of her body into his chest, and separate from the summer night's heat, there was a feeling of growing warmth, and his arm tightened around her a little.

The knock on the door shocked them both as Jaina pulled away from him with an audible gasp. Knowing that it would be both uncharitable and an abuse of power to ask the spirits to sweep the person who'd interrupted them away, he cleared his throat. "What is it?"

"I apologize for interrupting your rest," Eitrigg called. "Warchief, there's been an incident in the Cleft of Shadows."

"You should take care of that," Jaina said, her voice soft. Thrall met eyes that glittered with both want and exhaustion, and saw the way her lips parted just so, pinker now from kissing, and nodded once.

"You should rest, you're still worn out," he replied, and stood. He gave her a much gentler kiss when she nodded, and collected his armour. Eitrigg was waiting for him outside the door, and offered no commented.

"The guards that patrol the Cleft of Shadows reported unusual activity from around the time that you left. The reports we collected indicated that there was some kind of disruption or noise by
Ragefire Chasm. At the time, Neeru claimed he would take care of the issue. He disappeared into it and never returned." Thrall growled, and Eitrigg nodded. "They think he might be mustering the Searing Blade, since he has been discovered."

"That must be where he was keeping the other half of the Demon Seed." Thrall's expression set with grim determination. "I had planned to let the Shadow Council stew while I hedged in Neeru's power, but the recent developments have caused me to change my mind."

"Hopefully Garona will bring us back useful information about the Shadow Council's leadership," Eitrigg said, and added with slight hesitation, "And that she'll survive the process."

"She's very good at fending for herself," Thrall replied. "And she's aged well. I'm sure she'll be back within the week, complaining about how stupid they all are."

"Doubtless," Eitrigg agreed. "I'll call the Kor'Kron."

Thrall nodded, and watched as a few goblins shouted back and forth to each other across empty crates. "We missed the fireworks, didn't we?" Thrall asked quietly, and Eitrigg nodded.

"We did make an equally impressive display," Eitrigg reminded him. "Particularly Ak'Zeloth."

"Arrange something extra," Thrall said quietly. "On the beach. It's the crowning point of the holiday, after all."

"As you command, Warchief," Eitrigg said, offering him a salute. Thrall nodded once, and listened to Eitrigg with half an ear.

_The Searing Blade hides within Ragefire Chasm... that area is unstable enough, and has been a danger since we created Orgrimmar. It was unfortunate that even Rexxar could never secure it. I'm shocked they even took the risk, though I suppose it was very covert--_ Thrall stopped walking, and Eitrigg paused.

"Warchief?" the elder orc asked, and Thrall smiled.

"Assemble the Kor'Kron, but don't send them in," Thrall said. "I have a plan. This will take care of the problem quickly and efficiently. You're certain that Neeru is with them?"

"Reasonably so," Eitrigg said, and frowned. "What do you have in mind?"

"Evacuate the Cleft of Shadows," Thrall said. "The judgement of the elements comes."

Eitrigg paused, looking at Thrall, and then moved to do as he was ordered. Thrall walked out of Grommash Hold, and looked over at the likeness of Mannoroth that sat directly outside the entrance. _Grom might approve of this plan, reckless as it is._ He closed his eyes, and let his senses expand. He could sense Jaina, curled up in bed, resting quietly, drained of much of her power. He could not caress her in such a manner, but his hand made the motion anyway. He continued to seek, moving more towards the stronghold of the Searing Blade, and within it sensed the unstable earth spirits. Already agitated by the actions of the warlocks, it was easy to attract their attention, and to submit to a simple request. All Thrall had to do... was wait.

"The Kor'Kron are assembled, and ready," Eitrigg said, his voice distant as Thrall kept the earth spirits at bay.
"Tell them to wait at the entrances, but not to go near the Chasm," Thrall said. "They'll see why soon enough."

"As you command," Eitrigg said. Thrall could sense Saurfang amongst them, and when they were in place, he offered a single, mental command.

Now.

There was a sound like thunder, but it rolled, long and low. The buildings around them shivered, and people lunged to prevent objects from falling off shelves. There was the sound of glass tinkling as a few things were missed, or considered less valuable than others.

"Warchief, the Chasm is shaking apart! It's going to collapse!" one of the grunts called. Thrall didn't respond, and simply let the earth spirits flow. Stone fell, and sure enough, the entire thing began to collapse in slow motion. There were shouts as those that were fast enough to realize what was happening ran towards the entrance, and High Overlord Varok Saurfang. Thrall could picture his advisor, one hand on his axe, expectant, enough fire behind his eyes to cow even minions of the Legion.

He opened his eyes, and walked towards the Cleft of Shadows, Eitrigg keeping pace with him. When he arrived, Neeru and a handful of others were waiting, surrounded by guards.

"It seems you've flushed out the rats," Saurfang commented. "What do we do with them, Warchief?"

"They are under arrest," Thrall said simply. "For consorting with the forces of the Burning Legion, and the assault and kidnapping of Sergra Darkthorn, member of the Earthen Ring." Thrall smiled slowly, his eyes meeting Neeru's wild, desperate gaze. "Take them away. The spirits will judge them."

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"The view from this section of the beach is fantastic," Jaina commented. The large, blue-white moon rested low on the horizon, having just come up, and the light from it illuminated Jaina's hair just enough that Thrall could catch the highlights, and the breeze pushed strands back from her face. Thrall smiled warmly.

"It is an excellent view," Thrall agreed, though his eyes were not on the ocean. The moon reminded him of the Night Elves' belief in the goddess Elune, and that led him into thoughts of Orgrimmar's other guests. "You spent quite a bit of time in conference with Tyrande today. Was she suitably entertained during yesterday's adventures?"

Jaina nodded slightly. "Your people were good to her and the other guests. They were happy, but worried since we both disappeared so abruptly. I explained the situation."

"What did they say?" Thrall asked, offering Jaina his arm. When she took it, he guided her down the beach, walking at a leisurely pace.

"They don't approve of fel magic or warlocks, of course, but they think you handled it well, and Tyrande said that in some ways, Ak'Zeloth reminded her of Illidan." She smiled, and shook her head. "I can't imagine it. Everything I've heard about Illidan makes him seem very different."
"Ten thousand years in jail might do that to a person," Thrall commented. "I believe that Ak'Zeloth will be an asset to the council." He moved his free hand to pat hers. "Did you know Neeru tried to get onto the council for months?"

"He must have wanted inside information for the Shadow Council," Jaina noted, smiling up at him. "The understanding I was given by some of your advisors was that you were trying to keep an eye on the known Shadow Council members, but that must not be possible considering the unfortunate accident with the Ragefire Chasm."

"Indeed, it was unfortunate, and I hope it didn't disturb you when you were sleeping," Thrall replied lightly. "We had a vermin problem that needed solving."

"Nothing too serious, I hope," Jaina asked, her tone equally light.

"Not at all, and I think we've solved it for good," Thrall replied, and Jaina gasped, though not at his words. On the beach sat a pair of chairs, designed to be reclined on in the sun, sitting in just the right spot to watch something over the ocean, and in the distance, there was the silhouette of a small barge. There was the faint sound of angry goblins, arguing over explosive yield. "What do you think?"

"I can't believe it," Jaina murmured. "Particularly not on such short notice."

"It wasn't fair that I invited you here for Midsummer and you missed the best part," Thrall replied gently, reaching to touch her cheek lightly. "I made a few arrangements. Would you like to watch the Midsummer fireworks with me, Lady Proudmoore?" he asked, his tone mock-formal.

"Warchief Thrall, I would be honoured," Jaina replied with the same kind of tone. She moved to sit in the chair, and he sat next to her, though his chair creaked slightly ominously. "If it breaks, I think there's a blanket here," she said.

"Hopefully it won't," Thrall replied, and put an arm around her. She settled against his side, listening to the waves lap against the shore, and the intermittent rantings of goblins. Thrall made a gesture, and a spark rose from his hand, arcing up, over them.

"Got it, boss!" one of the goblins cried, and after a few moments, the display started. Thrall watched them, only partly interested in them, despite their bright colours and loud noises. Instead, he watched Jaina's expression flicker in the coloured firelight. Blues, greens, reds and golds reflected on her hair, and after a moment, he tilted her chin upwards. He leaned in to kiss her, and there was the sound of something hitting the water. He felt her pull back, and he looked out towards the ocean.

"Do you need help?" he asked, though his tone was somewhat irate, even to his own ears.

"That's comin' out of your pay!" they heard from the barge. "The show will go on, boss. Keep watchin'!"

"They're very resilient," Jaina murmured, and Thrall nodded, returning to the task at hand. He thumbed over her cheek, and leaned in once again.

"They are," Thrall agreed. "Joyous Midsummer, Jaina."
"Joyous Midsummer, Thrall," she murmured before their lips met, and the next fireworks explosion made hardly any sound at all.

~ * ~

"So, the Shadow Council's influence is gone from Orgrimmar?" Jaina asked, and Thrall smiled, though she couldn't see him through the communication crystal. Around him, people went about their business in Grommash Hold, particularly his advisors, though Shandel'zare had disappeared some time earlier. She had said nothing, and he simply assumed that she would tell him when she was ready, and no sooner.

"That's the intention, though whether or not that's true is hard to say," Thrall replied. "It seems as though Neeru was bad at being subtle. Why he didn't think I'd notice his plans sooner, I'll never know."

"Unfortunately for him, he underestimated you," Jaina said. "Have you had a chance to look over the new fishing treaty? I revised the old one, and I think this will work out better for both Theramore and Durotar."

"I must admit, I haven't had the chance--"

"Warchief," Shandel'zare said crisply. "I require your assistance."

Thrall looked up, frowning, though that expression immediately shifted to concern. Garona leaned heavily against the troll mage and orc warlock that supported her, and around his new scars, Az'Keloth looked worried. "Jaina, something has come up. We'll speak again later."

"Of course," Jaina replied, and the magic within the crystal faded. Immediately, Thrall stood.

"What happened?" Thrall demanded. "Garona."

The half-orc Spymistress gave him a look that would have been smug had it not been clouded with pain. "I found the Shadow Council."

"You need a healer," Thrall said, and moved to her side. Shandel'zare made a harsh noise in the back of her throat, and she and Az'Keloth started walking, bringing Garona to a private chamber to be healed. "If we could have some privacy?"

"Come, young one," Shandel'zare said, jerking her head. "Leave them to this."

"Is that really her?" Az'Keloth demanded. "The Garona Halforcen?"

"If there's more than one of me, we're all in trouble," Garona said wearily. "Go away."

Az'Keloth, being young but not unwise, left. Shandel'zare snorted and followed, leaving the two of them alone.

"That was unnecessary," Thrall chided her. "He's new, and young." He gestured. "Take them off."

"This is payback for all the times I've walked into your room while you're naked, isn't it?" Garona asked, though she undid the belt of her pants, and hissed as she let them fall. Thrall made a similar noise, though in sympathy rather than pain: long, thin pieces of wood had driven their way into her
skin, and the exposed ends were stained with the half-orc's blood.

"Nothing of the kind," Thrall told her, and knelt. He drew on the spirits of water, those that soothed hurts and used the natural fluids in the body -- blood and water -- to help ease each splinter out. The spirits guided his fingers to remove each one, whole, though after the first, Garona dug her fingers into Thrall's shoulders rather than cry out to express the pain she had to have been in. "What did you find?"

"The Shadow Council created a base in a place they call Jaedenar," Garona began, speaking haltingly as Thrall worked. "They've taken over a few elven Barrow Dens, and filled them with demons and their followers. I couldn't get in far, but I found a good place for the scrying beacon. We'll be able to move on them properly soon, and it looks like an organization called the Emerald Circle is interested in dealing with them. They've already sent in a couple of agents, but we can get to them first if we try. Consider it a Summer project. I saw Gruuk, too."

"Gruuk?" Thrall asked absently, working carefully, though his fingers were slick with Garona's blood.

"Or whatever his real name is," Garona said, snorting softly. "Because Fel'dan isn't it."

"Why not?" Thrall asked, and Garona snorted again.

"Honestly, Fel'dan? Why didn't he just call himself Chieftain Evul Muk'Dhark'Bhad and get it over with?" Her fingers tightened, and Thrall winced.

"You're very touchy when you're having six inch splinters pulled out of your thigh," he pointed out. "I'm almost done."

"Not all of us spent Midsummer having sex and watching fireworks, Warchief," she retorted. "Did you have fun, by the way?"

"That's a half truth," Thrall replied lightly. "Though the fireworks were very nice."

"I have no doubt," Garona mocked. "Why is there a warlock in Grommash Hold that isn't being used as a decorative fixture, and what happened to the middle of the city?"

"I wouldn't use a warlock, they smell bad," Thrall commented, and put his hand on her leg. He drew on the healing within Garona's body, and the aid of the spirits to speed it along. She hissed softly. "We simply had some issues with the Shadow Council's lower status minions. It's been taken care of."

"Did I miss Neeru's execution?" Garona demanded. "If so, I'll put scorpions in your bed. I wanted to see that."

"I waited just for you," Thrall replied. "What happened to your leg?"

"When I was getting out, I had to move through an area that was exceptionally unstable," Garona said, sighing slightly in relief. She carefully put pressure on her leg, and Thrall turned to clean his hands and then sponge the blood off of her leg. "There were some old, half-insane Kaldorei ancients, and one of them exploded right in front of me."

"This is why I told you to bring a crystal, and I was right," Thrall said, cleaning her newly healed
wounds. "You said you wouldn't need it."

"There is no possible way you foresaw a tree exploding on me," Garona snorted. "You're not a prophet."

"I'm a seer," Thrall replied with a hint of indignant hurt in his tone. "I have visions."

"Mostly when the Old Man whispers in your ear," Garona replied, though she patted his shoulder. "In this case, you were right. I'm going to need new pants."

"I'm sure Jes'rимmon can bring you something," Thrall replied, wrapping her thigh tightly in a bandage, and securing it with a hint of magic. "Why don't you take my visions at face value?"

"I know better," Garona retorted. "Besides, if you actually could see the future reliably, you'd have seen your future mate and heir, and then there would be no surprise."

"That's not how it works," Thrall replied stiffly, though Garona's joking tone had caused something to lurch within him uncomfortably. Could I see who is in my future, assuming the spirits didn't simply laugh at me for being simple? If they could... do I want to see the result?

Garona moved around him stiffly, finding a blanket to make a rough kilt around her bare legs. "Thrall."

"Yes?" he answered after a moment.

"You still didn't tell me why there's a warlock in the Hold."

Thrall sighed, and decided to explain it to her before she became totally unbearable.
Ashenvale had not changed since Thrall had seen it last, even in the Autumn. It was beautiful and verdant, with huge trees that blotted out the twilight sky, and as they came up the road that led from Mor'shan to the Warsong lumber yard, Thrall could sense that the spirits were strong here. Even the Kor'Kron could feel it, and they murmured to one another, somewhere between apprehensive and annoyed.

"This must have been what Grom felt," Thrall commented, and behind him, a warm presence stirred.

"I don't think I feel anything but tired," Jaina murmured sleepily. "Where are we?"

"Within the borders of Ashenvale, and on the road to Astranaar," Thrall replied. He smiled to himself as Jaina shifted and in a moment was gone. A dozen yards ahead, she was examining plant life, yawning and stretching.

"Some of us have to ride," Garona commented sourly, and Thrall chuckled. The human sorceress detested riding, and after being told that she couldn't use anything but a minimum of magic within Ashenvale's sacred borders, arrangements had been made. She and Snowsong got along reasonably well, and there were no unbonded frostwolves, which meant that Thrall had the burden of carrying her.

Not that it was any real kind of burden, Thrall thought. And Snowsong doesn't mind. He leaned forward slightly to scratch his companion's ears, and she made a soft, pleased noise in reply. "Don't get too far ahead, Jaina."

"I just needed to stretch," she called back, and remounted when her escort caught up. Jaina's own forces, this time consisting of two High Elves and two humans, exchanged looks expressing rueful disbelief. They all rode horses that had been chosen to be steady around odd mounts, such as the worgs, and the nightsabers that would soon join them. "I'm sure I'll need it before the conference."

Tyrande Whisperwind, High Priestess of Elune and the leader of the Sentinels, had sent Thrall and Jaina separate messages, asking them to meet with her in Astranaar on the twilight of the full moon, and arrangements had been made to travel together. Thrall did not maintain a great deal of contact with these peculiar allies: the Night Elves had chosen to retreat into their forests once again when Illidan went to Outland, and they conducted trade with the Kaldorei very carefully, mostly relating to the lumber camps that the Warsong had established in Ashenvale.

In exchange for the wood the orcs needed to build, they had agreed to send shamans to the site where Cenarius had died, and the lands that had been tainted by fel energy. They were tasked with the burden of cleansing the area, something that promised to take years, but in the mean time, the
orcs could collect wood from the damaged area. There were those that complained about the restriction, but a look to Mannoroth's likeness in Orgrimmar was all the true reminder they needed to see that it was dangerous to allow lust of any kind to overcome reason.

"Do you know what she wants to talk to us about?" Thrall asked quietly.

Jaina shook her head slightly. "I honestly don't know, but she seemed terse in her message. I don't believe there have been any major incidents."

"I managed to take care of that unfortunate incident in Stonetalon," Thrall rumbled. "I am not quite certain what was wrong with that woman..."

"Nor am I, and it saddens me that the Blood Elves would resort to such abject cruelty. I'm sure it must have been an isolated incident." Jaina's voice was insistent, and Thrall frowned. The two High Elves that accompanied them exchanged looks.

It is a difficult thing to have such a rift between two groups of the same people, Thrall thought, remembering the bloodthirsty look in Grom's eyes, that loss of control and reason before they'd captured him to remove the demonic influence from his body.

"Halt," they heard from ahead of them, and from the deep shadows of the forest, appeared a small group of Night Elves, and the speaker was Shandris Feathermoon. Thrall nodded to her, and she nodded back. "Come this way." She looked over the human group, and her eyes narrowed. "Refrain from using magic."

"We will, we don't want to offend our hosts," Jaina said, and Shandris nodded to her as well. Gesturing, the Sentinels moved into place around the group, and Shandris herself led them back towards Astranaar.

Closer to the city, Thrall could see Ancients roaming the woods, moving through the clearings, and the soft, tittering laughter of the dryads. They smiled at him and waved, and he waved back a little, causing them to giggle more.

"They're certainly friendly," Jaina murmured, and Thrall made a soft noise of agreement. He felt Jaina slide a little closer.

"Are you still secure?" Thrall asked, a touch of concern to his voice. "You're not uncomfortable?"

"No, I'm fine," Jaina replied. Thrall nodded, and when he looked out into the forest, the dryads had all disappeared.

~ * ~

Since the Battle of Hyjal, Nordrassil had been unlivable, and those that had survived had come to Ashenvale. The ancient forests had originally been a more southern territory, and the home of the Sentinels, the silent, twilight guardians of the Kaldorei. Now, however, it housed most of what remained of the no-longer-immortal race, and Astranaar had expanded to accommodate them. The edges of the city were sprawling, though for Thrall, it still seem mostly forested, though there were more clearings, and many of the trees were very large.

Shandris spoke briefly to the guards that patrolled the borders, and they let them pass, though Thrall noticed the way their eyes lingered over him and his companions. Jaina's arms squeezed him
slightly, and he allowed himself to relax.

*They're suspicious. I don't blame them, but we've been invited here. There will be no place for conflict, and there will be no violence,* Thrall thought, his expression grave.

"There's something wrong," Jaina whispered, and Thrall glanced over his shoulder at her. "It's the looks on their faces. There's bad news, and they know something. I've seen it before. When..." She fell abruptly silent.

"When?" Thrall prompted gently.

"The night Derek died. It was the look on the faces of the sailors who came back to tell my father."

Thrall squeezed his eyes shut. "Jaina, I--"

"Greetings." Thrall looked over, and bowed his slightly in respect, and felt more than saw Jaina do the same. Tyrande Whisperwind, High Priestess of Elune and leader of the Sentinels, wore armour and bore a large, curved bow, and it was slung across her back, though not unstrung. She was prepared at any moment to defend her people, and it showed in the muscular lines of her body.

*Though, one doesn't need to be particularly athletic to defend one's people,* Thrall thought, thinking of the slender and more delicate human woman that sat behind him. *Not, though, that Jaina couldn't outwalk me at any given opportunity, so perhaps that's not entirely fair--*

"Please, come with me," Tyrande said. She turned, going back the way she'd come and Thrall clucked to Snowsong. Tyrande's martial step was rapid and precise, and she expected others to fall in behind her, or to be left in her dust.

"It's a shame relations between the orcs and Night Elves are so poor," Jaina murmured. "I think Grom would have liked her."

"Or they would have killed each other," Thrall agreed, watching the rigid lines of her back, and noted that under her armour she wore white wrappings of some kind. *Odd...*

Astranaar became more of a city once they got closer. There were dozens and dozens of buildings, many of them low, open pavilions, and it took time for Thrall to realize that these sprawling structures were homes. Light curtains ruffled in the night breeze, and while he was beginning to feel the effects of a long day riding, the 'day' was just starting for the Night Elves, and he could see people going about their business, making purchases, taking walks, visiting their friends... all as the moons shone above them. Many of them stopped to stare, and Thrall came to another realization: this was the main street of the city, and they were all but on parade.

"It's beautiful," Jaina murmured. Thrall nodded briefly. As they moved further into the centre of the city, here were more buildings, though these seemed to be immense, hollowed out trees, strung with lights until what had seemed to be a decoration took off en masse, a huge streak of light moving past them to the delight of some of the children.

*Speaking of children...* Thrall thought, *there are so few.* He began to count them, and by the time they reached the large pavilion at the centre of Astranaar, he'd seen twenty, to several hundred adults.

"If Night Elves are anything like High Elves, they don't have children as often because they're so
"long lived," Jaina whispered, as if sensing his thoughts. "And each child is precious."

"Children are always precious," Thrall replied, though he smiled. "Regardless of how many of
them are created."

"Truer words have never been spoken," Tyrande interjected softly. "Welcome to my home."

Thrall dismounted, and offered Jaina his hand. She took it and dismounted as well, whispering
praise to Snowsong. The Frostwolf gave her bonded a look that could almost be smug.

_It's cupboard love, Thrall thought at his companion. You only love her because she flatters you._

Snowsong sneezed on him in reply, and Thrall began to wonder if everyone could read his mind.

Tyrande led them inside. Night Elven furnishings were sparse, and most of what was here was
simple, each piece carved out of a single piece of blue-purple wood. There were also no doors, he
noticed, and only gauzy curtains dividing one room from another.

"We prefer open air and sky to doors," Tyrande explained, and gestured to them to sit, having
stopped in what Thrall could presume was an audience chamber, though it was vastly different
from his own, as well as Jaina's. He greeted visitors and diplomats in a large, round room where at
least two of his advisors were usually working, and Jaina, he knew from experience, used the
bottom floor of her tower as a receiving chamber, and took visitors to her office. This room was
framed by hangings. The Sentinel crest hung on the back wall, and on each side there were two
smaller crests, one of a silver tree with a thousand branches, the other what could have been a
representation of a whirlwind with two moons watching from above.

"Nordrassil and the Whisperwind family crest," Tyrande said, answering the obvious question.
"My family has had a tradition of serving the temple of Elune for many, many generations." She
sat down on a low bench. There was no desk, so it felt oddly intimate to sit across from her.

"It's lovely," Jaina said. "Tyrande... this place is the most beautiful thing I've ever seen, but I have
to ask... why have you asked us to come here?"

"Lady Proudmoore, Warchief Thrall..." Tyrande began formally. "I need your help." She took a
moment to compose herself. "Malfurion has fallen into a coma."

~ * ~

Jaina broke the silence first. "Tyrande, I'm so sorry... what happened?"

Tyrande sighed. "As you may know, after Hyjal, we have done what we can to bring our people
together. The incident with the Wardens and Maiev only further exacerbated the situation, and
many of our people held a very real fear that our lives were at an end. Malfurion worked tirelessly
to help repair the damage that the Scourge and the demons did to the forests, and monitored the
situation in Hyjal closely. He believed that, in time, we would be able to live there once more, even
if the World Tree would not grant us immortality again. There were those that... disagreed."

"Disagreed?" Thrall asked, frowning.

"Indeed, Warchief. First among the dissenters was Fandral Staghelm. He is one of the powerful
druids within the Cenarion Circle, and has spent extended amounts of time restoring Darkshore
from the naga attacks that we experienced. He felt that it was unfair for us to lose our immortality
when the Well was not truly gone, and there was no proof that the Burning Legion's threat was truly gone... particularly since Kalimdor now hosts mages once again." Tyrande gave Jaina an apologetic look, even as Thrall made a low, growling noise in the back of his throat. He felt something against his hand, and glanced down to see Jaina's fingers curling around his. He took her hand and held it gently.

"I understand why your people would feel that way, Priestess," Jaina replied evenly. "So what does this Staghelm want? My understanding was that immortality was the price your people paid for Nordrassil's help."

"It was," Tyrande said simply. "He deludes himself, and I'm not certain as to why. He disagreed, openly at times, with Malfurion, and there are those who agreed with him. We have grown too used to immortality, to the luxury and burden of time. It is also easy for those who may sleep away centuries to misunderstand the consequence of an endless life."

Tyrande was old, Thrall observed. To his not particularly experienced eyes, the Kaldorei had looked ageless and perfect. Where an orc may begin to grow weak and feeble after five decades or more, here was a woman over ten thousand years old, and she looked, at first, no older than Jaina. It took time and experience to see the age behind her eyes, and the toll it had taken on her mind.

I have lost more people in the past decade than I care to think about, Thrall thought. Taretha... Grom... Orgrim... If I were to live a thousand years, there would be more, or ten thousand... it would weigh me down. Tyrande met his gaze, and nodded once.

"He can disagree all he wants, but he can't do anything about it..." Jaina observed. "Can he?"

"Up until this time, no," Tyrande conceded. "Malfurion also curbed his influence amongst the younger druids, being a hero of two great wars." She smiled, gently. "Now, Staghelm has been reclusive, and I believe he has done something very foolish. There has been no word from him for quite some time... since, in fact, the very time that Malfurion fell into his coma."

"You suspect foul play," Thrall rumbled, and Tyrande nodded.

"I have prayed to Elune for guidance in these matters, but I have received no enlightenment. I have asked healers from Moonglade to wake him, and there was nothing they could do. At... some risk, I obtained the great Horn of Cenarius, and I blew it." Thrall realized, with some surprise, that Tyrande was actually injured and the odd weave of the cloth under her armour was not clothing at all, but bandages. "I will mend, I chose to focus my energies on Malfurion rather than healing."

Thrall opened his mouth to offer to heal her, but a single, feathered eyebrow raised to halt him.

"So, his coma is deeper than the one he was in before..." Jaina murmured. "May I see him?"

"Jaina, it would take weeks to ride there," Thrall began. "We couldn't--"

"Do you remember the way there through your magic?" Tyrande asked, silencing Thrall effectively, and even Jaina looked startled.

"Of course I do... but I don't--"

"I will give you permission to use your magic here, and there," Tyrande said, the simple statement vibrating tension through her. "There are many considerations that you have made for my people,
and I will make one for yours. Let us go, quickly. If there is anything you can do..."

*This is far more urgent than I believed,* Thrall thought, and he intended to exchange a brief glance with Jaina, but the human sorceress was moving to embrace the elven priestess. For a moment, Tyrande's seemingly serene demeanour crumbled, and the priestess' expression contained both fear and grief.

"I can take us now," Jaina said. "Do you have any preparations you need to make?"

"No," Tyrande said simply. "Shandris knows of my intent, and what I would ask of you. If she finds us gone, she will know that you've agreed."

"I want to look in on Malfurion as well," Thrall said, and Tyrande nodded to him, giving him a brief smile now that she had regained her composure. "Perhaps the elements have more insight."

"Perhaps," Tyrande agreed. Jaina began to cast, and runes swirled around them, teleporting them away.

~ * ~

*I had expected the denizens to be displeased, but not so... quickly,* Thrall thought. He stood very still, watching the long, clawed hands before him, careful of so much as twitching. The being before him appeared to be some combination of elf and stag, and Thrall recognized it as one of the Keepers of the Grove, the sacred guardians of Moonglade--And the sons of the demigod Cenarius.

Two dryads, far less friendly than the ones on their journey to Astranaar, had spears pointed directly at Jaina, who kept her hands out in the open. Tyrande was not similarly guarded, but the immense Keeper that towered over her seemed more intimidating than all of them put together.

"What is the meaning of this foul intrusion?" the great Keeper demanded. "Priestess Tyrande?"

"Jaina Proudmoore and Thrall are my allies," Tyrande replied, her tone respectful. "I have asked them to bring me here, despite the danger, because they believe they have more insight about..." She did not speak the name, but instead gestured.

The Keeper made an odd sound, and both claws and spears withdrew. "We will discuss this, Tyrande. This is still a grave insult."

"I am desperate," Tyrande whispered. "Remulos, please. He will not wake. You know it as well as I. Something has happened and--"

"He would not take kindly to the presence of mages," the Keeper, Remulos, grumbled.

"He accepted Jaina's help in the past, and I believe he would accept it now if he could," she urged. "Please, let me see my husband."

"I wasn't aware you were married," Jaina murmured. "But, congratulations."

"I officiated the ceremony during the turning of the leaves," Remulos rumbled. "It was a joyous occasion."

"So recently," Jaina said. "But when did he--"
"Three nights later," Tyrande said, and her eyes closed briefly. "Come, the Stormrage Barrow Dens are in the south." She began to walk.

Thrall and Jaina exchanged another, brief, look, and followed. Tyrande moved briskly, and her armour gleamed in the twilight glade. Everything here seemed to be cast in an odd light, and Jaina looked pale, her garb that was normally blue and white washed out to gray. The path out of Nighthaven was guarded by a number of Wardens who watched them, their eyes blazing with hate at the insult that was a mage's presence. Thrall, very deliberately, met their eyes and put an arm around her.

"They won't harm me," Jaina murmured. "They are very frightening with their moonglaives and their armour, but I have a very quick hand with a polymorph spell."

"They have no right to hate you, you didn't do any harm," Thrall said, his voice firm, and almost overly-loud. "You fought the Burning Legion as they did."

"Think about what you're saying," Jaina said, her voice softer, but sad. "They have lived with a hatred and fear of arcane magic for ten thousand years. One battle won't end that. You would know. The Shady Rest Inn."

Thrall's arm tightened around her briefly. "Yes, I know. I would still be extremely upset if you got shot by an angry Warden."

"So would I," Jaina replied, and the dryness of her tone cause him to chuckle, and let her go. Jaina moved quickly to catch up with Tyrande, speaking to her softly, while Thrall let his senses extend outward. The spirits were strong here, and prowling amongst the shadows was a cat-spirit.

_Greetings, spirit of Moonglade, Thrall thought, bowing his head. We mean no offense, we're attempting to help one of the druids--_

_As long as you don't cause trouble, I don't care, _the cat-spirit replied, and as Thrall observed, it sat down and began to wash.

_The cat-spirit is lazy, _called another spirit, and Thrall had to crane his neck to see the bird-spirit that flew over head. _We greet you, Thrall, son of Durotan. Cause no trouble and you shall find none._

_The bird-spirit is a nosy poppinjay, and I will eat him, _the cat-spirit replied.

_As if you could catch me, _the bird-spirit replied, and flew past him. The cat-spirit stood, and began to chase the bird-spirit, both of them blurring out of sight.

_The spirits here are... odd... _Thrall decided, and moved to catch up with the two women.

The Stormrage Barrow Dens, as they were known, were guarded by two Wardens, one tauren and one Kaldorei. Thrall observed as they both argued with Tyrande and pointed at Jaina, who stood and waited with grace and aplomb. The tauren broke off to offer Thrall a salute, and he nodded back. The tauren Warden also did not join back into the argument, and Thrall frowned, very slightly.

_Hopefully he sees how illogical this is, _Thrall said, and moved to stand behind Jaina.
"They will cause absolutely no harm to Malfurion or any of the druids," Tyrande said firmly. "You waste our time. Jaina, Thrall, if you would please follow me."

"Of course, Tyrande," Jaina said in reply, and followed the High Priestess inside the Barrow Den, leaving the Kaldorei Warden to fume. Thrall quickly followed, and wondered, suddenly, why the tauren seemed to wink at him.

Perhaps there was something in his eye, Thrall said. The Barrow Dens were nearly stifling: as spiritually rich as the Moonglade had been, this place was barren, and the difference was palpable seconds after entering it. Jaina moved on ahead with interest, and he watched Tyrande tense. She feels it too. "Why is--"

"The Barrow Dens are warded from Nightmares," Tyrande said quietly, emphasizing the word.

"What kind of nightmares can you protect this place from by warding it from the spirits?" Thrall asked.

"Not nightmares, Nightmares," Tyrande corrected. "They are--"

Thrall felt a surge of spiritual energy, and he heard a sound, almost like a horse running, and through one of the walls came a being that for a moment, appeared to be something like a horse that was so green it seemed black, and two bright, burning green eyes stared at him, and then he was looking into the jeering, vicious face of Aedelas Blackmoore.

"You want her so badly? You can have her!" he cried, and a head fell at his feet, but this time it was not Taretha's staring blue eyes that met his. It was Jaina's empty gaze, and he felt--

There was a high-pitched scream, and Blackmoore disappeared. Jaina's eyes flashed with anger, even as frost dripped from her fingertips. Thrall swallowed, trying to dispel the nightmare image-- Oh. Oh.

"I see, Nightmare," Thrall said, swallowing again.

"You can understand why we want to keep them out," Tyrande said gently, commenting on neither of their reactions. "He's down this way."

"Let's get moving," Jaina said sharply, and Thrall agreed. They moved further down into the Barrow Dens, and Tyrande touched her hand lightly to the roughly-hewn walls, and the steps spiraled down, taking Thrall further from the surface and spirits both. As they reached the first landing, Thrall could see rooms, bored out of the sides of the walls, and within them were two or three sleeping figures, carefully tucked into wooden beds, narrow enough that the sleeper would not have the room to turn over or shift.

Though, they probably wouldn't move at all, Thrall reflected. These were druids, their bodies inert in the physical world while their minds and spirits roamed the Emerald Dream, sleeping to fulfill the promise that the Kaldorei had made with the great dragon, Ysera the Dreamer. Could I make such a sacrifice? Could I spend so long away from my people, only to save them?

"I don't think I could sleep my life away, waiting for my day to come," Jaina commented. "It would be so boring."
"The life of a druid is not the one for me," Tyrande admitted. "But Malfurion has assured me that the Emerald Dream is anything but boring, and that there was a time when the sleeping world might be as dangerous as the waking one."

"That seems unusual, but the Spirit World is not as safe as some would assume," Thrall commented as Tyrande led them further in. "Did he mention how long it's been like that?"

"Time is meaningless within the Dream, from what he told me, though he seemed to believe it was a relatively recent change," Tyrande replied. "You're concerned by it."

"I'm concerned by anything that comes out of a wall and threatens my life," Jaina replied, her tone so tart Thrall had to chuckle, dispelling the last of the uneasy feeling he'd had. "This place seems very large to have so few."

"The prisons are down below," Tyrande replied, her tone grave. "The prisoners are kept sealed away from Elune and the surface world, with the theory being that to escape, they'll have to fight their way through the Wardens and the druids."

"Having been imprisoned, it would seem that if a prisoner was angry enough, they might kill a few druids on the way out," Thrall commented, though for a moment, there was a sense of sick anger. "How long are they imprisoned?"

"Some of them years, others decades or centuries. Our sentences tend to be longer because the prisoners are immortal," Tyrande said. "Some few are imprisoned permanently, because they have contingencies against being killed, so they must be watched at all times so they no longer walk free and endanger the lives of the Kaldorei. Those sentences are never given lightly."

"Wasn't Illidan given one of those sentences?" Jaina asked quietly, and Tyrande looked away.

"Illidan was sentenced to an indefinite period of time in jail, on the ground that if he understood what he had done, he would be freed." She let her hand rest on one of the walls. "I freed him before that time."

"Ten thousand years is a very, very long time for someone to stew on the question 'and now what did you learn?'" Thrall replied, and was surprised at the soft growl in his own voice, and the anger at being within what was ostensibly a jail. Jaina let a hand rest on his arm.

"It was too dangerous to leave him to his own devices, and too risky to see what would happen to the demon he was containing to have him executed, so it was to be indefinite confinement." Thrall expected sadness or regret, but there was only iron determination. "I believe that while he has not necessarily truly understood what it is that he did, he has a new sense of responsibility."

"Did you contact him?" Jaina wanted to know. "If there was something demonic in what has happened to Malfurion, wouldn't Illidan be the best person to ask?"

"I have no way of contacting him," Tyrande replied quietly. "I believe he would come if I asked it of him, but I cannot even find him. He went back to Outland, and while there were rumours that he was in Northrend, he is gone again."

Jaina shivered slightly, and it was Thrall's turn to offer her a touch of comfort. "I can understand why that would be difficult. I'm sorry, Tyrande."
"Think nothing of it," the High Priestess replied. "Malfurion's chamber is this way." She moved carefully through the Barrow Den, and Thrall followed. Jaina's fingers entwined with his, and he smiled at her briefly.

Tyrande led them to a room that held only one bed, and Malfurion Stormrage, Archdruid of the Cenarion Circle, lay on the narrow wooden bed, though there was nothing about his slumber that was peaceful. The venerable Kaldorei's brow was wrinkled in a frown, and he murmured in his sleep, his lips trembling just so as a stray syllable escaped them.

Thrall moved to kneel by the Kaldorei Archdruid, and put a hand on his shoulder. He closed his eyes, and immediately opened them into the Spirit World. Malfurion's body was not quite empty, a thread that sprouted from the middle of his chest, though it was oddly vinelike, and it disappeared into a haze of green. Carefully, Thrall took a step out of his body, and reached out to touch the haze of green.

Perhaps I can find Malfurion's spirit and--

There was a sensation of slamming, and then darkness.

~ * ~

"Thrall?"

This is not your place, shaman. Leave. Green. It was green everywhere, in a thousand verdant shades, some bright but many dark. Too many. So many shadows, and the voice came from everywhere.

I'm looking for--

This is not your place. Do not make me repeat myself once more.

"Thrall, wake up, please..."

I didn't mean to intrude, and I sincerely apologize, but I'm looking for Malfurion Stormrage, and--

Malfurion Stormrage vowed himself to me, and he will not break his vow. I require his assistance, and I will not allow mortals to take him from me. A hint of something, huge and green, hidden amongst the shadows, and then a woman, a female Kaldorei, with skin that was pale, but hinted at the shadows made by leaves in a forest, layers upon layers, each hiding something. Her eyes were closed. Go, now, and disturb us no more. Know that there is danger within the Emerald Dream and Malfurion must fight it. It is his duty to me.

"Jaina, I'm sorry. I didn't think--"

Wouldn't it be better to let us help you instead of claiming him? The woman took a step towards him, unerring despite her seeming lack of sight. We could--

Malfurion will not wake until the Nightmare is over, the woman replied. Go, now. Trouble us no more.

He made a noise of frustration. How can you make that decision for someone else? He has a wife and a duty to his people, and he has been asleep for centuries, surely you can spare him--
The Kaldorei’s eyes opened, and within them, there was oblivion.

Thrall sat up abruptly, and immediately felt pain. Jaina was swearing, and his eyebrows raised as he fought to orient himself once again. His body felt heavy and restraining, as if he had fitted himself into it poorly, somehow. *That only happens when I spirit walk and I fail to return correctly.* "Jaina, I don't think it's physically possible to do that with a duck, a cactus and a copy of Theron's Passion."

"You have a hard head," Jaina managed, rubbing her head, and then threw herself at him, hugging him tightly. "I thought you wouldn't wake up. We waited for hours..."

Thrall let his arms rest around her, stroking her hair. "It seemed like moments, but the Dream has no sense of time." He looked over at Tyrande, who was holding Malfurion's limp hand. She tucked it against her husband's side, and nodded to him.

"What did you find out?" Tyrande asked, a hint of desperate hope in her voice. "You got much farther than anyone else, they found nothing within Malfurion--"

"I encountered something when I attempted to follow the trail that connects his spirit to his body," Thrall began, sorting through what he had seen, and what he had *not* seen. "There was a female there. She appeared to be an elf, but... I believe that was merely a form."

"Describe her, please," Tyrande murmured, and listened as Thrall did so. Her expression went from grave to barely restrained rage. "Ysera."

"The leader of the Green Dragonflight?" Thrall asked, and Jaina sat back, having calmed herself enough to surreptitiously wipe the tears away from her eyes. "Why would she--"

"Before the exile of the Highbourne, the Well of Eternity that Illidan recreated stood open to everything. Once Dath'remar was exiled for using its power to destroy a portion of Ashenvale, Malfurion realized that this would simply happen again if we didn't rein in its power somehow, so he contacted three of the great Dragon Aspects that watched over our world. They were reclusive after the decimation of their flights, but three of them still came to us. Nozdormu, the Timeless, Alexstrasza, the Life-Binder, and Ysera, the Dreamer." Tyrande set her lips in a grim line. "To us they entrusted an acorn of the great Dream Tree that bound each of the planes of this world together, and we placed it within the Well. It fed on the Well's magic and formed Nordrassil. The dragons each gave us a blessing and a duty. From Alexstrasza, we were granted immortality, but the responsibility of being the eternal guardians against the Burning Legion. From Nozdormu, we gained timelessness within our memories and in return we were to remember the mistakes of the past, and from my understanding, we have another duty, but those chosen for it never speak of it, if they are seen again at all, and Ysera..." She touched Malfurion's cheek. "All the druids had to slumber within the Emerald Dream, patrolling its dreamways and serving her. Most druids were to spend only some time there, but to Malfurion, she entrusted the position of *eternal* guardian, and he told us to only wake him in times of dire need. It seems she could not even wait before reclaiming him." She shook her head. "At least Malfurion will be timeless within the Dream. He will not age, and require no feeding, and no tending. This is true of all druids who slumber, but none have slept as long as he has..."

"She said that he would sleep until the Nightmare is over," Thrall said, frowning. "I have no idea what that means."

"That only happens when I spirit walk and I fail to return correctly."
"Nor do I, but it must be urgent," Tyrande replied with a sigh. "I apologize, that was mostly a waste of time."

"That's fine, as long as Thrall wasn't permanently hurt, there's no reason for me to find this Ysera and give her a piece of my mind," Jaina said, and Thrall noted her expression with both amusement and apprehension.

_I believe she means it,_ Thrall thought. "We should speak to Remulos again, I'm sure he'll want to know what's happened."

"Indeed," Tyrande agreed, and stood, only to be struck in the chest by a flying, feathery ball. "What is..."

The owl that had struck her tumbled back, dazed, and then began to hoot urgently. Tyrande held out her arms, cradling it for a moment while she carefully took the message from it. Her eyes moved rapidly, and then a curse fell from her lips, and Thrall wondered if the railing of the Barrow Den resisted disintegrating simply through sheer force of will.

"What is it?" Jaina asked.

"Fandral Staghelm has returned to Ashenvale with fantastic news," Tyrande said, gritting the words out through teeth clenched in anger. "He has created a new World Tree."

Thrall and Jaina exchanged looks of alarm, and Jaina's hands raised automatically to cast a teleportation spell.

~ * ~

They arrived within Tyrande's receiving chamber in Astranaar, and immediately, Tyrande began to run. Jaina followed closely on her heels, and Thrall brought up the rear. The owl that had brought them the message had brought another to Remulos, explaining their discovery and rapid departure.

_I hope that Tyrande will not do anything rash,_ Thrall thought. _I hope that she will not do anything she will regret._

Outside, many Kaldorei had gathered in a circle around a tall, green-haired male Night Elf that was clad in garments woven together from feathers and leaves, giving the impression of a creature of the forest. Despite the fact that he did not sport an impressive rack of horns, he was still identifiable as a druid by the feathered mantle he wore about his shoulders, though he lacked a chestpiece of any kind to keep it in place. At his side stood another male Night Elf, who was more soberly dressed, and seemed to be attentive to him, a grave expression behind the elaborate deep-blue mustache he sported.

"We no longer have to fear growing old," the Kaldorei was saying, his voice fervent with sincerity. "We will use the powers granted by this new World Tree, our beloved Teldrassil, to protect us all. There is nothing to fear from Nordrassil's death--"

Tyrande slapped him. Thrall blinked, because it was odd: she had been standing next to him, fists clenched in rage, and then she'd been gone. She was a nightsaber on the hunt, intent on her prey as she cut through the crowd, anger marring her expression as a storm cloud mars the face of the moon.
"Are you completely mad?" Tyrande demanded as Staghelm rubbed his cheek, his silver eyes going wide with surprise, and the pink-purple of his skin became darker from the force of the blow. "The reason we were granted immortality was so that we could protect the World Tree, which in turn guarded the Well of Eternity. When we were still Azshara's subjects we were immortal because of that, but its price was opening our world up to the demons. You have stolen a sacred artifact from the Aspects. Do you expect them to help you now? Do you expect them to bless your... your shrub so that we can be immortal again because you fear death? We all face death, each day we live, but if we live with wisdom and restraint, we may yet live to see many tomorrows."

"You lick the claws of creatures that do nothing to help us," Staghelm sneered. "The creation of Nordrassil was centuries ago, and you expect us to revere them still for that. They are useless and weak. The strangers you have brought here have said as much: one was captured, and some of the others are absent or mad. Depending on the Aspects and their so-called blessings is foolhardy."

"I have not once proposed that we depend on the dragons, Fandral," Tyrande hissed. "I propose that you face reality, and deal with mortality, as I have, as we all must."

"You consign us to death!" Staghelm replied, his voice loud, letting it carry over the crowd. "You admit defeat."

"You damn us with the unknown!" Tyrande shouted. "There is a monster within the Emerald Dream and it does not sleep. Anything from there could be infected by it. If you had slept and done your duty--"

"I would have abandoned our people the way Archdruid Stormrage has?" Staghelm supplied, and Thrall put two hands on Tyrande's arm, holding her back.

_I cannot even guarantee I would manage it with one_, Thrall thought. "Tyrande..."

"You would have us surrender to death, as you surrendered to the green-skinned mongrels that murdered Cenarius," Staghelm said, and Thrall was sorely tempted to let her arm go.

"It was an accident," Jaina broke in. "A terrible, tragic accident, but an accident nonetheless. You can't possibly use that as your platform--"

"I'm sorry, is someone speaking? I don't hear it when those that endanger our world with their foul arcane magic are speakbaaa."

"I don't believe this is helping the situation," Thrall observed dryly, letting the sight of Fandral Staghelm wandering around as a bewildered sheep calm him. Tyrande lowered her arm, and nodded slightly to Thrall when he let go of her. "Let it not be said that you do not have the strength of arm to lead your people."

"Thank you," Tyrande said cordially, and looked around to the crowd. "You must listen to me. We face at this time a crisis, much as we once did. We had a hard choice to make. We understood the danger of arcane magic as recklessly uncontrolled as it was, in the hands of those who would do anything they could to make their lives easier. We had convenience, and safety, and certainty, but we also had the danger that Dath'remar the Sun Strider would bring us by insisting that he could control the Well's power. We had to give up all of the luxury we once had because that luxury almost cost us this entire world. Nordrassil will recover, in time. Hyjal's forests will be livable once again. We simply must wait, and if it does not happen in our time, it will happen in our children's time--"
"I see no reason to wait on petty idealism," Staghelm said, and Thrall raised an eyebrow. It would seem that the polymorph spell would not hold a druid, not in the animal forms they had mastered, and before them stood a large, feathered creature with wing-arms that ended in claws, a large, gaping beak and twin stag horns that sprouted from its head, though it spoke with the Archdruid's voice. "If you wish to hide in the forests and concede more of our homeland to strangers who bear the same magics that you claim to hate, then so be it. Those who would seek the power of the new World Tree should come with me."

He spun on feathered and clawed heel and marched away, and with a murmured apology, the blue-haired druid followed, and with a sense of unease, Thrall watched some from the crowd follow. Some, but not all. Thrall could feel the tension vibrating off of Tyrande as she watched him go.

"I didn't think a moonkin was capable of a heel-turn," Thrall commented dryly. "It lacks a certain level of... intimidation." Tyrande laughed briefly, and he saw her relax.

"What do we do now?" Jaina asked softly, watching the crowd. There was no hostility, only curiosity, apprehension and confusion. Thrall moved a little to stand beside her anyway. "This could mean a civil war for your people, Tyrande."

"No," Tyrande said simply, raising her chin. "Dath'remar the Sun Strider once led the remainder of the Highborne to your eastern lands, and Staghelm leads them west. He may have his joy of this... Teldrassil, but I will never set foot on that foolish, ill-considered thing. I thank you, both of you, for your assistance. We know what we must do now. We must protect against whatever will be coming from the Emerald Dream through that abomination, and I can only hope that Fandral will some day learn his lesson. I believe the rest of the week will be consigned to more restful talks."

"Thank you for your hospitality," Thrall replied honestly. "We wouldn't think to refuse."

"Absolutely not," Jaina murmured. "Though all of this talk about Dath'remar reminds me of something Kael once told me."

"And that is?" Tyrande asked, lifting a soft, feathered eyebrow in query.

"That you should never regret casting a spell, because if you regret it, it means you didn't take the time to think about the consequences of your actions, and whom it would hurt. It means that you shouldn't be casting spells in the first place." Jaina smiled. "I don't think I regret the spells I have cast."

"I knew there was a reason I liked Prince Kael'thas," Tyrande said, and chuckled softly. "I hope that he has survived."

"So do I," Jaina murmured softly, her gaze distant. "So do I."

~ * ~

"Jaina," Thrall whispered, and the human sorceress stirred briefly against his side. He smiled at her in the darkness, hoping that the sliver of moonslight would catch the shine of his teeth.

"Mm, Thrall," she murmured in reply. "Is something the matter?"

"No," he admitted. "I just wanted to talk."
"I like listening to you," Jaina replied, shifting to kiss his bare shoulder, and the thin material of her sleeping robe made him shiver just slightly, the feeling moving down his legs, and straight to his groin. "I'm listening right now."

"I wanted to talk about us," Thrall said, taking one of her hands, and bringing it to his cheek. Her fingers were cool and soft, and he let the feeling lend strength to his words. "I wanted to ask if you were interested in having sex with me."

He felt her pause, and consider. "I would, yes," she replied, and snapped her fingers. A single, tiny light, no bigger than a firefly illuminated them, though there were still deep shadows that pooled around them. She looked him in the eye, thoughtful. "May I assume that you're interested as well?"

"I am," Thrall replied, a low rumble to his chest, and he let one hand rest on her waist. "I wanted to make sure that we were both prepared for this. It's something that can't be undone, like creating a World Tree, or a Sunwell."

"If we cause such disasters when we're together, I'd be concerned," Jaina replied, smiling, and rolled on top of him. His eyes widened slightly, and he cupped the curve of her behind as she straddled him. "How is this, is this comfortable?"

"Somewhat," Thrall admitted. "I've had sex in such a position before. Orc women are often very... feisty. I am also somewhat heavy."

"I thought you might be," Jaina replied. "Well-built men often are." She shifted against him. "Hm."

"You're thinking," Thrall commented. He moved his hand to stroke up her back. "What are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking I don't want to do this here, not when anyone could hear us, in the middle of the night," Jaina said, and Thrall nodded. "I'd like this to happen somewhere more private."

"I am in acquaintance with those who make even a locked and sealed room a public domain," Thrall said dryly. "Still, I see your point, and I'd like time to prepare." He reached up to touch her cheek. "To make this special."

"Then we can wait until then," Jaina replied, and shifted off of him to curl against his side again. "We can wait as long as we need to." She let her fingers run along his chest lightly, and the shiver returned.

"Hopefully, not too long," he said, looking pointedly at the tented material of the thin sleeping trousers he wore. "As you can see, I look forward to the prospect."

Jaina laughed softly, and took both of his cheeks in her hands, and kissed him deeply, the pink of her tongue flicking against his lips. A groan escaped him, and the light winked out, plunging the room back into darkness, punctuated by soft noises.
Chapter 11: Late Winter, Year 27

Chapter Notes

Originally posted February 13th, 2010.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

*Candles. Incense. Music? Perhaps the gnomes have some kind of device, or the goblins...*

"Warchief."

*If it's built by the goblins, it might explode, but if it's built by the gnomes, it might actually turn us both into chickens, which would be awkward and break the mood.*

"Warchief Thrall."

*So no music. It feels as if I'm missing something. Jaina said she had what she would need, and I'm curious to know what this spell is--*

"Warchief Thrall, the Burning Legion is invading again."

"Mm." *Food? Should there be food? We could have dinner first. Fish? She has fish regularly, so she might be tired of it. Pork? There should be more than enough for the winter, and it's just one meal. Winter Veil has passed again so--*

"Warchief Thrall, Grommash Hold is on fire."

*She was beautiful in the candlelight, it's a shame she was called back to Theramore, but we weren't ready anyway--*

"Mmannoroth's statue has come alive and is destroying the Valley of Wisdom."

--*but I want to be ready now--*

"Jaina Proudmoore is here."

Thrall sat up abruptly. "What? When did she..."

Laughter. His eyes narrowed, and met the amused faces of his council. Garona crosses her arms over her chest, black on black, having returned from an assignment recently enough to be still wearing her assassin's garb. "I realize bureaucracy is less interesting than running across the table and cutting off Vol'jin's head--"

"Why does it have to be my head, mon?" the troll witch doctor protested.

"--but you still need to pay attention." Thrall opened his mouth, and she quirked a smile. "And no, Lady Proudmoore is not here, yet."
"That was mean," Thrall told her pointedly. He glared at each of his advisors, who seemed to be in varying states of embarrassment or amusement, and nodded to her. "Continue."

The remainder of the meeting finished swiftly, and Thrall made it a point of being involved with each aspect, glaring over at a still-amused Garona. Once everyone was dismissed, Thrall stood, and moved to return to his quarters. He pointedly ignored Garona, who stood in front of him deliberately.

"You can be angry with me all you like, but you do need to do more than just daydream about Jaina Proudmoore," she told him flatly. "You have a job."

"I don't do it that often," Thrall protested, and she moved to walk beside him.

"More and more lately," Garona pointed out. "There were two meetings while I was gone, and you got nothing done in either of them, because you couldn't focus."

"In regards to the last two meetings, at the first everyone had a hangover, and the second was interrupted because Grommash Hold actually was on fire," Thrall pointed out. "The spirits can get my attention, even if you can't."

"This is why you don't let the goblins set up your fireworks displays," Garona grumbled. "Nevertheless, you've still been distracted. You should just get it over with already."

"Everyone else seems to believe we're already sleeping together," the Warchief grumbled.

"Everyone else isn't your personal bodyguard," his Spymistress replied tartly. "And trust me, I'd know."

"That's not comforting," Thrall growled, and then sighed. "I want it to be perfect. Special. Memorable. Is that so much to ask?"

Garona's expression shifted, just slightly, before it went back to sardonic. "Bad sex is memorable too, you know."

"Is it impossible for you to be helpful?" Thrall demanded.

"Yes," Garona told him. "I have to change. Goodbye, now. Don't get lost on the way to your quarters."

Thrall resisted the urge to say something rude as she walked off with a swagger to her step. Obnoxious, nosy, know-it-all, half-o-- He hit the wall suddenly. Tea. I need the tea. He turned, and walked back towards where the healers took up residence within Grommash Hold. He did not have a personal physician the way Jaina did -- he felt that meditation and consultation with the spirits was often enough -- but he did know them, and had studied under them when he could.

"Thrall!" barked a voice, and a slight shiver of fear ran down his back. He turned, and offered his former teacher a bow, despite the fact that Drek'thar of the Frostwolf Clan would not be able to see the gesture. "Come here."

"Of course," he said, and despite the fact it had been nearly six years since the elder shaman had taught him, he could feel the sting of Drek'thar's cane. "How can I help you?"
"You can have tea with an old, blind man, for once," Drek'thar said, and Thrall resisted the urge to sigh. "Sit with me."

"Of course," Thrall said again, and went where his mentor led. It was not as though he didn't love Drek'thar. The shaman had given him his parents, his heritage, and in many ways, his people. Without Drek'thar's help, he never would have learned to speak to the spirits so that they would listen and reply; he would not have learned the gifts of healing, of elemental manipulation, and he had refined the combat skills that he had learned from the arena. *It's just that he's old, and cranky, and stubborn as the rock faces of Azshara, and even more frustrating to deal with than Garona.*

Drek'thar turned, and led Thrall to his room. He was not quite unerring, and Thrall took his arm to lead him inside. His frostwolf raised her head slightly, yipped briefly, and lay her head back down. Along her flank were scars from a battle that had nearly proven fatal to her.

*She's old,* Thrall thought, a brief hint of sadness to it, and he glanced at his mentor, who muttered as his hands moved over shelves. *They both are.*

"Old and blind, but not senile," Drek'thar said sharply. "Help me with these."

"Yes, Teacher," Thrall replied, and took both mugs from him. The tea was fragrant, and reminded him of what had brought him to the healers in the first place, but he sat. *Drek'thar taught me patience, because he has none, or so it seems.* He watched as the elder orc sat, grumbling about his bones, and offered him a mug. *When you're young, it's easy to see the impatience only, and not the test that comes with it.* Drek'thar took it, and sipped.

"So, what brings you to the healers?" Drek'thar asked. "Are you ill?"

Thrall took a long gulp of his tea before answering. "No, I needed something from them. A tea."

The old orc's expression shifted from annoyed to amused, but pleased. "Ah, you're finally going to do it, then. Excellent. Jaina Proudmoore is a fine woman, would that she were an orc."

Thrall winced. "Does everyone know?"

"I believe those at the outpost near the Mirage Flats don't know," Drek'thar replied, though he chuckled. "She has courted you well, don't feel ashamed. It will make for a fine mating."

"I don't believe that everyone will take quite your stance on it, but thank--" Thrall paused, and then frowned. "She courted me? I believe you're mistaken."

"No, no. It's just as Draka courted your father, Durotan." Drek'thar smiled reminiscently, and Thrall was grateful that his teacher could not see the expression on his face.

"She... did? My understanding was that men courted women, but they chose--"

"You have spent too much time with humans, and it surprises me that Eitrigg had not taught you differently," Drek'thar said sharply. "Be silent, and listen."

Thrall smiled. "Yes, Teacher."

"Hmph." Drek'thar sipped his tea, and the reminiscent smile returned. "While it's true that it is
common for males to court females, many females find their mates in advance, and do things to get their chosen target to notice them. We are not like humans, to enjoy that which is soft and pretty. A mate is useless if she cannot fight off a worg that hunts orc children as it would a clefthoof calf. A mate is useless if she cannot bear her husband's spear with equal skill to defend her home while her mate hunts. A mate is useless if she has no spirit and no fire."

"There is fire in our blood," Thrall murmured, and hastily drank before his teacher decided to strike him for interrupting.

"Just so," Drek'thar rumbled. "So, a female presents herself as appealing to a male whom she also feels to be appealing. One that is a strong hunter, one that is not too stubborn, but not too weak willed. One that is well-endowed." This last was accompanied by a grin in Thrall's direction that caused his cheeks to heat. "Sometimes, the male is not quite clever enough to know a good thing when he sees it."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Thrall protested. "I--"

Drek'thar struck him with his cane so fast it could have been lightning. Thrall swore under his breath, using a colourful oath that he'd once heard Jaina use.

"We're not talking about you, we're talking about your parents. So shut up, boy," Drek'thar replied tartly. Thrall scowled at him, but held his tongue. "Now, Durotan was the son of Garad, the chieftain of the Shadow Wolf clan, and the Frostwolf parent-clan. He was an accomplished warrior, though he believed in the spirits quite strongly for one that had not been touched by them. He had friends outside of his clan... Hellscream, and Doomhammer, though Hellscream was a reckless, skinny whelp when Durotan first met him, and he became a reckless, skinny warrior in time."

Thrall smiled involuntarily at the memory of Grom's recklessness, that had been both exhilarating and infinitely frustrating to deal with.

"Durotan's head was filled with many things, and unfortunately, none of them was the immediate need to find a mate. Fortunately, someone else had the foresight to know that he would need a mate. Your mother. Your mother had, in her youth, been weak and sickly. She was born during the worst season, and under a poor star. Her family feared for her life, and for the health of the clan, so she was taken outside the village to see what would happen to her. When she finally returned, it was as a woman, as beautiful as she was dangerous. She was an accomplished hunter, working with a finesse that those who had been born strong lacked. She saw your father, and admired him. Durotan was wise, even in his youth, and clear-seeing. He believed in the mission to someday cleanse Draenor, though we never saw that goal come to pass."

Drek'thar bowed his head, and Thrall reached forward to touch his shoulder. "I'm sorry, perhaps someday--"

"It is best that Draenor and Azeroth's connection was severed, and that the pain and humiliation of being the pawns of demons left there," Drek'thar said, though his voice was sad rather than harsh. "In any case, Draka knew what she wanted, so she set out to get his attention, but males are often stupid, and take time to come into their own minds." Thrall frowned, and Drek'thar raised his cane warningly. "Don't frown at me. It's the truth, and you're no less guilty than I am, or anyone else is. Durotan didn't quite notice right away what Draka was interested in, and by the time he did, there was a second female who wanted his attention. Her name was Jeneka, and she was of a different clan. Howling Storm, as a matter of fact."
"I've never heard of that clan," Thrall commented. "Did something happen?"

"They were absorbed by the Blackrock clan when it formed," Drek'thar said. "As was the Great Sands clan, and half a dozen others, along with many warriors from existing clans, including Orgrim Doomhammer. In any case, Jeneka of Howling Storm saw Durotan during the gathering at the base of Oshu'gun in Nagrand, and decided that she, too, wanted the son of a Chieftain as a prize. Draka was displeased by this."

"Oshu'gun? Nagrand?" Thrall murmured, and ducked away from the next blow. "I know, you're telling a story."

"Hmph," Drek'thar said. "Jeneka was both more blatant about it, and resorted to more underhanded tactics. She learned that Draka had once been weak, and began to spread this news throughout the gathering, until all lips buzzed with the news that a weak girl-child coveted the son of a Chieftain. Jeneka intended for Durotan to laugh at her, and instead, he was surprised by the fact that not one, but two women that desired to become his mate. Durotan, foolish male that he was, tried to resolve the issue peacefully. Draka took a more direct approach. She challenged Jeneka for Durotan, and by the setting of the Red Son, Jeneka was face down in the mud, and Draka was victorious."

"My mother... wrestled in the mud... for my father..." Thrall said numbly, trying to reconcile this story with what he'd heard about his parents from Doomhammer and Grom, and couldn't quite manage it. "What did my father say?"

"I believe his exact words before Draka dragged him off were 'Um. Ah. Oh'." Drek'thar gave him a yellowed, toothy grin. "Never underestimate the determination of females when there is something they want. They can be like the tide. You can fight it, but you will only be tired when you are dragged by it."

*Perhaps an apt metaphor for Jaina, since she was trained in sea magic as part of her heritage, but...* Thrall frowned. "What if my father simply didn't love one of them? Or either of them? Wouldn't she have taken him against his will? How would that be fair--"

"If Durotan had truly been disinterested in either of them, he would have refused the condition of victory," Drek'thar said gently. "I understand that aspects of orc mating frighten you, but there are rules that are unspoken because they are taught, from mother to daughter, and from father to son, over generations. Unfortunately, because of the circumstances of your birth and your childhood, that chain was broken. Durotan would have explained it all to you in time, but instead, you learn piecemeal from those who know these things by instinct, the way we learned to walk, to run and hunt."

Thrall sat quietly, turning the mug in his hands. The spirits were quiet, and there was only the sound of breathing. It was in this silence Thrall finally found his centre, and asked the question he'd turned over in his mind. "What if I hurt her? Not just... physically. She has been hurt before by the actions of foolish and careless men. If I followed in their footsteps..."

"You must fight them for her," Drek'thar said simply. "Fight them for her hand and her honour."

"Arthas Menethil is the Lich King, and Kael'thas Sunstrider is in Outland," Thrall said, a hint of frustration in his voice. "I wouldn't even say that it would flatter Jaina or impress her to fight for her hand, she has been fought over before, and it angered her. I will never treat her like a thing."
"Females are not fought over because we believe them to be objects," Drek'thar said sternly. "It does them a disservice to believe that. Females are fought over to show that we are determined to fulfill our duties to them. That we will not flee in the face of the enemy, that we will not give into despair when things are difficult or balk at that which is challenging. We fight for a female to let them know that they are worth fighting for. That they are of value to us, and not simply replaced like an axe or a saddle. Do not go to Northrend to fight Arthas Menethil, fight his memory. Fight that which she remembers about him that hurt her. Do not fight Kael'thas Sunstrider in Outland, but instead fight the concept that you may have love or friendship, but not both. I know that concerns you, and it concerns her too."

Thrall stared at Drek'thar wordlessly, and his teacher stood, complaining about his old bones. The words resonated, deep within him. He sat, turning the words over in his mind the way he would examine a magical working -- with Jaina, at his side, wise in areas he would never be -- and was startled when Drek'thar threw something to him, though he caught it by instinct.

"The tea," Drek'thar said quietly. "You will need it."

"Thank you," Thrall said sincerely. "You have given me a great deal to think about, and a gift. You told me a story about my parents."

"It was nothing," Drek'thar grumbled, though the words contradicted the glow of pride in his teacher's face. "But for this story, you must do something for me."

"What is it?" Thrall asked, turning the sealed, stone jar over in his hands.

"I wish to hold Durotan's grandson in my arms, so I'm expecting you to have one," Drek'thar said. "I have been present for many births, but this one, I believe, will be special."

_Not this again_, Thrall thought, and suppressed a groan. "As soon as I'm to be a father, I will let you know."

"I'll hold you to that," Drek'thar said. "No, go away. I believe you have a female to woo."

"Goodbye, Teacher," Thrall said with a hint of annoyance, and stood. He left the cup with Drek'thar, whose chuckles followed him out of the room. _Everyone is so impatient. I'll get to it when I can._

~ * ~

"There's a what?" Thrall asked, incredulous. He gestured, and the half-dozen candles he'd arranged winked out, preserving much of the wax.

_"There's a hurricane, I'm so sorry,"_ Jaina replied through the crystal. _"I don't understand it at all, it's Late Winter, there shouldn't be hurricanes this late. The weather's been so strange lately. I'm working with Tesoran, Tervosh and Rylai to protect the walls, and hopefully we can wait this out._"

Thrall sighed softly. "Be careful, please. The weather doesn't like to be toyed with."

_"I know better than to change the weather, but if I can protect Theramore from it, we shouldn't take too much damage. I'm sorry, Thrall, I wanted to..."

"I know, please be safe. Spirits watch over you," Thrall said.
"Light bless."

"Theramore isn't the only place being hit by bad weather," Garona said as Thrall set the communication rune down.

"I could have been busy," he pointed out.

"You're still wearing pants, you weren't that busy," Garona replied dismissively. "That hurricane isn't just hitting Theramore, it's hitting along the entire coast of Dustwallow. We're getting high winds. It's harder to hear them inside the city, and these aren't the Razor Winds. Those come in the Summer."

"It could be something to do with the spirits, and I may as well make use of this." He gestured to the meal that had been set out. "Help yourself."

"I'm sure it will be overly-sweet for me," Garona grumbled, but sat down, and Thrall closed his eyes. Almost immediately, he could feel the distress of the spirits.

"Something is amiss," he murmured. Spirits, I honour you. Please, grant me--

His head rang with the urgency of the air and water spirits. They wailed, and he realized suddenly that they were fleeing from something.

What's wrong?

It calls to us, but we don't want to obey, the spirits cried, and he could feel them clinging to him as lightning clings to the underside of a stormcloud. Save us, save us!

First, you must calm yourselves, Thrall said, offering them stability and certainty. Can you tell me what it is that's calling to you?

The Stone calls to us, it beckons the tides, and we flee, even as others of our kind are drawn to it, forced to do Her bidding. Thrall frowned. They must obey, but we ran to where it is safe, we hide on our haven's shores...

Can you tell me where this is? Thrall asked, and in return was given a vision of an island and fragmented images of ships and high cliffs lashed by rain and lightning. His heart sank. Go inland, but gently. Your fear harms those that live here and work the land, those who respect it and do not harm it even as it blesses them with a home and food to eat. Go, and I will do what I can.

The spirits thanked him, and he felt them depart, though the wind still howled over Grommash Hold. "It will take time for the spirits to pass over us, but I think I know where to go. I will need to speak to Jaina, I think. Something is wrong..."

"You're not going anywhere," Garona commented, and he was surprised to find her kneeling at his side. "Look at yourself. You're soaking wet."

"When did that happen?" he asked, looking down at himself. Garona was right, he was soaked to the bone, and he shivered slightly.

"About four hours ago, when you went into the trance," she replied, and he gave her an alarmed look. "A long time to watch you mutter and twitch."

"Four hours?!" Thrall exclaimed. "I spoke to them in moments--"
"Look at the hour candles," Garona said. "Jaina used the rune to say that the hurricane had mostly subsided, they must have taken whatever you said to heart. She said there's a lot of rain and snow, but they'll survive."

"You spoke to Jaina?" Thrall rumbled. She chuckled.

"No, I made Eitrigg do it," she replied. "Whatever it is that the spirits want can wait until you're dry. Think how embarrassing it would be if the Warchief of the Horde, on the most notable occasion of him getting laid, had the sniffles."

"I've had--" Thrall growled, and moved to stand. His legs were stiff, and his clothes clung to him. *I need a soak in a tub of hot water, and then dry clothes. She's right, damn her. I hate you sometimes.*"

"No, you don't," Garona said cheerfully, offering her arm. "You adore me."

~ * ~

"What do you think?" Thrall asked, shifting his arms around Jaina while the human sorceress sat perched on his lap, looking pensive.

"It must be Crestfall island," Jaina said finally. "I can't think of another place would have that particular description, but... the spirits didn't say more about what this stone is?"

"They said the stone beckoned the tides, and that it called to them, though they managed to flee. They also spoke of a 'she' that was calling to them, using it," Thrall replied, letting his head rest against her arm, and she smiled, stroking his hair lightly.

"There are some artifacts that might allow a magic user to bind elementals to them, our study of them in Dalaran was quite extensive," Jaina murmured. "While most mages don't wind up using or being interested in them, others make it their specific point of study. I remember that Kael'thas and I were discussing an essay on--" Her eyes widened. "Stone of the Tides."

"Stone of the Tides?" Thrall repeated, glancing up at her. She nodded, and cupped his cheek in one hand.

"There was a series of essays that one of the Archmages, Ansirem Runeweaver if I recall correctly, wrote about the ancient troll empires. One of the things he discussed was a troll artifact that would appear and disappear throughout troll history. It was legendary for allowing its Champion to control water and the tides... it hasn't been seen in quite some time. If that's what's doing this... I'm not sure how we can stop it, until the Champion fades."

"Fades?" Thrall asked, letting his hand rest at the small of her back.

"All Champions of the Tides are drawn back to the sea, and they take the Stone with them," she replied, a certain level of sadness to her voice. "That end seems to come faster or slower depending on how much they're required to use the Stone in service of the Emperor."

"Is there still an Emperor?" Thrall asked. "The Darkspear have shamans and witch doctors, but..."

"No, the Gurubashi and the Amani empires both fell," Jaina said simply. "What's left is a shadow
of what it once was. If you get the chance, you should study them. They're fascinating, really."

"It surprises me that you're so well-versed in troll history," Thrall commented. "Particularly, before..."

"One of the things you must learn about mages is that we're like cats," Jaina said, leaning against his chest. "Curious about everything, sticking our noses into dark corners and kicking up dust. I'll admit, my fascination with trolls originally came from my friendship with Kael. Trolls and elves are intertwined by history, though elves have a much more personal view of it. Some of my research was not well-received." She smiled, though it was wistful. "Kael at least was willing to listen to me, though how much of it he believed..."

_Fight their memories_, Drek'thar's voice reminded him.

"I'm always willing to listen, even to unpopular theories," Thrall said gently, stroking her hair. She shifted, nuzzling against his chest.

"I know you are, that's why..." She smiled. "That's why I'm so happy when I'm with you," she finished. "I should take care of this. My brother needs to know about this."

"You didn't want to go home," Thrall murmured, and Jaina's head shake shifted against his chest.

"No, I didn't, but I need to. This isn't just personal any more, this is urgent enough to affect large portions of Kalimdor, particularly along the coast." She pressed a kiss against his chest. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

"Are you going alone?" Thrall asked, gently tilting her head upwards.

"Oh, no, I plan to bring Tervosh with me," Jaina replied instantly, and he chuckled. He leaned down, and kissed her. She scooted closer, and wrapped her arms around his neck for a long, clinging kiss. When it broke, she smiled at him. "I'll be back."

"I never doubted that," Thrall said sincerely. "It was for luck."

"Thank you," Jaina murmured. "Be well."

"I will be," Thrall said sincerely. "Once you've taken care of the weather problem, things will be very peaceful."

Chapter End Notes

To see what Jaina did during this period, go to _Stormcaller_, a series that will be completely posted between June and July 2015. Enjoy!
Chapter 12: Late Winter, Year 27

Chapter Summary

This is the chapter that has actual porn in it.

Chapter Notes

Originally posted February 14th, 2010, on Livejournal.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"Thrall, are you alright?" Jaina called, though her voice was faint. Thrall ducked behind the charred remains of a tree, and a cloud of steam burst past where he had been standing.

"I'm somewhat busy," Thrall said, his tone as apologetic as he could make it. "You recall the air and water elementals that fled from the Stone?"

"Of course I do," Jaina replied. "I have a lot to tell you about how that went. What about them?"

"They went further west, and went to Stonetalon... and they're fighting with the earth and--" Thrall ducked around again, though this time from a stray boulder, accelerated by striking a whirlwind. "--fire elementals."

"Oh dear," Jaina said. "Contact me when you're done in Stonetalon? I'll look forward to it."

"Of course," Thrall replied. He tucked the rune into his armour, and turned.

"Warchief, we must stop them," Sergra called, and Thrall nodded to her. There were other shamans here -- tauren, orc, and a young troll -- and he gestured. He took Sergra's hand and that of one of the tauren, Tonna Lightninghoof, and began to chant.

Spirits of earth, stay your hands. Spirits of fire, lower your flames. Spirits of water, be at low tide.
Spirits of air, be a sweet breeze, Thrall called to them. There is no war here, no conflict. Just confusion and mistakes.

They have invaded our lands and attacked us, sizzled the fire elementals. They seek to extinguish us, and we will not let them!

They ambushed us on the way to the far sea! burbled the water elementals. We did nothing to harm them and yet they tried to evaporate us! We will not stand for it!

This is all a misunderstanding, Thrall told them, keeping his mental voice soothing. The water and air elementals did intend on traveling across Kalimdor, but without harming anyone. I specified that they were to be careful of the people who lived here, but I had not considered your presence, and I am sorry. They have escaped from an artifact that attempted to control them. If both sides could cease their extinguishing and evaporating, I believe the water and air elementals can be on their way.
Thrall felt a trickle of moisture along his back, and the breeze picked it up to make him shiver, while there was a feeling of near-searing heat across his arms, and the ground rumbled under his feet, but he stood his ground, waiting patiently.

*Very well, they may go, and trouble us no more,* the fire elementals crackled sulkily. *But they must promise not to soak us.*

*If they promise not to disperse us with flames, we will depart immediately, we wish to return to the sea,* the water elementals bubbled swiftly. *We will not waste droplets on such hot-tempered creatures.*

*It is so,* the fire elementals snapped, and Thrall turned to the earth and air elementals, both of which had participated, but not spoken.

*What of you, solid ones and ephemeral ones?* Thrall asked. *You have been silent.*

*Wind carries water, and we are heavy with it,* the wind elementals sighed. *We wish to rest, and we are content with this resolution.*

*Earth supports fire, and we burn with it,* the earth elementals rumbled. *The sooner this is resolved, the cooler we will be. We are content with your wisdom, mortal.*

*I am glad. Thank you for your patience, and listening to my words. Go in peace, friends,* Thrall said, and around him, the chanting shifted, and he opened his eyes. They were all soaked with water, and half-covered in mud, while parts of their armour and hair were singed, and one of the shaman was mourning the loss of his eyebrows. Thrall dropped their hands, and stumbled a little. Sergra took his arm.

"Well mediated, Warchief," she murmured. "And just in time, too. You can find a Lover's Day gift for Jaina before the day is marked by goblins setting off pink fireworks all over Orgrimmar."

"Lover's Day?" Thrall repeated, blinking at her tiredly, and she laughed, though not unkindly. "You were the one telling us that these holidays were important, you'd think you remember this one," Sergra said, her tone one of barely suppressed mirth. "You'll recall it from last year, it's the holiday with all the pink and red, and that goblin that came by. The one dressed in the white dress-thing, with the wings, and the silver bow. He shot Runthak with it, and when he was chasing him, he ran straight into Gryshka, and they've been mated for half a year."

"Perhaps Kwee Peddlefeet's claims of having magical arrows aren't entirely off," Thrall murmured. "I forgot, things have been busy..." He frowned. "Sergra, you won't be lonely, will you?"

"I?" Sergra snorted. "I have plans. You might not have them for much longer if you don't take care of your mate." She slapped his back lightly. "I suggest something grand. You are our Warchief, after all. Something really..."

*I think that I would rather go back to the elementals,* Thrall thought, and when Sergra caught his expression, she laughed, and slapped him on the back again.

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"Warchief, there seems to be something... odd... in Stonetusk," Eitrigg said, and Thrall looked up. Garona's admonishments aside, he was finding it harder to concentrate. The goblins had arrived early, and the scents coming in from the Valley of Strength were overpowering, and the elementals, being how they were, were prone to... overreacting.
A simple request like asking for a slight breeze can cause an isolated tornado, Thrall thought wryly. They will settle in time, once they believe they are safe. "How odd?"

"They report that several of the farmers are being attacked by their fields," Eitrigg said, and the extremely bland look on his face made it no less surreal.

"They... what?"

"Are being attacked by their fields, Warchief," Eitrigg repeated. "They're very distressed."

"I'll see to it," Thrall said, and stood. At least this will get me away from the smell...

"They will be glad to see you," Eitrigg said. "And, Warchief?"

"Yes?" Thrall asked.

"I think she'd prefer blue to pink."

Thrall made a noise deep in his throat, but said nothing.

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"Mud elementals?" Jaina said, sounding perplexed. "I've never heard of such a thing."

"It would be more accurate to say that an earth elemental and a water elemental became intertwined, and required separation," Thrall replied wearily. "That took some doing. Earth elementals are slow to anger, but their fury is unmatched by even fire elementals, and water elementals are notoriously difficult to pin down. They don't wish to be contained, and finding themselves trapped in with an earth elemental..." He used a rough towel to take another swipe at the mud that coated his legs, and shifted in the bathtub that seemed to be far too narrow for its purpose. "It was quite messy. I'm sorry, Jaina."

"No, I understand. You sound exhausted. Rest well."

"I will," Thrall said. "I'll see you as soon as I can."

"I know, and I look forward to it," Jaina replied, and Thrall smiled.

That should be the last of it, Thrall decided. Everything will be fine now.

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"I didn't think it was that foggy," Thrall admitted. "But I could be wrong, I'm no expert."

"No, it's not that foggy, at least not to an experienced watchman," Jaina said, her tone sharp, even across the distance. Ratchet's harbor stank of fish and of the thick sealant used to secure crates that headed to Booty Bay. "Blaming the weather is shameless... utterly shameless. I'm sorry, Thrall. Please, pass on my apologies. This will not happen again."

"I'll tell Captain Brightsun, I'm sure he'll appreciate it." Thrall glanced over at the Sin'dorei captain who was having a heated -- possibly intimate, it's difficult to discern at times, Jaina would be able to tell -- conversation with his second, Gilthares Firebough. "What are you going to do?"

"Replace the command of Northwatch Hold entirely, to start with," Jaina replied, her tone still stiff and frigid. "They're in a very delicate location, this is the kind of thing that is unforgivable if we're to maintain peace in Kalimdor. They'll all be disciplined." She took a deep breath. "I'm sorry, this
"will take time, and I don't think I'll be able to..."

"No, no, of course. I understand completely," Thrall said, trying to ignore the sinking feeling in his heart. "Be well."

"I will."

As Thrall tucked the rune away, Saurfang, who had been discussing the situation with several of the goblin dock workers approached him.

"No?" he asked, and Thrall narrowed his eyes.

"No," he replied curtly. "The situation has upset her, and I don't blame her."

"You know, Warchief, if there's some concern over the size of--"

"Varok..."

"--your weapon, she shouldn't be intimidated. In fact, Orgrim could frequently wield it one-handed."

"I'll keep it in mind," Thrall grumbled. Saurfang saluted.

"I live to serve the Horde."

Garona, he could swear, was laughing, and she wasn't even in Ratchet.

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"Warchief, are you certain--"

"Yes," Thrall said, and straightened. There were times that he missed his armour. It was thick and concealing, and fit him well, despite the fact that it had once been designed for a different orc. Instead of Doomhammer's legacy, he wore a white shirt, simply woven but well-made, and loose, black trousers. Even this had taken him time, until Shandel'zare had told him that many troll men courted their lovers in thongs or in the nude. It was then that he had made this decision, sending his advisor away with a glare, while she had given him a look of mild amusement. She may as well have cackled at me, then.

Nara, the wise and brave young tauren, had offered Thrall the simple gift of a card, cleverly made from palm leaves and bark, and wished him the very best of luck. Jes'rimmon had offered gestures and Vol'jin potions, both of which he had declined, and the former had caused him to remind Jes'rimmon that Garona was only gone temporarily.

I'm relatively certain I couldn't even manage that, my knees don't bend that way, and I'm sure Jaina's back doesn't, Thrall thought as he paced nervously. In some ways, he missed Garona, even though the last thing he wanted was for her to watch. It was not the act itself that made him nervous, but of course, the person, and the timing. I've been drinking the tea, grassy as it is. Dinner is ready, the bedroom is... Candles, music because the trolls also know how to make music boxes, the bed itself... He looked towards it by reflex, and it was cozy, and well-cleaned and aired, all set for two, Garona is investigating a fortress in Desolace, or she should be. Everything is ready. All that's missing is...

There was a soft chiming, and Thrall pushed back his nervousness and looked towards the spinning symbols that heralded Jaina's arrival. She wore white robes, and while they covered her neck and
wrists, the material clung, giving Thrall a perfect idea of what was underneath.

"Jaina," he said, and was surprised by how breathless he sounded. Jaina smiled at him warmly, and offered her hand.

"Thrall," she replied. "Happy Lover's day. I'm so glad to be here."

"It's been busy," he admitted, and took her hand, putting an arm around her to lead her to the table. "I wasn't sure if we'd make it."

"Nor was I, I think all manner of minor disasters conspired to keep me away," she said, and sat when he pulled out her chair. "I've told them I'm not to be disturbed. Not tonight."

"No," Thrall agreed, touching her cheek briefly. "Not tonight." He turned to the orc woman who was standing, waiting. "Thank you for being patient, Drayna. Could you bring dinner, and then you're free to go for the evening." She nodded once, and he turned back to Jaina. "I hope you'll enjoy it."

"I think I will," Jaina replied sincerely.

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"...so, as it turned out, a naga priestess had captured the new Champion of the Tides, and was using him to try and flood portions of the coast in an effort to expand the ocean. She'd collected makrura and murloc slaves, so we freed them. Tandred wasn't keen on it at first, but I explained that they were slaves and largely helpless, and it would be a different matter if they attacked us afterwards. The makrura did help us get into the deeper part of the catacombs, and I'm hoping that in the future, I can accommodate visits from Ach'lwn and his people. The murlocs fled, though I don't think they'll trouble us, unless they get caught again." Jaina's face glowed with pride, and Thrall let his hand rest on her knee. She smiled at him, and silence stretched, and Thrall's touch shifted, just slightly.

"I'm glad that it all worked out, though the elementals will take some time yet to properly calm," Thrall said. "You and your brother are getting along?"

"That's not quite how we put it, but I think he understands, now." Jaina let her hand rest on top of Thrall's, and something fell against his hand. He glanced down and saw that Jaina wore a bracelet of some kind, wrapped around her wrist. It had unfamiliar rune on it, and the token glowed with soft blue light.

"What's this?" Thrall asked, and took her hand in his, tracing over her palm. She shivered slightly, and he thought to ask if she was cold, but from her expression, realized that it wasn't from cold, and smiled.

"It's a ward against pregnancy," Jaina replied. "These ones are expensive and magical, but all well-born men and women have them, just in case..."

"Just in case," Thrall commented, and lifted her palm to his mouth, lipping over it. "We have tea."

"The... some drink a tea as well, but they're sometimes prone to error if people are careless..." She made a soft noise. "Thrall..."

"Would you care to join me in my bed, Lady Proudmoore?" Thrall asked, carefully ignoring his own reaction. "I believe there's still dessert."
"I think I can wait on dessert, for a time," she replied, and in a swift motion, moved into his arms, kissing him firmly. Thrall made a low sound in return, letting his hands roam up her back as he opened up his mouth to the tongue that pushed against his lips.

Slowly, Thrall stood, his arms still around Jaina. One of his hands moved up her back, pulling lightly at the fastening of her robe, and her hands moved around his waist, tugging the carefully selected shirt up. He tilted his head, letting Jaina's tongue explore his mouth, careful so that his tusks didn't pierce her skin. She's kissed me before, but not like this. He smiled against her, remembering how some, very foolish members of his council had once assumed Jaina was the passive type. No, never.

"Thrall..." she murmured against his lips. "We need to..."

Wordlessly, he shifted his hands, sliding one to her knees, and the other to her shoulders, and lifted her into his arms. He carried her to the bed, and set her down on the edge. She looked up at him, smiling as she slipped out of her robes, baring her breasts. He moved, and she stopped him, her touch light.

"Let me undress you," she said, and he nodded. Her hands moved to his waist, and tugged up the front of his shirt, and he felt her fingers caress his stomach, tracing lightly over some of the scars there, and then Jaina moved to undo his shirt from the bottom. Thrall let his hands rest lightly on her shoulders, and she shifted to kneel on the bed, giving her more height. He hissed when she brushed her lips against his stomach, tickling the hairs there as she worked up and up, and a slight tug was all it took for his shirt to fall around his shoulders.

"Jaina..." Thrall groaned. She smiled, and her hands ran down his chest again, to the fastenings of his pants, and cupped his rapidly hardening member briefly. She unlaced his pants slowly, and let him push them the rest of the way down.

"I told you I would," Jaina said, and moved back so that he could lie down. He stepped out of the pooled black material, and climbed into bed, laying beside her. For a moment, they stared at each other.

It's not as if I've never seen a woman naked before, a small part of Thrall reasoned while the rest of him took in the sight before him. It's not even as if I've never seen Jaina without most of her clothes on, but never... like this.

The candles brought just enough flickering light into the room so that he could see Jaina's face, her bright blue eyes and slightly parted pink lips, and the shimmering golden locks of her hair. He reached forward, and put a hand on her arm. He felt the softness of her skin, and moved his hand down to the curve of her breast, thumbing over the soft, pink nipple that was already half-hard. At the soft noise she made, he continued, rolling the nub between thumb and forefinger slowly, watching her expression shift.

"That feels good?" Thrall asked, his voice low, and Jaina nodded rapidly.

"Yes... and let's see if..." One of her hands moved, and Thrall felt her squeeze his own nipple, and he hissed involuntarily. The pressure was light, but it sent a shiver across his body and she smiled at his reaction. "That's a yes. Have you ever used your lips to..."

"Oh, yes," Thrall said, and shifted down, cupping her breast as he brought her nipple to his lips. She cried out softly, her own fingers tightening their hold on him slightly, and he began to suck at her nipple, gently squeezing her breast as his lips and tongue worked. One arm worked its way around Thrall's shoulder, and cupped the back of his head, stroking the back of it as he worked, and
Jaina's breath came out in soft, needy moans. Her other hand continued to pinch and squeeze, and then her fingers tangled in the hairs of his chest, tugging lightly, and Thrall groaned against her.

"O-other one," Jaina whispered, and Thrall nodded, offering her other breast the same treatment. His hand released her breast, and traced down her stomach, touching lightly over her navel, and then, with a pause he was certain was palpable, he let his hand rest on her thigh. "Don't stop... Thrall..."

Carefully, he shifted her, holding her against his chest, and slid his hand up, stroking at the inside of her thigh. He kissed her shoulder, and her neck, and smiled at her briefly. "I won't." Watching her expression closely, he nudged her thighs apart, and she hooked a leg around one of his.

"You'll let me know if I hurt you?" Thrall said, and Jaina gave him a look that might have had a hint of impatience in it. He chuckled at her expression, and stroked once over her entrance, and annoyance melted into need. Deciding that was answer enough, he held her, one hand on a breast, the other exploring the entrance that was already slick. Pushing one of his fingers inside of her, he let his thumb rest against the nub of her clit, and she cried out softly at the first full thrusting motion. He kissed her shoulder, and began to move again, only to feel her fingers curl around his shaft, and stroke him in perfect time. He groaned, and thrust against her hand.

"A-am I hurting you?" Jaina asked, between thrusts, and he began to understand why she had given him that impatient look.

"No, of course not," he managed, and their next thrusts were in unison. "You couldn't..."

"Then don't w-worry about me," she said, and tilted her head, kissing him firmly. She squeezed his length, and he grabbed for her with his free hand. A light touch was all Jaina needed to push Thrall onto his back, and he found himself looking up, into her eyes as she moved over him. "I want you, Thrall."

"You said you had a spell, to make this easier," he said, his heart thundering. His fingers slipped out of her, and he gripped the bed instead while she toyed with him. "I don't imagine you intend to shrink me."

"No," she said, the soft laughter mixing with lust. She set her other hand against his shaft, and he felt her palms go slick, and then both of them moved, and he thrust against her hands.

"A... a lubricant. Clever," Thrall managed. "You're certain this will... will work?"

"I think the proof will be in the testing." She released him, and shifted, straddling him firmly. His hands came up, to run down her back and sides, and to cup the curves of her hips. He pressed his erection against her slick entrance, and with a single, practice thrust, he moved into her, and she accepted him. He watched her closely as she eased him in. It was an exercise in patience, one that he was more than willing to participate in. Her expression shifted half a dozen times as she sank onto him, and he met the last of it with a thrust, and she gasped. She leaned forward a little, and her hands found his forearms, and they were still slick when she held him, digging her fingers in a little.

"You're alright?" Thrall asked, anxiousness breaking through the haze of lust. "It doesn't hurt?" She squeezed his arms a little, and his erection throbbed in response to it. He noticed that her eyes were closed, though it was difficult to say if it was in concentration or pleasure. Perhaps some combination of the two--

She rocked against him, and encouraged by this, he met her motion with a thrust, slow and gentle.
His hands rested on her hips, stroking little patterns along her lower back with his thumb, in response to the sensation, she moved against him, her urgency demanding a slightly faster pace.

So be it. He smiled, and let his head tilt back, and the next thrust came faster, and she met it, her fingers scrabbling against his arms. His movements became steady, and they moved together, faster and faster. She shifted against him, suddenly, and recognizing it for what it was, he thrust again, and again, and when her fingers squeezed him to the point of bruising, and his name tumbled from her lips in a ringing cry, he felt his heart swell. *I've done it, I--*

She shifted suddenly, kissing him hard. The movement caused a shudder within him, and he released with a roar, half-muffled by the kiss. His hands moved, and he held her against his chest, kissing her as his hips pumped. The kiss left him breathless, and he needed to pause for air. Inhaling brought in the scent of their coupling. He touched her cheek, and was almost, but not quite, surprised to find that his fingers were shaking.

"That was..." Thrall began, only to find Jaina had begun the same sentence. They stopped, stared at each other for a moment, and laughed softly. She eased off of him, and curled against his chest. She's... small. *When did she become this small?* He stroked her hair, and considered it. Jaina seemed bigger because she's a part of my world, he realized. *I do not hesitate to think of her when I have a question about arcane magic, though no doubt Shandel'zare would answer any query I have, because that's her job. She is not a shadow warrior the way Garona and Jes'rimmon are, not a druid, not a shaman, nor a witch doctor. She's a warrior, though not the way Eitrigg and Varok are--* He gave the human woman in his arm a startled look. *I give her the same consideration as my advisors, when did this...*

His hands didn't falter, even as his mind raced. *Since Theramore, it must have been. Every time I try to remember a time when I didn't trust Jaina as much as those who advise me, I think of an earlier time when I did. It's... remarkable, really.* He smiled. *Or perhaps not. I love her. He froze.*

"Thrall, is something wrong?" Jaina asked sleepily, nuzzling against his shoulder. "You aren't having an allergic reaction to the spell, are you? It happens sometimes, I should have tested it..."

"No, I'm fine." He kissed her gently. "You should sleep, if you're tired."

She nodded against him, and with a single gesture, extinguished the candles. The tiny elementals in them expressed mild indignation, but Thrall was too dazed even to comfort them.

*I love her. I love her. Why must these revelations sneak up on me, like Garona at her most mischievous?* The thought of Garona reminded him of the lectures he'd been given about finding an appropriate mate, and if it had frustrated him before, he found the notion of doing this with someone else, anyone else to be, if not repellent, then wholly unappealing. *I said that there would be no pressure on her, no promises, but... can I keep my word on that?* He let his hand rest against her back, and gave himself the stern, mental order to move it. When he could not even respond to this simplest of requests, he sighed. *I must tell her, and if she doesn't feel similarly...* His heart twisted. *I'm not sure if I want her to, or not. It would hurt if she didn't love me back, there is no question of that. It would be safer for her, though. There are some who would not understand this. Could never, though I wish they could. "Jaina?"

No response, though there was a sleepy murmur. In the unbroken darkness he traced the line of her cheek, to her lips, and then to her chin. She didn't stir, and he smiled. "I love you, Jaina Proudmoore." The quiet silence filled with those words, overwhelming the soft music for an instant before they were swallowed by it. *I like how that sounds, he decided. I'll ask her, very soon.*

It was with that thought that he fell asleep.
There is a short side-story, Linguistics, after this part, which will be posted as its own chapter, just because it's so very short it won't disrupt the story's flow.
**Sidestory: Linguistics**

Chapter Notes

Originally posted April 1st, 2010, on Livejournal.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Thrall?"

Jaina's voice was soft in the low light of dawn. Thrall shifted, his hand moving slightly. "Are you uncomfortable?" Thrall asked in reply, equally quiet.

"No," Jaina said, and her tone was tinged with embarrassment. "I just... there was something I wanted to know."

"Anything, Jaina," Thrall replied, and winced. His recent revelation had made him incautious, but still... *Jaina would never ask anything of me that would be a strain or a burden. I'm being paranoid.*

"When we're together... we always speak the common Human tongue," Jaina said, and traced her finger along his chest. "Why don't you speak orcish with me? I know it, though I'm not very... good with it."

Thrall blinked. *That wasn't quite the question I was expecting.* "I thought you'd be more comfortable with it, and you help me keep up language skills," he replied gently, and his thumb moved to her cheek. He felt her smile in the darkness. "Do you want me to speak orcish?"

"I... yes," Jaina said, and he could feel the warmth of her cheek under his palm. "I like how it sounds."

"Like this?" Thrall said, slipping into the tongue of his people. "I didn't know that's what you wanted. I hope you're not upset."

Jaina shifted against him, to his surprise. "I'm not upset," she responded, though her orcish was clumsy, coming from softer, gentler lips and throat. He liked how it sounded. "I just wanted to know."

Thrall shifted, gently nudging Jaina onto her back. "Now I have told you," Thrall rumbled, and was pleased by the slight shiver he felt under his hands. "Jaina... how much do you like hearing me speak orcish?"

"A great deal," Jaina admitted, and made a soft noise as Thrall's hand moved to cup her breast, and thumbed over the still-sensitive nipple. "Oh..."

"I didn't realize," Thrall replied, and rolled the pink nub between his fingers. "I'll have to do it more often." He bent to take the other nipple into his mouth, and she moaned, her hands moving to stroke his hair, and his back.
"I'd like that..." Jaina managed, sounding less convincing with her orcish, and Thrall felt himself stir. While she didn't quite have the same sound to her as an orcish woman, there was something about it...

*Perhaps because she's trying, or perhaps I find a certain amount of appeal to my people's native language as well,* Thrall thought, his lips moving down along her stomach. The teeth in his lower jaw scraped against her skin lightly, and about to apologize, he felt her writhe instead. *Interesting.* "Jaina," he murmured against his stomach. "Does this please you?"

"Y-yes, it does," Jaina replied, and he could feel her breathing become more rapid. "Thrall..."

"Your skin is more tender, I'll need to be very careful," Thrall commented. Jaina's legs opened wide, moving to accommodate him. Thrall bent his head, and let his tongue flick against the human sorceress' entrance.

"Thrall!" she called out, and he felt her grip at his shoulders. He smiled, and did it again, drawing it out. He moved his hand, using them to cup her, and protect her from his teeth, finding the angle slightly awkward, but worthwhile.

*If she moves too much, she'll cut herself,* Thrall thought. *I can't have that.* He shifted his tongue to move over her cltit, and Jaina moaned. He pushed a finger into her, and licked at the same time, and when her hips bucked, it was only against the digit, and not against his teeth. *Excellent.*

Thrall's tongue and finger worked in tandem while Jaina writhed, and words spilled from her lips, some in Common, some in Orcish, and some in the elven tongues, Thalassian and Darnassian. Against her, between licks, Thrall murmured praise in Orcish, which only caused her to buck harder against his finger, and he could feel the shiver of delight that went through her with each word.

He thrust a little more firmly. "Jaina Proudmoore, you are the finest ally and mate I could ever--"

"Thrall! Thrall!" Jaina cried, and he felt her release. His finger kept moving, working her through it, but moved to kiss her knee, and then her stomach while she moaned in delight.

"Was that enough talking?" Thrall asked softly, coming up to kiss her again, and with one hand, she stroked at his cheek. Despite the darkness, he knew she was smiling, and that her eyes sparkled.

"Why... Warchief..." Jaina managed, lapsing back into Common. "I had no idea that you were such a cunning linguist."

End

Chapter End Notes

Normal story pacing resumes.
"It's good that you can concentrate on your work," Garona said sharply, walking with Thrall through the halls of Grommash Hold.

"Garona," Thrall said wearily.

"Perhaps something will actually get done, for once," she continued, and Thrall ducked into the meeting room.

"Are you still angry I sent you away so I could sleep with Jaina in peace?" he demanded.

"You could have been killed," his spymistress snapped.

"By Jaina?" Thrall asked disbelievingly. Garona glared at him.

"Not by Jaina, by assassins. You'd think you didn't want to be--"

"Congratulations on your mating, Warchief," rumbled a deep voice. Thrall and Garona looked to the source. A tall, elderly tauren stood in the council room with a deeply embarrassed Nara Wildmane.

"I... apologize, Warchief, I didn't realize that you would be discussing a personal matter," she said, bowing her head.

"It's alright, Nara," Thrall said, glaring briefly at Garona. "We shouldn't have been doing so anyway." He smiled towards the other tauren. "It's good to see you again, Cairne."

Cairne Bloodhoof, chieftain of the united tauren tribes, smiled back amiably. "It's good to see you as well, Thrall. Regrettably, this isn't a social visit. Do you have some time?"

Thrall and Garona exchanged a brief look. "Of course," Thrall replied. "Please, rest your bones, and we can talk. Do you require a pipe?"

"No, no," Cairne said, and he made an odd, wheezing noise that was in fact a chuckle. "My son claims that I am too venerable an elder to smoke. I will accept your offer to sit, though." He shifted his bulk into a seat, and he was to orc furniture as Thrall was to human furniture.

_There is a reason when we visit them, they have only hunks of wood to sit on, Thrall thought ruefully. Varok will undoubtedly be upset about his chair. _"What has happened?"

"You recall our journey through the Barrens," Cairne began. "We visited the three great oases so that the kodos could rest."
"I do remember," Thrall said. "You said each oasis was not only a place of rest for your people, but they were great wellsprings of spiritual energy. I felt it, the energy is strong enough to warp the land and the creatures that live there. I believe someone in the Crossroads is doing a study."

"Tonga has submitted many interesting reports to me," Cairne agreed. "It is from him that I have learned that something is amiss. At the second, and most powerful oasis, there is a disturbance in the spiritual world. From what Hamuul has told me, one of the Kaldorei druids took himself and some of his associates to the cave to investigate, but they have not returned, and Hamuul fears the worst. Beyond that, there are signs from the ancestors that something is happening. I bring this to you because I know that you have strong and adept subordinates. I have come myself because I am interested in an adventure."

Thrall ignored Garona's raised eyebrow, and nodded. "We'll do what we can, but I'm afraid I know relatively little about druids." And what I do know involves being knocked out by a rather angry and possessive dragon...

"I will be going with you to help, Warchief," Nara said, speaking up. "Archdruid Hamuul wants a full report about what's happening. Unfortunately, he's very busy, and he's being hampered by--"

She stopped, and looked at Cairne guiltily.

"By Fandral Staghelm," Thrall rumbled. "Not even Teldrassil can keep him happy for long."

"It stirs something within the tauren," Cairne commented, his deep voice drawing Thrall's attention. "My people are proud, but even they would have accepted help from the Kaldorei against the centaur... if they had offered it. Instead, Archdruid Staghelm insults us by refusing to acknowledge that we were taught first by Cenarius, and we helped guide the Kaldorei through their first lessons. Even Rabine Saturna cannot undo all the damage he does."

Thrall frowned. "If Archdruid Stormrage were awake, such remarks would never be tolerated. Not that Tyran..."

"Archdruid Stormrage's coma is tragic, though you have brought High Priestess Whisperwind some few answers, from what I understand," Cairne said. "I do not blame her, but as you well know, not everyone can be logical and open-minded."

Thrall nodded soberly. Peace was neither simple nor easy, and more time than Thrall cared to consider was spent breaking up minor skirmishes. Jaina herself was at yet another conference, trying to convince the Explorer's League not to push for digs within the Barrens and Mulgore because of how deeply invasive digging and mining affected the Tauren. He smiled softly, because even thinking about Jaina brought about a warm feeling in his--That's the runestone. "I apologize, Cairne, someone is contacting me."

"Of course, Warchief," the elderly tauren replied warmly, and Thrall moved into another room.

"Jaina," Thrall began warmly. "I wasn't expecting--"

"Warchief Thrall," came a different crisp, feminine voice, and Thrall blinked.

"High Priestess Whisperwind," Thrall corrected. "I'm sorry."

"Jaina told me that if things were urgent, I could use this... device... to contact her or you,"
Tyrande said. "It is urgent. I need your help, Thrall."

"What is it?" Thrall asked, frowning. When Tyrande wants to be informal, it means that things have gone badly. "Is this about Staghelm?"

"Not quite," the Kaldorei priestess replied. "This isn't about Fandral. The druid in question hasn't been nearly as frustrating, but equally stubborn."

"Go on..." Thrall said quietly.

"His name is Naralex. He is one of the senior druids, and he's one of the Kaldorei that works with the Shu'halo as well," Tyrande began, using the tauren word for their people. "He and his apprentices have been observing spiritual fluctuations in a specific location within Horde territory for some time, and they've recently decided to investigate personally."

"Cairne is here, he mentioned something very similar. Hamuul brought it up to him."

"Archdruid Runetotem is very wise to be concerned," Tyrande said gravely. "I would ask something of you. If you can retrieve Naralex and the others, I would appreciate it. Or perhaps you allow me to send a squad of Sentinels in to find them."

"Cairne and myself intended to investigate personally, and we will certainly do what we can. Is there anything I should know? Will Naralex be hostile?"

"Naralex will be stubborn, but I don't believe that he'll be harmful to you or Chieftain Bloodhoof," Tyrande said, and Thrall could practically hear her frown. "There is something, though."

"Something?" Thrall pressed. "What is it?"

"Naralex and his apprentices were attempting to find a new type of creature to transform into, and believed that the spiritual energy of the Barrens would bring them the answer," Tyrande said. "Malfurion had once warned Naralex that such a venture was dangerous, and that without Cenarius' guidance, they could be manipulated by hostile spirits."

"If there are spirits at work, I will do everything I can to deal with them," Thrall promised. "And I'll bring Naralex and his apprentices back to Ashenvale."

"Thank you," Tyrande murmured. "May Elune guide your path."

"May the spirits guide yours," Thrall replied, and the runestone went cool in his hand. He sighed.

"Well, that makes things just a little bit more interesting," Garona said dryly. "Mystery animals."

"That conversation--" Thrall began before Garona cut him off.

"It's not as if I haven't overheard your conversations with Jaina anyway, as sickeningly adorable as they are," she pointed out derisively. "You realize that now I have to go with you. You don't know what those druids will turn themselves into. Giant cats and bears are bad enough. Next they could turn themselves into raptors, or snakes."

"Why would you ever turn yourself into a snake?" Thrall asked, ignoring Garona's tone as he returned to the conference room. "It never helps."
"It's called Skull Rock," Nara said, and pointed with one three-fingered hand. "Because of the formation that makes it look like a skull. See the ridges?"

"I suppose it does from far away," Garona muttered. "But from up close, all I can see are sniper crannies."

"That would imply that someone would spend hours at a time waiting for people to come by," Thrall rumbled, and heading towards the cave's entrance. "It would be a waste of time."

"And if someone was up there, they'd have just seen the Warchief of the Horde, the leader of the Tauren, and a couple of long-suffering female companions walk into a place that is named the Wailing Caverns," Garona pointed out.

"You are not long suffering, I am," Thrall replied stiffly, and Cairne chuckled. Nara ignored all of them, moving forward into the cave. There was little light to see by, so Thrall lit a torch, whispering to the spirits of fire to keep the light steady. Water splashed lightly as they moved forward, and their shadows moved against the low, rounded walls. Within moments, Garona moved ahead, slipping through the shadows, and Thrall contented himself with reaching out to the spirits.

Like many of the spirits in Kalimdor, the ones here were very responsive, as well as loud. It had taken months for Thrall to adapt to their call, and they still found the orcs fascinating, new things.

Greetings, great ones, Thrall called out. We are looking for someone.

Found someone you have, hissed the serpent spirits. Around them, Thrall could sense movement, if the shadows themselves were watching. Many someones. And there are more someones deeper in the spirit caves. The soft hissing took on an almost concerned air. They are with the others.

Others? Thrall asked, trying to cast his senses forward into the large wellspring. With concentration, he could sense many, many serpent spirits, and some other, stranger spirits -- the night elves!

The children of night are here, within the coils of the Serpent Lords, one of the serpent spirits agreed. You must be cautious.

Thrall frowned slightly. I am always cautious.

They sounded amused. Just so. Do not step on the Serpentbloom, it angers us.

I will remember, Thrall replied, and opened his eyes. "They are here, further in. Don't step on the Serpentbloom."

"This is a very powerful place," Cairne commented, holding his hand out to one of the retreating snakes. "Serpentbloom?"

"I presume he means the purple clusters of flowers that grow further in, and seem to mark the homes for small snakes," Garona replied, slipping out of the shadows again. "I've found the way in."
Cairne gave her a mild look. "You're very quiet." He shifted, very deliberately.

"No," Thrall replied. "She is very loud." This provoked the reaction he hoped, which was a wheezy chuckle from Cairne and a glare from Garona that had neither heat nor anger behind it. "Lead on."

Garona did, moving more slowly. The cavern was long, winding and infinitely twisting. With the assistance of the spirits, Thrall would be able to find his way out, but Garona had no such gift, and yet as he watched her, her eyes flicked over each crevice and detail, finding her way back. Stone floors and animal droppings gave way abruptly to greenery, bright moss clinging to the walls and ceiling of the huge, open chamber. A large pool filled most of the area, and the way out stretched on behind it.

"By the Earthmother..." Nara murmured, and knelt at the edge of the pool. "Can you feel it? It's so rich with life." She smiled with wonder. "I just want to..."

Cairne moved to peer past its surface, and blinked slowly at the large fish that swam lazily around the pool. It was the size of a shield... and not one of the small, circular ones the humans used, but a tauren tower shield. "Want to what?"

"Lay down and take a nap," Nara confessed. "It's so peaceful."

Thrall opened his mouth and cracked a yawn. Garona touched his shoulder briefly.

"If you fall asleep on the job, I'll make fun of you," Garona said. At the face Thrall made, she continued, "drowsiness could be a symptom of this place, since there is something wrong here. Sleeping could be a mistake."

Suddenly, Thrall felt alert. "Through there," he said, and pointed deeper into the cave. Long, feathery plants covered much of passage further inwards, and if one was lazy -- or tired... one would simply assume they was no other way to go. "Nara, it would seem the spirits don't want visitors, to compel sleep in passers-by."

The young tauren sighed regretfully and stood. Garona hovered, almost herding the tauren in. She looked at the pool mistrustfully before following. Past the pool, the greenery did not quite fade. It spread along the cave's walls. It looked virtually untouched, so the banked fire threw the whole thing off.

"They were definitely here," Garona commented, and held her hand over the fire. "It's old, at least two nights."

Thrall nodded, and reached out to the spirits. They were a tangled ball here, difficult to speak to, and difficult to separate one from another. Reluctantly, he withdrew.

"We will simply use our eyes and our instincts," Cairne said. He was taller even than Thrall, and his massive body seemed to fill this section of the cave. "And we have a very powerful set of eyes."

"Several sets," Garona commented. She moved forward, listening and watching, and waved them onward. "The way seems mostly clear but... you'll have to see for yourself."

Thrall followed, and his eyes widened. This narrow cave opened into a massive cavern. The stone
seemed to stretch forever, with long, narrow bridges and flowing water. Breathing in felt like breathing in life itself. Along the far walls were nests. Male raptors hissed at the intruders, their bright mottling catching the eye, even as the female raptors, larger and duller, moved protectively over their nests. With silent acknowledgment, Thrall indicated they should find a way around.

"We'll need to go in much deeper to find Naralex and the others," Nara commented, unable to draw her eyes away from the bulky, reptilian mothers. "Such power..."

"I believe they are larger than the usual roaming groups in the Barrens," Cairne said. "It's difficult to say without provoking their ire."

"Let's not do that," Thrall replied, and saluted. "Garon..." She was gone, and he blinked. "She's been doing that more lately."

"Perhaps she has more to be afraid of, lately," Cairne murmured.

Thrall frowned. Garona's nettling had been more intense, the snap in her tone less tempered by humour and affection. It could be because she doesn't approve of my relationship with Jaina, but even then... it's hard to say. I will have to trick her into saying anything. Garona's return was heralded by grumbling.

"I've changed my mind. I hate this place," she declared. Her normally silent footsteps were marked by wet squelching, still far quieter than anything the rest of them could manage.

"You liked this place?" Nara asked in polite disbelief, and Garona shook her head once.

"No. I disregarded this place," the Spymistress replied. "Now I hate it. All you can hear is wailing and sobbing."

"Well, the name does imply..." Thrall began, and stopped. "Sobbing?"

Garona nodded, and held her hand up for silence. "Right... there." True to her word, amidst the winds that blew through the large network of caves was the distinct sound of misery.

"That's not wind," Thrall said. "That's a person. What direction is it coming from?" Garona closed her eyes, and said nothing for a few moments, and then pointed. "Let's go." The raptors watched them go, still wary. The sobbing sound led them along winding paths, some of which ended abruptly and forced them to backtrack. Cairne hummed tunelessly under his breath as they made their way down to where they'd begun.

"If your Earthmother designed places like this, she has a sick sense of humour," Garona growled. Cairne chuckled.

"The Earthmother provides, the elements shape," he replied, and addressed the turtle that swam up to them, sniffing delicately at Nara's outstretched fingers. "Isn't that right, shell-brother?"

The turtle blinked at him, and slipped back into the water. The expanse of its back was half Cairne's height and twice his breadth, and Thrall shook his head, marveling. "I've never seen the like. Are they usually so large?"

"No..." Nara said. "The spiritual magic is making things grow out of control. Enormous fish, raptors... turtles. It's unnatural, I can feel it."
Garona and Thrall exchanged a look. "You know, Lordaeron has no giant reptiles," Garona noted, and her eyes followed the turtle. She tilted her head, indicating they should follow.

"Really?" Nara asked, sounding genuinely surprised.

"Really."

"No wonder you left, then," she said.

The turtle's path took them past a small outcropping of rocks that original evaluation had deemed impassible. The turtle, on the other hand, was under no such restrictions. With some discomfort, they passed one by one through the outcropping, into an even more rich and lush area.

Here the sobbing sound was more distinct, sounding louder and more miserable. Thrall moved ahead, and within one of the small glades was a night elf. She wore clashing and eye-watering shades of green, purple and gold. Lying beside her, carefully covered in blankets and lying on furs, was another night elf, male this time. His eyes were closed, but he seemed to struggle silently against something.

"And here I thought druids had it easy," Garona said quietly before Thrall hushed her and approached the distressed night elf.

"Hail, child of night," Thrall called out, using the name the spirits had used for her. She looked up, and blinked twice, her bright silver eyes winking in and out like stars.

"Could it be... am I dreaming?" She glanced down at the night elf, and back up at them, half-hopeful and half-fearful.

"We're real," Thrall said gently. "What is your name?"

"Shakuras," she replied, wiping at her eyes. "Shakuras Windleaf. Oh... thank Elune and Cenarius. I'm so happy that you've come... this has been a nightmare."

"A nightmare or a Nightmare?" Thrall asked, curious.

Shakuras blinked at him. "What's the difference?"

"Never mind," Thrall replied, shaking his head once. *No need to confuse her when she's upset, and she's young for a night elf. Tell us what's happened here.*

"Shan'do Naralex said the spiritual energy here was very strong, and that we would communicate with the spirits here." She gestured down at the sleeping druid. "It's difficult to form a new spirit animal bond, but the Shan'do believed this would be the best place to do it, since the spirit of Serpents resides here. We had hoped to appeal to it directly, but... we have not succeeded. Some of the others have been possessed. They're... they're so angry and vicious. I had to leave them, but... I'm the only one left." She looked at Thrall pleadingly. "Surely, High Priestess Tyrande must have sent you, this is such good fortune. Please, help me. We need to stop them."

"What about Naralex?" Nara asked, running her fingers along the sleeping druid's troubled brow.

"He fell asleep," Shakuras replied, her voice breaking again.
"He fell asleep?" Garona asked, raising an eyebrow.

"He just collapsed, and we can't wake him! I suppose he's asleep." Shakuras sniffled. "We all take turns looking after him, but there are fewer and fewer to do it now, until..."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Thrall said softly. "May I take a look?"

Shakuras blinked again. "Of course, but not one of us has been able to reach him, and with respect, Warchief, you aren't a druid."

"I'm not, but I've traced the minds of those within the Emerald Dream before." *Hopefully, this time, without being threatened by Ysera.*

"By minds, you mean one," Garona pointed out, and Thrall sighed, seeing Shakuras' uncertainty.

"Garona, enough," he said, and knelt by the druid. Almost before he began, he realized this would be impossible. The line of green was there, faint and nearly imperceptible against the massive knot of spiritual energy that moved and coiled — *like a snake, appropriate* — and Thrall frowned. "We're going to need to deal with those possessed by the serpent spirits before we can help the Shan'do, I'm afraid."

Shakuras nodded a little. "This was the safest part of the caverns, the others are all further in. I can't leave him here alone."

"But will you be alright, theroshan?" Nara asked softly. "You were very sad earlier."

Shakuras gave her a brave smile. "Now that I know help is here, it will be easier for me to smile." Nara brushed her fingers over Naralex's brow again, and then along Shakuras' arm.

"Then we'll hurry," Nara said. "So you won't be alone." Cairne nodded, and Garona slipped away, scouting further in. Thrall followed more slowly. He could sense why Shakuras called her location safe, because the thickness of spiritual presence increased with the foliage. He felt tested and tasted, and frowned.

"They know we're here," Thrall commented, and Garona made a face.

"Well, I do hate the element of surprise," she said. "What do the spirits want?"

"Power," Thrall replied. At her look, he elaborated. "They want to know how powerful we are, and if we can be manipulated the way the Kaldorei were. They don't want a direct conflict."

Garona watched Nara sway slightly, and Cairne grip her elbow. "Well, they're going to get one if they keep that up."

"Scouting ahead might be difficult," Thrall said. "But if you can think of a way..."

"The spirits sense me even when most people don't, and there's away to be unnoticed by those that are sensitive, but it creates a... void. Which is just as noticeable in a place like this," Garona gestured around her. In the shadows, elementals, composed of spiritually charged earth, overgrown by plants, shuffled about.
Thrall offered them silent acknowledgment, and they were ignored. "As long as we're careful, we shouldn't upset anything that lives here too much, until we come across the errant druids."

"They aren't too far, I can hear them," Garona murmured, and looked over at Nara. She was murmuring a soft prayer to the Earthmother and Cenarius. "I'm also fairly certain the High Priestess will be upset if we start killing off druids."

"I don't plan to kill them," Thrall said. Carefully, working past the serpent spirits, he called to the plants within the cavern, making a simple request. When he heard shouts of panic and protest from up ahead, he knew that they had agreed. He moved forward more quickly. Half a dozen Kaldorei in garb similiar to that which Shakuras was wearing were tangled in vines.

"Listen to me," Nara called, raising her hands. "You have fallen under the influence of ambitious spirits, you must--" All of them writhed and transformed, taking on the aspects of huge, spitting cobras. "No!" The vines could not hold them, and they advanced. "Cenarius, guide me..."

Thrall felt a wave of drowsiness move over him, and Garona's hand clamped around his wrist. This kept sleep at bay. Nearby, Cairne had fallen asleep on his feet, his stance shifted wide. Nara, on the other hand, looked wide awake, but their opponents were deep in slumber, coiled in a scaly heap. "Did you..?"

"They will sleep for now, but we will need to get them out of here," Nara said, her expression determined. "We must stop this at once before someone is hurt."

Thrall nodded. "Then let us hurry." He moved to wake Cairne, who mumbled about his old bones, and shifted his totem on his back.

"It might be wise to put the druids to sleep before they can attack us, just in case any of them spit poison," Garona pointed out, and Nara nodded. Closing her eyes, she transformed into a sleek black and tan lioness. She crept forward, embracing the shadows, and Garona followed.

"This is quite an adventure," Cairne murmured. "I will have to tell Hamuul all about it. He will be jealous, he rarely has the chance to leave Mulgore unless he's attending a meeting in Moonglade."

"And meetings are only adventures in patience," Thrall agreed. "I had wondered, old friend, if you felt this was exciting enough for you."

"Well, it could do with a bit more running," Cairne admitted. "But perhaps I will have a good run on the plains when I return to Mulgore."

"Well, running is--"

"None shall stand against the serpent lords!" cried a voice. Thrall and Cairne exchanged a look, and broke into a run.

"That's more like it!" Cairne crowed as they ran past grouped up piles of druids. "Everyone needs a good run!"

As Thrall approached, he saw a Kaldorei woman, clad in purple with embroidered gold snakes along the sleeves and open sides of her pants. She wore a purple cowl around her hair, and her facial markings had been painted to look like fangs. "You must stop, we're here to help you!"
She laughed harshly, and Thrall felt the serpent spirit coiled around her, speaking through her mouth, even as she pointed at him dramatically. "Lady Anacondra surrenders to no one, particularly not to green-skinned--" She fell at Garona's feet, and Nara gave the former-assassin a slightly reproachful look before nudging at the fallen druid with her paws.

"Don't look at me like that, all it was going to be was a lengthy speech about how powerful she was," Garona said and knelt. "And I didn't hurt her permanently."

"Let me take a look," Thrall said, moving towards her. He sat down, and Garona helped him move Anacondra so that he could rest her head in his lap. The serpent spirit seemed decidedly put out by Garona's decisive interruption, and finished its speech within Thrall's mind. The druid -- Helenae Gladewalker -- lay dormant, sleeping beneath the weight of Anacondra's spirit. *I will have to ask you to leave,* Thrall thought to the spirit sternly. *Helenae is not a shaman, and she would not have invited your power to possess her and harm her friends. Let her go.*

*Then she should not have entered my domain,* the serpent said resentfully, and thrashed against Thrall's influence. Helenae moaned, and Nara nudged. Warm, green light filled Thrall's vision as Nara helped to wake Helenae, and together, they pushed the serpent spirit out. *Fine, shaman. I will go, but warn her not to return.*

_Somehow I doubt she will want to,* Thrall thought back. *But I will tell her.*

"What..?" Helenae murmured. "Oh, an orc... two orcs, and two Shu'halo..."

"We were sent by High Priestess Tyrande to find you," Thrall said gently. "Can you stand?"

"I-- I think so," the night elf replied, and sat up carefully. "Where are the others?"

"Either further in, or along the way," Thrall said, helping her up. "They were still possessed by the snake spirits--"

"The... spirit was controlling them, they should be fine now," Helenae said, and her brow wrinkled. "We weren't welcome here, but we couldn't leave Shan'do Naralex... we went exploring."

"Go to Shakuras, she's with Naralex now," Nara said, raising a paw. Helenae took it gravely and squeezed it.

"I will, and I will bring the others back. Thank you all." The druid blinked. "Oh, I have something that might be of use."

"You're welcome," Thrall replied, and then nodded. "What is it?"

"We found these stones deeper within the caverns." From a pocket, Helenae fished out a green stone that gleamed with menace. As she placed it in Thrall's hand, he watched shadows shift under its bright surface. "The others each took one, there were only four."

"I see, we'll take care of it," Thrall promised. Helenae picked her way past the plant elementals and Garona tilted her head back.

"So, three more to go, with more of the little followers to be knocked out," Garona observed. "At least the task is simple enough."
"Simple, but traumatizing for everyone involved," Nara said stiffly. "They've been possessed by spirits and used against their will."

"I didn't say it wasn't traumatizing," Garona said as they moved forward. "But look at it this way, at least it's not demonic possession." She waved in a general manner as they came across the next group of druids. "We don't need an army, infernals aren't falling from the sky, and the cleansing process mostly involves a stern talking to."

"Ah, yes, Grommash," Cairne said reminiscently. "He was both foolish and brave."

"More foolish than brave," Garona cut in, just as Thrall made the reverse observation. "Sentimental."

"He was like a brother," Thrall pointed out as Garona peeked around a corner.

"Snake's nest," Garona said. "I'm not sure if they're druids or snakes, that's your job."

"Snakes," Nara said decisively, creeping forward. "Though they're easily the size of a Kaldorei."

Thrall took a look, and swore under his breath. There was a huge, roiling mess of snakes. One of them seemed even larger than the rest, and it rose up out of the pile. Green eyes glowed malevolently as it hissed at them.

"That, on the other hand, is a druid," Nara said.

"Go, my children! Cobrahn commands it!" the snake hissed, and the snakes disentangled themselves smoothly, slithering towards them.

"Save your energy, child, I have this," Cairne said. He shifted his stance, and hefted his totem. "Creatures of this cave, you will cease!" When the snakes continued, he drove a hoof down into the cave floor, and knocked the snakes back. They writhed, disoriented. Thrall and Nara moved toward the large snake, maneuvering to pin it. Even as it writhed and flailed, the two of them brought it under control.

"We're trying to help you..." Thrall said as they struggled. "You just... need... to... calm..." The snake struck at him, sinking his fangs deep into Thrall's arm. He roared in pain, and punched the snake at the base of its skull. It went limp. "Down."

"Nice shot," Garona said. "Was he poisonous?"

Nara sniffed the wound. "It doesn't look like it. Can you bandage the wound? We should save our magic for the druids if we can."

"Sure, don't give him reproachful kitty eyes because he punched a snake," Garona muttered, removing a coil of cloth and bandaging Thrall's arm. "You could have avoided being bitten if you'd hit him sooner."

"None of us quite have your instinct for such things," Thrall said, and looked down at the unconscious, coiled snakes. "Didn't I say it never helps?"

"You did," Garona said, and ran her fingers lightly along the snake's back. "Though one can get by on intimidation factor alone..."
Thrall reached out, and touched the back of Cobrahn's head. Within his unconscious form, the snake spirit grumbled mightily. *I don't like being bitten,* Thrall said. *You need to let him go.*

*He should not have come here, to our domain, unless he was prepared,* Cobrahn insisted. *He was not prepared.*

*If there are those who are both immortal and infallible, I do not know of them,* Thrall said. Nara's magic moved over Veritas Stormwaker, teasing him into wakefulness. Thrall could feel his confusion and lack of awareness. *Please, leave him, Cobrahn. This is not where you belong.*

*Fine,* Cobrahn said. *But you cannot protect everyone, orc. We will return.*

*I will protect everyone I can,* Thrall vowed. Veritas awoke, shifting back to his elven form as the spirit left him.

"Master Naralex! We have to help--" He sat up abruptly, and Thrall jerked his head back.

"Easy, easy," Nara soothed, and Veritas' eyes fell to her. "You're safe now."

"A sister of fang and claw... what happened? I only remember in fragments." His eyes were vague, as if not quite seeing everything. "I saw..."

"You were possessed by a snake spirit, but it's gone now. We're looking for your companions," Nara said, and licked her rough tongue over the knuckles of one hand. "We've found Shakuras, Hellenae and some of the others, they've gone back to where Naralex was being sheltered."

"Thank you," Veritas replied, and closed his eyes again. "I'm so tired..."

"You need to get back to where it's safer," Thrall said gently. "The others will go with you, but you need to stand."

"Very well," he said, and moved to stand. With Thrall's help, he made it to his feet. "It will be good to see the others again."

They watched him go, and Garona shook her head. "Two more to go."

"Wait, he has one of the stones," Nara said, and started to follow him.

"Not anymore," Garona said, and held it up. Thrall frowned.

"Did you steal that from him?" Thrall asked. When Garona nodded, he sighed. "Was that really necessary?"

"It's not as if I stole his coin purse, Warchief," Garona replied. "We have more snakes to punch."

"I hope to avoid punching more snakes," Thrall said, and looked to Nara. She was swaying again, and he touched her back lightly. "Are you alright?"

"The corruption seeps... we must hurry," Nara murmured. "We must go." Thrall nodded, and together, they made for the next Serpent Lord.
Chapter 14: High Spring, Year 28

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“This area is a dead end,” Cairne observed, gesturing to the cave walls. “We’ll have to retrace our
teps.” He began to hum again.

Thrall resisted the urge to groan as they picked their way back across the caverns. It was frustrating
to retread old corridors, or find new ones that were only to be filled with more plant elementals, and
huge, flying, winged serpents that Cairne identified as Wind Serpents. Dealing with the druids had
become second-nature, in that Nara had done most of the work, knocking them unconscious and
leaving them to sleep. It seemed as if the young, vulnerable druids had gathered near the Serpent
Lords, making them targets that were both necessary to incapacitate and in need of a more delicate
touch than totem, sword or mace.

"Is it tiring you to do that?" Thrall asked of Nara, and she nodded wearily as she padded along
beside him.

"But it must be done to preserve as many lives as possible," she replied stubbornly. "While you,
Cairne and Garona can knock out a handful of targets, I can knock them all out together. While
they were foolish, and their leader stubborn, they don't deserve to be killed for making a mistake."

"I think you've just described the Kaldorei forever," Garona said. "Are you sure you don't want to
be something smaller?"

"No, this is comfortable," Nara said. Thrall watched her for a moment, and very carefully, stroked
her head, and then scratched behind her ears. The low, pleased thrum and waving tail allowed
Thrall to let out the breath he was holding: the last thing he wanted to do was offend her.

"That's adorable," Garona muttered, and Thrall glared at her. "I'll be scouting ahead now." She
moved into the shadows. After a few moments, Nara padded on ahead, leaving Thrall and Cairne
to follow.

Thrall shook his head, just slightly, and Cairne patted his shoulder. "They are both formidable, in
their own way."

"They are," Thrall agreed as they followed at a slightly slower pace. "I just hope Nara will get the
chance to rest. Much of our success here relies on her. I have little desire to fight those who were
simply unfortunate rather than actively malicious, as Nara said. I've done enough of that already."

"You're thinking of Grom," Cairne rumbled. "Do not blame yourself for that."

"I shouldn't have sent him to Ashenvale. I shouldn't have left him to the demon." Thrall moved
carefully, feeling the growth all around him, and finding it both strange and abundant. "He died for
his people, he should have been able to live for--"

"How long has it been?" Cairne asked gently. Thrall bowed his head as he ducked a low-hanging
"Two years. Today, perhaps tomorrow. It's hard to say. I can't honestly claim I remember the exact day very clearly." He shook his head. "Something about trauma, and being thrown into a cave wall."

"It was a difficult day," Cairne agreed. "But not one you should blame yourself for. You did not know that a demon sought out your people still. You did not know that the Kaldorei existed at all, and I was unaware of your plans, so I could not warn you. What you did know is that you had to seek out the Oracle, and that Grom's bloodlust would hamper your efforts. Grom had disobeyed your orders and he needed to be punished. Taking personal responsibility for his actions takes that responsibility away from the Burning Legion, and from Grom himself."

Thrall walked in silence for a moment, letting the press of vibrant plant life distract him. "Cairne?"

"Yes, Thrall?" the tauren chieftain replied.

"You make it very difficult to feel sorry for myself," Thrall said, a touch of dryness to his tone. "Have you been taking lessons from Garona?"

Cairne chuckled. "Guilt is a constant, regardless of race. You will recall that I once was so consumed by guilt and remorse because my son had been captured by centaur that I could do nothing even when my people needed me. It happens to even the oldest and wisest, and I would not have that happen to you."

"I do remember that," Thrall admitted. "I've felt guilt over Sen'jin's death, and over that of Daelin Proudmoore. Garona's guilt over the death of Llane Wrynn was enough to overwhelm even the Lethargy, and Jaina..."

"Arthas Menethil and Kael'thas Sunstrider, and the fate of Lordaeron itself," Cairne finished. "It's more important that you move past your guilt, both of you, and work towards a better future for both of your people."

"I try," Thrall said. "It's not bad most days, just... this one."

"Skum," Garona said, and Thrall and Cairne both turned. Thrall frowned. "I don't think I'm that bad for feeling guilty over--"

"No, you're just a sap because you still feel guilty about Hellscream being an idiot," Garona replied, having heard enough of the conversation to comment. "But who I'm talking about is Skum. That's the name of the thunder lizard being kept contained by the druids. A strange thing for them to do."

"It is, but we'll have to deal with the thunder lizard when we're contending with the druids, and carefully. It could trample them while they're unconscious." Thrall frowned. "Is Nara strong enough to disable it?"

"She seems to believe so," Garona replied. "On your signal."

Thrall nodded. "Very well then. Now."

Garona made a quick hand gesture. Nara's eyes shimmered as the dim light caught in them. Within a pen was a huge lizard, a series of bony-looking plates in double rows down its back, ending in a tail adorned with sharp spikes. Its great head turned towards the shadows, suspicious. It took a step
forward and stumbled. Alarmed, the druids that had been watching it turned into snakes and hissed in anger. Suddenly, they collapsed, crumpling into scaly heaps. The thunder lizard took another step, wavering, and then fell away from the druids and onto its side.

"Nicely done," Thrall remarked. "It didn't even fall on the druids."

"Thank you, Warchief," Nara replied. "But now we--"

"You," hissed a voice. "The intruders."

"Yes, us," Garona said. She fixed a stare on this Serpent Lord, presumably Pythas. "Do you know what we've done to the last two Serpent Lords we've encountered?"

"Yes--"

"Don't interrupt me, that was purely rhetorical. We knocked them out and removed the serpent spirit from them, and we will do the same to you. Vacate your host and you won't have to be punched in the back of the head."

"You're no fun at all," the serpent said, its tone distinctly sulky. Pythas collapsed, his eyes rolling back in his head. Thrall moved to catch him, narrowly avoiding having him crack his head on the stone.

"You intimidated him into surrendering, most impressive," Cairne observed.

"I think they're cowards," Garona said. "They probably didn't have to fight very hard to get these hosts, and they're not really willing to fight to keep them."

"You have a little shaman in you," Thrall said, letting his hand rest over the night elf's forehead. Slowly, the former serpent host's eyes fluttered open.

"I have no such thing," Garona said stiffly. Thrall grinned at her, and then looked down.

"What... you saved me?" the night elf murmured. "You know, there's a formula for what comes after this."

"He's taken," Garona said, before Thrall could open his mouth. "Your friends are out near the front of the caverns. You may wish to join them. Oh, and we'd like the stone."

The night elf nodded, sitting up carefully. "There were others nearby..."

"They're unconscious, you should wake them as well," Nara said. "But perhaps not the thunder lizard."

"Skum," the night elf agreed. "Thank you all." Thrall helped him to stand, and watched as he walked away.

"Who names their minion Skum?" Garona wondered. "And for that matter--"

"Don't say it," Thrall warned, standing. Garona turned to him.

"You know those aren't their real names," she began.

"Yes, we do," Thrall said, interrupting before she could gain her stride in a rant. "They're all possessed by snake spirits. We know how you feel about people with stupid names."
"I bet most of those snakes aren't even from here," Garona complained. "This isn't Stranglethorn. Everything tries to kill you in Stranglethorn."

Thrall shook his head ruefully. "The question is, where do we go now? The path ends here, and if we were finished, we'd have four stones instead of three."

"There is a possibility," Cairne said, and pointed with one large, three-fingered hand. "There appears to be some kind of drop straight down."

Nara padded over and peered over the edge, her whiskers crinkling with distaste. "It's too far to jump, I think."

"Where's your sense of adventure?" Garona asked. She began to unwind coils of rope, and looking for a good place to anchor it.

"I'm afraid I left it in Orgrimmar, along with my wading boots," Nara said. "I can fly down."

"We'll still need to rappel down and get Cairne somewhere safe," Thrall remarked. "Assuming there's dry land down here."

"I hope so," Cairne said. "I'm not fond of wading."

"I'll go first," Garona said. Within moments, she was moving down the narrow opening, legs braced against one side and being lowered carefully with help from Thrall and Cairne. "I don't see a direct opening, but I think I see light in the water. I'm going to have to dive to be sure."

Nara and Cairne both pulled faces. Thrall made a soothing noise. "I don't like it either, we're going to have to strip down and bring our armour and weapons down separately."

"Let me just make sure there's anywhere to go first," Garona said. "Letting go of the rope."

Thrall peered down as Garona slipped into the water, and ducked under its surface. She moved towards the light and disappeared. Meanwhile, Thrall began to shed his armor, and attach it all together in a bundle.

"Once she's certain, I can take the armour bundles down," Nara said. "If I hit the water just right, I can pass into a creature that swims in the water directly from my bird-shape."

"What if you hit the water incorrectly?" Thrall asked, curious. Nara's whiskers twitched.

"Then I'll still change, but it'll be more embarrassing."

Cairne chuckled. "You won't be able to carry my totem down, I fear, but that will not be difficult to transport. It's very strong, I can simply drop it."

Garona's head broke the surface of the water. "I've found the way through. Have I mentioned I hate this place yet?"

"Yes," Thrall, Cairne and Nara chorused. Garona made a face. Thrall lowered the armour down in bundles, and Garona disappeared again. Once Cairne's totem was dropped down, they created a rough harness, and carefully lowered the tauren chieftain down.

"I dislike being wet," Cairne said as his hooves hit the surface of the water, and then he began to sink. Garona undid the harness and guided him out and away towards the surface. Thrall and Nara exchanged a look.
"I'll go, and then you can retrieve the rope," Thrall said. Nara nodded, a little wearily, and returned to her natural form. Thrall put a hand on her shoulder, offering her some of his own strength. She smiled. "We'll all enjoy it when we can sit and rest in a safe place."

Nara nodded again, and Thrall moved to the rope. He climbed down carefully, bracing himself against the wall the way Garona had, though his form was larger and thicker, making the descent a bit more awkward. He hit the water and bit back a curse at the chill, then ducked his head under the surface and began to swim. Like Garona, he could see the light indicating where he should go, and emerged on the other side. This part of the cavern seemed much like what had come before it, though there were no plants, no strange creatures, and no druids, conscious or otherwise. Cairne was squeezing the water from his shirt, and Garona had the armor set on one side to drain.

"Where are we now?" Thrall wondered. "And how are we to get back?"

"That's a good question, one I hope that the elves can answer," Garona replied grimly. "Where is--"

Out of the water came a slick, silky looking brown seal, bearing a coil of rope and the pitons that had been used to fasten it in place. "There she is," Thrall said, moving to take the rope.

"Thank you, Warchief," Nara barked, and shifted into her cat form again, and took a few minutes to wash her paws and ears.

"We were just discussing where we should be going," Thrall began. "I think--"

"Hiss..."

"Do you hear that?" Garona asked with a frown. Thrall nodded.

"Hiss..."

"Someone is saying the word hiss," Cairne observed. "What a foolish thing to do."

"Hiss... hiss..."

"I believe it's this way," Nara said, and padded around a corner. Thrall collected up the pieces of his armour, leaving them tied together. They came across a dark alcove containing a primitive, haphazard nest made of moss, twigs and rocks. Within the nest was a male night elf, dressed similarly to the others they had met.

"Hiss! Hiss!" the night elf insisted. Garona rolled her eyes, walked over to him and slapped him upside the head sharply. "Ow!"

"What do you think you're doing?" Garona demanded. The night elf scowled up at her.

"I'm trying not to get caught by the Serpent Lords, what are you doing? I thought hiding past a sheer drop into water would keep me safe!"

"We're trying to help your companions," Thrall broke in before Garona could say something scathing. "You seem to have avoided being possessed, but why were you... hissing?"

"I fooled the Serpent Lords," the night elf replied. "I made them think I was possessed by one of them, so they wouldn't try it again." He held up a dull, green stone. "I even made myself a nightmare gem, like theirs."

"The spirits would know if you're possessed or not," Thrall pointed out, and the night elf's
expression became crestfallen. "And I believe your stone is malachite."

"Oh..." the night elf said, his head bowed. "I even had a good name... Boahn."

"Don't say it," Thrall muttered. "Do you know how to get out of here?"

"Oh, yes, just over there." Boahn pointed to a cave. "It loops around near the mouth of the cave."

"Where..? How?" Garona demanded. "We saw nothing of that kind when we came in."

"The Caverns are deceptive," he replied, shrugging a little. "If you aren't observant, you'll miss things."

"Garona," Thrall said warningly as she raised her fist. "You should get out of here, we've been rescuing your fellows. They're gathering near Naralex."

"Oh, that's a good idea," Boahn remarked, and stood, shedding twigs and moss. "I suppose I will see you again later."

"Oh, you will," Garona said darkly. Nara nosed against her hand, and Garona petted her absently. "So, now that that pointless delay is over and done with, we need to find the last of the Serpent Lords."

"I believe he is not far," Cairne said. "None the least of which is because I can hear actual hissing."

"I hear it too," Thrall said. "Let's move, quickly. My armour can wait, I believe. I don't anticipate a serious conflict."

"You never know, you could get bitten by a snake again," Garona said, smirking. Thrall pulled a face at her.

"My arm is still throbbing, I haven't forgotten," Thrall replied wearily. "I'll try to avoid being bitten again by snakes."

"See that you do," Garona said. She moved towards the sound of hissing snakes, and Thrall followed, with Cairne squelching up behind them. All too close was a huge snake nest. While the lighting was already dim within the Caverns, this cave was dark, with only red, sinister lighting to shimmer off of several massive snakes, each nearly as thick around as Thrall himself.

"You dare... you dare approach me," called the night elf, nestled within the coils of his snake-companions. "I... am Serpentis. I am the Serpent King! I can do anything!"

Thrall paused, waiting for Garona to make a pithy remark about such a proclamation, and was surprised by her silence. He glanced around, and saw nothing but moving shadows. And where is Nara... oh, I see. I suppose I shall have to be the noble, righteous one. Let's see... He straightened, and pointed the Doomhammer at Serpentis. "Spirit, the time has come for you to leave your host. He does not belong here, and he made a mistake. We understand this, but he doesn't deserve to have his freedom... his very life taken away. Let him go."

The red light from the cave flickered in the night elf's eyes, and Serpentis raised an arm. Two huge snakes uncoiled and lunged from the nest. Thrall spun to the side. The snake slammed against the wall. Cairne lifted his totem to swing, and Serpentis opened his mouth, rearing back and spat out a huge glop of green. It missed the tauren chieftain only narrowly, and hissed against the stone.

"Acid!" Thrall called out. Every time I don't think I need my armor, I am wrong, he thought
"Burn!" Serpentis cried. "Burn and be--" His voice choked off when Garona emerged from the shadows, her steely gray eyes flickering with a hint of red as her arm tightened around his throat, trapping him within her grip. One of the snakes turned, huge jaws coming to clamp down around her waist. She grunted as she felt the teeth bite into her side, but held Serpentis fast.

In the darkness, Nara sprang, landing on the snake that bit into Garona, clawing and biting. Thrall swung at the snake that was approaching him, bringing the Doomhammer down hard to crush its spine. He felt regret for a moment, but if Nara had not simply subdued them, it was entirely possible that they could not be soothed. *Or she's too tired to manage it. If--*

Nara snarled as she tore the snake open. Despite the way the snake writhed and thrashed, Garona held her victim fast, and Serpentis was rapidly running out of air. As the snake died, Serpentis collapsed, and with him, Garona fell to her knees, still clinging to him.

"Garona, you can let go now," Cairne said, loping over to her, and reached down, pulling the snake's jaw open and wrenching it away. Garona stared at him blankly for a moment, and then her arms relaxed.

"That could have gone more smoothly," Thrall muttered, shaking scales and gore from the Doomhammer, and moved forward. The shadows coiled and writhed, and the final snake, having hidden in the shadows, lunged out at Cairne. "Cairne!"

With deliberate slowness, Cairne brought his totem up, and then slammed it down, and Thrall felt the earth vibrate under his feet. In mid-lunge, the snake died, its head crushed by the heavy blow. The tauren chieftain smiled, his eyes twinkling. "A fine adventure indeed."

"Indeed," Thrall said, relief tinging his voice. "Let's relieve our friend of his burden."

"I have a name, you know," Garona snapped, her voice tinged with pain. One hand was pressed tightly to her side, and her fingers were already stained with gray blood. "I also hate snakes."

"The next thing you know, you'll be hating perfectly harmless things, like steam," Thrall chided, and went to kneel at her side. He gently moved her fingers, replacing them with his own. "It was strange, not hearing you mock someone's bad name."

"It was hard to resist, particularly when he claimed he could do anything," Garona said, wincing. Thrall called on the spirits, healing the wound in her side. "Don't fuss over me, get the Serpent Lord before he wakes up and he spits acid all over us."

"You imply your headlock was less than effective," Thrall said mildly. "I'm shocked."

Garonasnorted, but smiled as he healed her. "I consider myself to be a realist."

"I thought you were a pessimist," Thrall said, moving to bandage her side.

"Pessimists are what optimists call realists, Warchief," Garona replied. Chuckling, Thrall finally moved from her side and to the Serpent Lord. He placed a hand on his forehead, and closed his eyes.

This Serpent Lord was indeed the most powerful, the spirit representing all snakes instead of merely one kind. The recesses of his mind were labyrinthine, no less so than the caverns they had spent so long exploring-- In fact, they are exactly like the Wailing Caverns, Thrall realized as he recognized the exact spot the raptors had hissed at them, and where they'd followed the turtle.
Remembering what 'Boahn' had told him, he picked a different direction, and instead of taking a long, circuitous and wet route he came upon Serpentis very quickly, or in this case, the sleeping soul of the druid.

Over the druid loomed a large snake spirit, filling the room. Thrall watched cautiously, never taking his eyes from the huge coils. Instead of scales, each wriggling inch was another, much weaker snake, having been absorbed by the greater force of will of the Serpent Lord.

So... you seek to dislodge me, do you? Serpentis hissed. And what makes you think that you can dethrone the Serpent King? Your friends cannot help you here.

Two reasons, Thrall replied. The first is that I have succeeded with all of the others, and I will succeed against you. The bold, bald statement felt a little odd to Thrall, but it was worth it to hear the spirit hiss in anger. And the second is that you are wrong. I am not alone.

From within himself, Thrall drew upon memories, recollections and feelings. One by one, spirits manifested in a protective circle around him. Each wavered a little and then grew strong as he fed emotion and memory into them. Jaina, bright-eyed and alert, curious. Doomhammer, grave with secrets and heavy burdens, but strong. Garona, cynical and smirking, but fiercely protective. Grom, reckless and brave, sacrificing his all. Thrall raised his hand, and the spirits advanced. Serpentis hissed and lashed out at them, but was limited by his unwillingness to move away from the druid. The night elf stirred, distressed, and it was all Serpentis could do to fight off the assault quietly. Thrall's spiritual allies did nothing to help, as Orgrim bellowed and Grom uttered high warcries.

Garona drove one of her swords deep into the Serpent Lord's side, splitting it open. Dozens of tinier snakes began to flee from it, and he cried out in anger and frustration. Serpentis moved away, trying to consume the spirit-Garona as she mocked him, cocksure but wary. Once Serpentis moved, a young, blonde woman appeared, simply dressed but beautiful in Thrall's eyes. She knelt by the night elf's side, and Thrall enjoyed seeing the spirits take her form, recapturing how vibrant she'd been in life instead of how she'd died.

Wake up, Taretha murmured. Her hands glowed green, demonstrating a power she'd never possessed. Wake up, you must fight now for your freedom.

The night elf stirred and awoke. He sat up a little, confused and disoriented by the battle. "Who...?" He looked between the spirits wearing human and orcish shapes and the enormous snake spirit. "I'm going back to bed." He made to close his eyes, and the spirit-Taretha put a hand on his shoulder and began to shake him lightly.

You have to fight! Taretha urged. This is your life that has been taken away, and you that must defend yourself.

"I will... try." Sitting up, the elf began to concentrate. "Spirit, I am Aurelis Moonshadow. This is my body. I want it back." Drawing on the green energy around him, he struck out at Serpentis. Where Garona's swords had created impressive but ultimately shallow cuts, the magic tore open huge holes, freeing more and more of the accumulated spirits. The Serpent King howled and writhed, undulating until he was nothing more than shed scales.

Nice of you to join us, Garona said, smirking and tucking her weapons away. Did you have a good nap?

Don't pick on him, Jaina chided. She moved over to Thrall and embraced him. As they kissed, Thrall absorbed his sense of curiosity and wonder at the world, a sense that would never die or be slain by cynicism. Garona rolled her eyes. It would be Thrall's turn to initiate a kiss, instead
pressing his lips to her forehead, absorbing his sense of both caution and ultimate loyalty. Next, he clasped arms with his sense of duty and his ability to lead his people through hardship, and Doomhammer disappeared. He offered his orcish pride a rough hug before turning to Taretha and the elf.

*It's good to see you,* Thrall said. *Tari...*

*I will always be a part of you,* Taretha whispered. *My dear little brother.* Though it had been years, Thrall could still feel the last time his sister in spirit, if not blood, had embraced him, and into himself he took in his ability to fight onwards, no matter how difficult things got, and his ability to love despite hardship.

Slowly, Thrall opened his eyes, his needs protesting. Next to him, Aurelis stirred. Despite her injuries, Garona was standing over him protectively, and Nara was curled around Thrall, sleeping. The chamber was no longer dark-red, and was instead merely dark.

"That took a long time, young one," Cairne remarked, chuckling. "But it was good to rest these old bones for a spell. So, we now have four nightmare stones and are without four powerful serpent spirits. We should return to Naralex and wake him."

"First, I'm putting my armour on," Thrall said wearily. Garona offered her hand to him and he took it, standing. Seeming unconcern flickered over worry, and Thrall shook his head.

"That was the last of them, it's almost time for you to rest," Thrall said kindly. Nara shook her head.

"No, we cannot rest here... I thought it would be safe once the last Serpent Lord was gone, but I sensed... the darkness is only getting stronger. We must--"

A high scream pierced the air. Thrall and Garona exchanged a look and immediately began to run.

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Thrall pushed his way through the crowd of night elves around Shakuras and Naralex, and moved to kneel by the elder druid's side. He was fighting against nothing and murmuring.

"We have the stones," Thrall said. Garona, who had slipped next to them remarkably quickly, passed them over. Beneath their clear, green surfaces, smoke moved and writhed, as if it were water coming to a boil. "What's wrong?"

Mutely, Shakuras pointed towards the water. Thrall had seen it before, but had dismissed the lake within the cavern as merely being part of it being exceptionally wet and unpleasant. Now, the water roiled the same way the stones did.

"Excuse me, young ones, please allow us to pass," Cairne said, using his gentle tone to finish what his large, bulky stature could not. Nara bounded behind. "That is... unusual."

"I'm not certain what that is," Thrall said, "or what's causing it, but we must wake Naralex now."

"I will try, Warchief," Nara said. She lay her head against his chest, and began to purr.

"...the... Nightmare..." Naralex murmured, struggling against insubstantial foes. "It... it comes... our
"Didn't you say something about Ysera not letting Malfurion go until the Nightmare ends?" Garona asked in an undertone to Thrall. He nodded briefly.

"Malfurion is not the only one trapped in it, then," Thrall replied, his voice a soft growl. "We must..." The water from the lake began to crest against the rocky shore. Without a word, Thrall, Garona and Cairne drew weapons. "Whatever it is, no matter how terrible, we cannot let it pass."

A frill of bright orange broke the surface, and was followed shortly by the rest of a large, scaly head. Two huge, blinking eyes peered out at them malevolently as the creature stepped onto the shore. It raised it's head in a piercing cry, causing the night elves to shriek.

Garona, on the other hand, began to laugh. "That's a murloc. What is everyone so afraid of?"

Thrall growled softly. "I'm aware that's a murloc."

"This is Naralex's great nightmare?" Garona asked in disbelief. "What he fears beyond all else?"

Shakuras glared belligerently. "Well, think about it. Wouldn't a giant murloc scare you?"

The other night elves seemed to agree, but Garona made a noise of disbelief. "No! That's ridiculous. There are a million things in this world more frightening than a giant murloc." To emphasize, she pointed with one of her swords.

Considering everything she would have seen, that's probably not totally uncalled for, Thrall thought ruefully. "Then we should be grateful that we're not getting dreams from your head."

Garona considered. "You have a point."

"Meanwhile, while we may disdain its presence, the murloc remains," Cairne said gravely, stepping up to meet the murloc. It began to writhe with shadows, striking out at all those nearby. Garona ran, ducking and rolling until she stood beneath the murloc, and began to climb it. Distracted from Garona's acrobatic feat by Cairne's more directly presented threat, it battered away at the elder tauren, leaving Garona room to get to the highest point of its back. She drove her swords in deep, and it let loose a blood-curdling cry.

Thrall had not been idle. Drawing on the now-free spirits of the Wailing Caverns, he channeled their power and drove it deep into each of the murloc's wounds, making them worse. Unlike natural murlocs, which had green blood, this creature was made from nightmare and shadow. With each wound, Thrall remembered something, a dark memory. From the expressions on his companions' faces, they too remembered.

_I will never lose Tari as long as she has a place in my heart. Blackmoore is dead and rotting. I am not a slave._

On Cairne's face, he saw grief and loss as he remembered his son's capture by centaur and his mate's death. And, Garona...

"In my mother's name," she whispered, and drove her swords into the back of the murloc's skull. It exploded into shadow, flinging Garona back into the water, and flattening the rest of them.

"Garona!" Thrall called, running for the lake. He did not so much dive as flop into the water, cutting through it, pulling Garona to the surface while she was still stunned from the impact. He wrapped his arms around her in both an embrace and to hold her firm. "The nightmare is over."

"Now your armour's wet," she murmured. "I hate murlocs."
Thrall laughed softly, and they returned to shore together. Naralex was just sitting up, being tended to by Nara and Shakuras, the former licking his cheeks. "I... have... awakened!"

"It is an honour, Shan'do Naralex," Thrall said gravely, carefully picking out bits of seaweed and murloc scales from his armor. "I was asked by High Priestess Whisperwind to retrieve you and your students."

Naralex looked between the various night elves. "I believe we are quite ready to leave this place. Thank you, all of you."

"You're welcome," Cairne said heavily. "But my old bones would appreciate not being here any longer."

Thrall chuckled, and offered Cairne a wet slap on the shoulder. In reply, his old friend blew gustily at him. It only caused Thrall to laugh all the more.

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"A whole flock of druids should be heading back to you now," Thrall said into the communication rune. "Most are none the worse for wear, aside from being tired and cautious. This Nightmare troubles me. I have sent the nightmare stones to Thunder Bluff with Cairne and Nara so that Hamuul can look into them. I understand he has some experts that may be able to unravel their mysteries."

"A circle," Tyrande said absently. "A group of druids is a circle. Thank you, Warchief. I appreciate your assistance in these matters, and I look forward to Archdruid Runetotem's report."

"You're welcome, High Priestess," Thrall said, and let the magic within the rune fade. He stood and went to his armour. It had been finely polished since his return, and he touched over the lines briefly. He remembered the first time he'd seen Orgrim wearing the now-familiar black and gold plate. He'd shed his cloak and surprised Thrall with it, though the younger orc had won their battle nonetheless.

_I was so proud of myself_, Thrall thought ruefully. _And then wondered why everyone else acted like they were in on a big joke. Orgrim was always... tricky_. He touched over the dent representing the end of his friend and mentor's life. _He would have liked Jaina, I think. He said he had little care for the humans, but... I don't think he was being entirely truthful, not within earshot of those who still hate humans._

"Warchief," he heard from behind him, and turned. Garona stood behind him, dressed in black, as she did when she--

"Garona, what is it?" Thrall asked. "What happened?"

"You said you trusted me to protect your interests, Warchief, is that still true?" Garona replied, and Thrall felt decidedly uneasy.

"Of course I do, but I still want to know what happened," he said. "Tell me."

"You don't want to know," she murmured, almost inaudibly, and a chill ran down his back. "One of my regular routes revealed a small number of dissidents that were making threats against your life. I have eliminated them."

"Threats?" Thrall asked, his eyes widening. "What kind of threats? People complain, Garona, they-"
"I would not have killed men who were morose and drinking, nor fools who will regret their words in the morning, Warchief," she replied, and turned to face him. "They were dangerous, both to you and to Jaina--"

"Jaina," Thrall breathed. "It's because of Jaina, isn't it? The reason why they felt threatened."

"I told you you didn't want to know," Garona said and sighed. "Jaina is an excuse. If it weren't about her, it would be about the fact that we make treaties with the night elves instead of taking what we want, or that the dwarves should know their place, or that the Forsaken, despite being undead, are too human or elven to properly join the Horde. I would not spill blood for philosophical disagreements, but when it comes to the point when people wonder if there might not be a slightly more traditional leader of the Horde, that's when I act."

Thrall felt sick. "Are there that many that feel that way? That believe I'm wrong?"

"No, not many," Garona replied, and walked over to him. With a single, graceful movement, she went to one knee. "You are my Warchief, and I serve you without hesitation. The men I killed were wrong. Those that remember the so-called glory days of the old Horde did not see what Blackhand did. Ask Eitrigg about the fate of his sons. Ask what drives an orc to abandon his people so thoroughly that he would rather call a human, someone who had been his enemy for as many years as he'd been on this world, brother. Ask Drek'thar what drove Durotan to take his people as far from Blackhand as possible." She smiled, bitterly. "And, if you could speak to the dead, you could ask Griselda Blackhand why she ran from her father and died, or Doomhammer how he earned the nickname 'Backstabber'. You are what we need. There are always those that will prefer violence to peace, and intolerance to understanding. When they endanger you, I will be there, to guard your shadows."

Thrall closed his eyes, letting her words echo. He was not afraid of bloodshed when it was for a purpose, and Garona's speech reminded him that she shared his beliefs. He touched her shoulder lightly. "Rest, you deserve it. Thank you, for protecting me."

"Warchief," Garona replied, and rose. Thrall returned to his room, his heart still heavy.

Is it so terrible for my people that Jaina and I are close? It's not as though I'm required to pass on either of my titles to my children. He touched the jar that he kept the tea in. I thought we were past that, and Jaina... Her name evoked a feeling of warmth. Not just because we are intimate. She is the friendly ear that listens to my troubles, the keen mind that sees solutions I cannot. I need her. He brewed the tea carefully, and took the steaming mug to his bedside. After he set it down on the low table, he removed the communication rune from his clothes and set it next to the mug. He began to undress, simply letting each piece of clothing fall to the ground. He settled into bed, and took a sip of the tea. Ignoring its grassy taste, he activated the rune. "Jaina?"

"Thrall?" Jaina replied, sounding tired. "Is something wrong?"

"I'm sorry to bother you," Thrall said, feeling guilty. "I just wanted to..."

"Talk," Jaina finished gently. "You wanted to talk. So, talk to me. Tell me what's on your mind. I'll listen."

Thrall settled a little more into bed, and with Jaina's voice tucked against his ear, like a ward against the darkness, he began.

Chapter End Notes
Cairne is humming Paw's Backtrack Song, which, to the tune of Ode to Joy, is:
Backtrack, backtrack, fucking backtrack, gotta do this shit again... Because that's about
how I felt about having to backtrack in Wailing Caverns approximately a million
times. Thanks to the joy of YouTube (and the original writer, Paw Dugan being a
wonderful sport), The Song!
The first thing Thrall noticed was the smell. Breathing was difficult when inhaling brought with it the stench of rot and the taste of decay. Thrall kept his breathing careful and shallow to avoid too much of it, which meant each lungful was just as stale as the last. He gave up trying to be polite about it after the first ten minutes, and this actually helped to numb his senses. The spirits had long since fled this place, and any place in the near vicinity, so there would be no purifying the air around him.

The second thing that Thrall noticed was that it was not quite, as promised, a city carved out of a sewer. As Thrall stood in the main threshold of Undercity, he could see that this had once been a city, albeit the sad ruins of one. As he understood it, some large cities were layers built on top of layers, and when new levels were added, old ones were forced down into obscurity. This became the ‘under city’ of a city, and often led into the sewers. Many of the sewer pipes of old -- some of them twice as tall as an orc -- had been broken open, adding more labyrinthine layers to an already dark and complex city.

Thrall’s escort through the Undercity was none other than Nathanos Marris, known as the Blightcaller, and Sylvanas' champion. More than once, Thrall had heard a noise, or caught a particularly alarming smell, and asked about it. The Forsaken man had shrugged with a grinding of bones Thrall found disconcerting every time he did it, and said that he never noticed such things. Because he's used to it, Thrall mused. I don't know if I ever could be.

Marris had been tall, once, and while death and reanimation had wasted him, there was still some amount of height and pride to him. Thrall recognized his garb as that of a Ranger, though he wore a tabard that bore the symbol of the Forsaken's ruler herself, the Banshee Queen. A ivory half-mask, cracked but not broken on the front, on a purple backing. The armor itself seemed to be rotting away, as if the very touch of undeath caused it to age, exposing bony joints and clawed fingers and toes.

"We've divided our city into five quarters," Marris was saying, and offered Thrall a macabre grin, so that he wouldn't ask the obvious question about the math involved with five quarters. "Four of them are in the city proper, and the fifth, where you're going, is more private."

"I understand," Thrall said gravely. Garona nodded once, and unlike many of their sojourns into highly unpleasant places, she offered neither comment nor complaint. In some ways, I should be happy. In others, it means that she truly doesn't like this place, or it reminds her of something worse.

As if she could sense his thoughts, Garona said quietly, "I've been here before. Not for long, and not after the fall of Lordaeron. The buildings are different. This place was smelly, disgusting and filthy, but it wasn't... death. This place smells like death."
"Well, we don't make it particularly welcoming to the living, considering how little they make welcoming to us," Marris said, his tone acidic. "Perhaps you can claim that you're not being chased around by humans with swords, bows, and guns, but we can't say the same thing."

"We make a point of trying to move past it, and understanding that not all humans are the same," Thrall growled warningly. Those reports of human activity in the Barrens prevented Jaina from visiting this place. She takes it so personally when they cause trouble. I'm almost glad she isn't here. Almost.

"I'm afraid we don't really have time to send them questionnaires about their feelings when they're trying to kill us," Marris replied, ignoring his tone. He waved one bony hand. "But for those who cannot ever go home, Lordaeron is our sanctuary. Quel'thalas is heavily reinforced and fortified as a Scourge base, as are most of the eastern parts of Lordaeron, from Stratholme to Andorhal. Arthas being run out of Lordaeron by the demons was a favour to all of us."

"In a sense, I suppose it was," Thrall admitted. "Your Queen was spare on the details."

Nathanos shrugged. "What our Queen chooses to disclose -- or not disclose -- is entirely up to her."

"It’s difficult to negotiate diplomatically without proper information," Thrall noted. Nathanos lead them through the ruined gates, down past the ruins of Lordaeron and into the under-city. The buildings were largely wooden construction, but aged, old and dark.

Most of the buildings seemed to be empty, with their windows either boarded up or smashed out, the latter staring like eye sockets in a line of skulls. Here and there, Thrall could see a Forsaken head poking out, like white maggots peeking out from inside a skull, watching the activity on the street. He could sense their curiosity, their suspicion. Even as Forsaken, the former humans and former elves were distrustful of those some of them felt were still a great threat to Azeroth.

Perhaps, if they were better accepted by the living, they would not have resorted to allying themselves with the Horde, Thrall thought, and glanced at Garona. We need something from each other, if nothing else, neighbours who won't shun us.

Garona's brow was wrinkled with concentration. He knew it was her impulse to hide in shadow, to conceal herself from prying eyes, to be the observer and not the observed. That was forbidden, they both had to be under supervision at all times.

Residential areas, such as they were, gave way to merchant stalls and shops, lurid and colourful almost in defiance of the rot and decay of the rest of the city. Some shops billowed with green or purple smoke, others displayed wares out front, clinking in the slight breeze. There was food, which Thrall did not quite expect. Dead carcasses or creatures kept in crude cages, ready to be taken home, a parody of living human cities. Even the animals were twisted by exposure to the plague. Patterns of infection marred their skins and coats, infected even if they were not, in fact, undead, and Thrall had no doubt that such creatures would sicken the living if they attempted to eat them.

Another way to destroy the humans... starving them out or making them desperate enough to try infected meat, Thrall noted. I wonder how many here fell to such a trick.

After the merchants were the training halls. Plague hounds barked with low, rough voices at skeletal birds while decaying, undead horses stood in stalls eating what looked to be raw meat.
Nearby, Forsaken were training with arms. Like the buildings, the armour they wore looked old, rusted and decayed, baring the bone-joints of knees, elbows, fingers and toes, while their swords shed rust flakes with each swing, though they seemed to hold out against attacks.

The Forsaken were practicing against hulking creatures, wielding various weapons. A meat hook would grasp towards the fighters, only to be deflected and evaded. Thrall felt bile rise in his throat as he noticed glistening loops of intestine swinging from the creatures with each blow. *These must be the abominations... they're more horrific than Jaina described.*

Hooded Dark Rangers, clad in the uniforms of the Rangers of Quel'thalas, practiced their marksmanship against straw dummy figures shaped in human forms, their burning red eyes missing nothing. Still others crafted, and for a moment, Thrall saw the way they formed weapons, without elegance, only efficiency. Still, the steel was new and well-forged. It was exposure to the Forsaken that changed its quality, their very presence eroding that which was new and whole.

From near the fighters came the scent of the Apothecarium. *It would appear,* Thrall thought ruefully as his nose began to burn, *that my sense of smell is not quite as gone as I thought it was. More's the pity.* Regardless of previous occupation, the Forsaken had embraced alchemical research with zeal. Thanks to Sylvanas' ability to poison Arthas and nearly kill him, poisons were of great interest to the Forsaken, and so too was the plague that had transformed them. The Forsaken raided Scourge camps, stealing cauldrons and bringing them back, using the plague they found to test and modify. *To render it harmful to the Scourge, I am assured.* Thrall glanced around at the Apothecaries. Unlike many of their kin, these individuals were not frightened or shy. They grinned openly at the visitors and even waved. It was Nathanos, with his stern, disapproving looks that caused them to go back to work.

"The Dark Lady's receiving chamber is near the Apothecaries," Nathanos said. "She founded the Royal Apothecary Society and personally approves and tests their work."

"Has there been much success?" Thrall asked curiously, and Garona drifted forward a little, frowning at the poisons.

Nathanos shrugged again. "Some. Not as much as we'd like, the Scourge aren't rotting and dying. It will come with time."

"What happens to the Forsaken when you create a plague capable of destroying the Scourge?" Garona asked quietly. "Will you go down laughing with the sinking ship? Will you embrace oblivion with open arms?"

Around them, the Apothecaries stilled in their work, and for a moment, there was only the sound of boiling potions. Finally, Nathanos shrugged again. "We'll just have to see." He glared at the apothecaries, gesturing for them to get back to work. They hastened to their respective tasks, but as they moved past the apothecaries, Thrall felt as if he were being watched. He shared a glance with Garona, who shrugged unapologetically.

The far end of the under-city was built into the catacombs beneath the major graveyard, breaking into the tomb of the Menethil kings. Thrall's gaze caught on some of the plaques marking the identities of those who'd been laid to rest in the marble tombs, recognizing some from his history studies and others from later stories he'd heard from some of Jaina's people. They spoke of their dead rulers with reverence and a touch of fear: the Menethils had been warrior-kings, conquerors feared by their allies and feted by their subjects. While Terenas had not been the type to take to the battlefield with sword and shield, he had been a warrior in the field of politics, and few had been
able to match wits with him, from the noble elves to the steadfast dwarves. The tomb of Terenas Menethil II was empty: the urn holding his ashes had been stolen from Uther the Lightbringer, and was reportedly lost somewhere in Lordaeron.

Jaina said there were rumours that Arthas had taken them to try and reassemble his father so that he might enslave him, Thrall thought, feeling cold all of a sudden. She assured me that such a thing was impossible if the body was cremated, but still... we rely so heavily on it to protect our fallen. To find it ineffective at its primary purpose would be unsettling.

Nathanos spoke briefly to a number of Deathguards, Sylvanas' elite bodyguards. They seemed larger and more solid than the civilian Forsaken, and eyed the living with somewhat impolite disbelief. Nathanos gestured towards Thrall and Garona as he addressed the Deathguard, and they nodded briefly.

"Come," Nathanos said. "The Dark Lady is waiting."

I would hope so, Thrall thought sourly. Considering we were called here. He simply nodded back and Nathanos led them further in. The passage through the catacombs was narrow, and lined with Deathguard, all watching the trio in silence, and the feeling of crawling discomfort returned. Finally, the passage broke into an open, round room, obviously once meant for the royal family to find their final rest, but which had since been cleared out. There, shrouded in darkness, was the Banshee Queen.

"Welcome," Sylvanas said, acknowledging Thrall and Garona with a nod of her head. "I have been looking forward to this meeting for some time."

"As have I," Thrall said. Sylvanas sat on an elegant ebony throne, padded with black silk cushions and framed with a charcoal gauze curtain. She was sitting back so that the shadows concealed her face, though her burning red eyes pierced the darkness. Her legs, crossed at the knee, were encased in black scale armor, both flexible and protective. Black leather boots covered her from her knees to her toes, without any hint of the decay that Thrall had noted in every member of the Forsaken that had watched them approach, and the flickering light hinted at a black scale breastplate that covered her from waist to wrist to chin. She drummed long, pale fingers against the arm of her throne.

Sylvanas gestured, and several Forsaken carried out two wrought-iron chairs. Thrall disliked them on first glance, and only continued to do so the more he looked at them. They were large, but the metal seemed rusted and stained, somehow, rather than sturdy.

I'd almost prefer wood, Thrall thought, carefully sitting in one of them. Garona ignored the second seat and stood just behind his left shoulder at rest, but not at ease.

In the darkness, Sylvanas smiled.

"Garona," Thrall said warningly, his voice a soft, orcish growl.

"I think I've seen this particular type of torture device before, Warchief," Garona replied. "You can see where they removed the bolts and straps."

"You're exaggerating," Thrall said, and looked anyway. She wasn't. Damnit.

Sylvanas' smile widened. "If you're comfortable, Warchief, let us get started. We have so much to
"We do," Thrall agreed. "What news from the Eastern Kingdoms?"

"The Ashbringer is dead." Sylvanas folded her hands, and there was a certain amount of smug satisfaction to the gesture. "The Scarlet Crusade scrambles to properly lead themselves, but there is a second organization, similar to the first but far more tolerant. I believe you’ve heard of them, they call themselves the Argent Dawn."

Thrall nodded, and frowned slightly. "I have heard of the Argent Dawn, they have done some recruiting in Orgrimmar. It is... unusual to see humans outside of the Theramore League in Durotar. Usually, they are more hostile."

"I will confess to having an interest in the Argent Dawn. They seem to accept our state of being, and several Forsaken have joined their ranks." Sylvanas gestured elegantly, towards Marris. "We shall see how long their shiny ideals last."

"We shall," Thrall agreed, and frowned again. "How did the Ashbringer die?"

"My sources say that he was ambushed by Scourge on the way to Stratholme to meet with his superiors. Some theorize he was betrayed by one of their own."

"Theorize?" Garona asked, raising an eyebrow. The Banshee Queen turned her gaze on the orc Spymistress, and nodded to herself when Garona neither flinched nor shifted.

"The Scarlet Crusade are the dregs of the Silver Hand, those who were not good enough to die at Arthas' hand. They are like scorpions, fighting and stinging each other, and lashing out at the innocent and guilty alike." Sylvanas' fingers curled. "I'm not sure which of them got the notion in their head that the Scarlet Crusade was not going to save Lordaeron, but it's good that they did. It weakens the Crusade, and the Argent Dawn holds true to the ideals of the Silver Hand, while the Crusade does not."

"What’s the present state of affairs in the plagued lands now?" Thrall asked.

"The city of Stratholme is divided. The Scarlet Crusade managed to succeed in purging and holding the Cathedral district, and they get their supplies through the shipping district, since the Scourge rarely make use of ports or navies."

"Stratholme has the wherewithal to support a port?" Garona said, and Thrall nodded.

"While the domestic port has been the King’s Harbour for centuries, Stratholme was the major oil supplier to the fleets patrolling the northern parts of Lordaeron during the Second War. Peace made them less prosperous, but I suspect you could sneak a boat down the coast if you were clever."

"Assuming the Scarlet Crusade are ever clever," Garona pointed out, and Sylvanas raised an eyebrow before continuing.

"The most heavily corrupted parts of Stratholme are being held by a Death Knight named Baron Rivendare who has been placed in charge of overseeing the conflict with the Scarlet Crusade. Presently, the necropolis Naxxramas is stationed over Stratholme, spewing blight and poison into the lands below. Its master is Kel'thuzad."

The contempt in Sylvanas’ voice was a palpable force.
Almost all of the surrounding countryside, aside from one narrow pass, is controlled by the Scourge. The Argent Dawn hold the city of Tyr's Hand and the King's Harbour. Tyr's Hand is a coastal city, and surrounded entirely by Scourge holdings, including Mereldar-on-the-Lake and Corrin's Crossing. Due to the conflict between the Argent Dawn and their former brothers, shipping between Stratholme and Tyr's Hand is nonexistent.

"Why haven't the Scourge overrun the city to begin with?" Garona asked. "They have to sleep sometime."

"That... I don't quite know," Sylvanas admitted. "In their attacks on Forsaken outposts, they have possessed some kind of strong protection against the undead. It makes them difficult to fight."

"Could it be the Light's work?" Thrall frowned as Sylvanas laughed harshly.

"If it were, don't you think that the Lightbringer would have won against his student? No, I think they've found something else. At first, I believed it was the Ashbringer's influence, and now... now I'm not quite so certain. It's a concern that needs to be investigated by the living." Her burning gaze went from one orc to the other. "If what they have can be used to fight the Scourge, we must seize it. They will not share it. They have no regard for the Forsaken, nor for the living that aren't part of their organization. They have turned away non-human members of the Silver Hand, and sent those who originally joined them on suicide missions. The last of those who survived went to the Argent Dawn."

"You've kept a very close eye on the situation," Garona observed. "I'm almost surprised."

"Almost, because the Scarlet Crusade are our neighbours, whether we wish them to be or not," Sylvanas said, and settled back again. "It is in my best interests to encourage the Argent Dawn. The Scourge need to be eliminated."

"I will pose the problem to my council," Thrall said. "Was there more, before I give my own report?"

"I believe there is, yes," Sylvanas said, steepling her fingers together. "A matter that concerns you more directly. There is a race on Kalimdor that are known as the... Quillboar, I believe?"

"That's the name we give them, yes," Thrall said. "What of them?"

"The Scourge are courting them. Recent intelligence suggests that they've sent an ambassador to one of the Quillboars' elder crones in the hopes of establishing a stronghold in Kalimdor." Sylvanas smiled at the looks of alarm and surprise on Thrall and Garona's faces. "I thought you'd appreciate the warning."

"We do appreciate it," Thrall said. "We appreciate it a great deal."

"Good," Sylvanas said. "Oh, and before your report begins, there is one, additional piece of intelligence I have about the Scarlet Crusade matter."

"And what is that?" Garona asked flatly.

Sylvanas smiled, and it sent a shiver down Thrall's spine. "Something at least one of your councillors will appreciate. Taelan Fordring is the Highlord of Hearthglen."
"And then they told me that I needed to go outside," Jaina finished. Thrall offered his hand to help her over some thorns, but she had blinked past them. He smiled fondly, and hurried to catch up. "I do go outside."

"I believe you," Thrall said sincerely. "I appreciate that you've taken time to come with me for this."

Jaina smiled at him warmly. "I always enjoy our time together, Thrall. The spread of the Scourge in Kalimdor is something we all must worry about. If they're allowed to run unchecked..."

"I understand," Thrall replied gravely. "Though after meeting with Sylvanas... the threat of the Scourge is so widespread."

"Yes," Jaina agreed, and bowed her head briefly. "We were not meant to stop it, not at that stage. Everything Kel'thuzad permitted us to discover was to drag us further into his plot. If the trap had been meant for me instead of Arthas, I don't know that I could have resisted."

"I think you could have," Thrall said softly, and reached to take her hand. Jaina squeezed his hand silently. "Though speaking of the Scourge, the other matter that Sylvanas brought up has been troubling me."

"Troubling you, in what way?" Jaina asked, watching his expression.

"She mentioned specifically that Taelan Fordring was the Highlord of Hearthglen. The name sounds vaguely familiar, but I'm not quite sure why. It certainly meant something to Eitrigg, he all but jumped at the chance to go to the Eastern Kingdoms. He didn't explain why, just that it was personal. It's a long shot, but I was wondering if you had any idea who this Taelan Fordring is."

"Ah," Jaina said, and paused, gathering her thoughts. Thrall waited, expectant. "Well, it's... complicated, but if he can be found..." At Thrall's uncomprehending look, Jaina elaborated. "Taelan Fordring is the son of ex-Highlord Tirion Fordring, once the governor of Hearthglen."

"That name I know," Thrall said. "That was the human that Eitrigg was living with when I came to find him."

"Really... he was reported as dead a year after his exile... I should explain from the beginning, though you surely know Eitrigg's part in this story."

"Of course," Thrall replied. "Eitrigg left the Horde because he felt as though Orgrim had broken his promise to lead the Horde with dignity, and he lived in the forest near Hearthglen, far away from the war and the camps. He was found by a human -- Tirion -- and while they fought originally, as we did, it was due more to misunderstanding than malice, and they grew to be friends."

"Yes," Jaina said, and smiled briefly. "Tirion kept it secret from Lord Uther and the other paladins, but he was turned in by one of his students, Barthilas. Eitrigg was seized and Tirion was reprimanded. Tirion then continuously petitioned for Eitrigg's freedom and eventually agreed to go before a tribunal, promised that he could plead his case."

"That doesn't sound so unreasonable," Thrall said, but Jaina shook her head.
"The so-called tribunal was not motivated by a desire for justice, but by anger and disgust. Four men sat on the tribunal, and of them, only one went into it believing that Tirion didn’t deserve to be stripped of his privileges, and that man didn't even believe that Tirion shouldn't be punished, merely that capital punishment was too much."

Thrall frowned. "What do you mean?"

"The tribunal consisted of Lord Uther, my teacher Archmage Antonidas of the Kirin Tor, my father and... Arthas." She sighed. "My father and Arthas openly hated orcs, Uther privately hated orcs and while my teacher had devoted time and studies to the orc Lethargy, he felt on the whole that Tirion's behaviour had been irrational, emotional and foolish. He would not have seen Eitrigg executed but brought back to Dalaran for extensive studies, which is neither comforting nor compassionate of him, but simple logic: if he could see what made Eitrigg different from other orcs, he could learn what the Lethargy was, whether it be the symptom of a disease, a curse or what have you. Nonetheless, Tirion made his case and was summarily told that what he had done was treason, pure and simple. There was no exception. All orcs had to live in the Internment Camps or under the supervision of recognized Internment officers, or be killed."

"Not that the Frostwolves or the Warsong cared for such," Thrall said, a rumble building in his throat. "Nor, for that matter, the remainder of the Black Tooth Grin clan which reclaimed the name of Blackrock once Orgrim was captured."

"No, human rules so rarely apply to anyone but humans," Jaina murmured. "The worst part was that if Tirion had denied it, he could have gone free with only the reprimand, but to Tirion, that was an unacceptable solution. It was dishonest, against the Light. In calling this tribunal, he had admitted to his own guilt, and the trial became not about Eitrigg, but about Tirion. Tirion was offered multiple opportunities to recant, to ask the forgiveness of the tribunal and he refused. As a point of mercy, or so they claimed, rather than having Tirion executed, he was excommunicated from the Church, stripped of his powers and sent into exile. Reportedly, all he asked was that his family not be forced to join him, which they weren't. He was reported dead within a year."

"He wasn't dead," Thrall replied after a moment. "I saw him, we were introduced. If he was stripped of his gifts as a paladin, then he would not have been able to save Eitrigg. During their escape, he was badly injured and Tirion called upon the Light to heal him."

"I argued that, at the very least, removing the Light's gift from an individual after they'd been gifted by them was impossible according to the very process by which it was granted, but this was ignored in favour of deciding I was sympathizing too much with a traitor." Jaina's lips quirked in a smile. "And that was before we met."

"I felt how sympathetic you were when you tried to impale me with an ice crystal," Thrall said ruefully, and glanced around. The home of the quillboar was circular, the kraul fenced in as its name suggested by thorns and brush. Snowsong hopped over an arm-sized coil of briarthorn and whined. "She hears something."

"We've walked right into their home, I wouldn't be surprised if they've been watching us." Jaina's voice was calm and unconcerned, even as she shifted positions. Thrall looked around in a more exaggerated fashion, stepping back so that he and Jaina were back to back. Snowsong stood at his feet and whined again. "There?" Jaina asked, gesturing slightly.

"There," Thrall agreed. He did not close his eyes, as was his habit, but let his gaze unfocus as he called to the spirits of air, asking for their help. Wind swirled around him, filling his lungs with
magic. "We can see you, come out."

Immediately, there was angry snorting, and one of the quillboar broke from its cover, raising its spear high. It took three steps before it was frozen in place, ice crystals creeping up its hoofed feet. It made an angry noise, brandishing its spear while Jaina shook her head.

"No, that's unacceptable," Jaina said, and as her voice drifted through the air, it changed and altered into a series of grunts and syllables. When it reached the quillboar, its eyes widened. "You will listen to us. You will hear our words."

Another quillboar stepped forward, making sure to show off its numerous trophies, proof of a strong warrior, though it did not attack. Instead, it looked each of them over, calculation behind its dark, narrowed eyes. Finally, it snorted. "You are on our lands, outlanders. You cannot make demands of us."

"I have learned about your language and customs from your exiles," Jaina said. "You do not take requests or ambassadors. You consider them weak. You execute them as cowards and deserters."

She snapped her fingers, and the ice crept up the quillboar's legs. It squealed and fought. "So we will make demands and you will hear them. If you don't like it, you will try to attack us, to force us into war."

"How can you trust the words of exiles?" the quillboar snorted, and Jaina smiled sharply.

"They have nothing left to lose but their lives, and even those are considered forfeit. Now, will you listen?"

The trapped quillboar squealed again, and the speaking quillboar gave it a look of disgust. "Very well, we will hear what you have to say."

"I know that the quillboar speak to the elements as well," Thrall began. "I know that the quillboar speak to the spirits and their ancestors, that you are the children of the boar-god, Agamaggan." This was met by squealing and hooting. "So you know what the spirits call abomination. The restless dead. The blighters of lands, the plagued. We have been told that one of your crones is negotiating with one such creature. We must stop this, or all quillboar lands will become as dead as salted earth, and your people will be slaves to the king of the dead."

This was met by squealing, snorting, and three more quillboar broke from the brambles to charge. One turned into a rabbit, hopping and looking quite perplexed. Another was swept in a tornado of winds, flailing and dropping his spear, and a third was encased in ice.

"Rabbits, now?" Thrall murmured. "I thought it was sheep."

"I'm experimenting with new things, it's thematic," Jaina replied. "Rabbits are easier to pick up, relatively speaking."

"You've never been kicked in the face by a rabbit before," Thrall said, chuckling before he returned to seriousness. The speaking quillboar drove his hoof into the dirt.

"You insult us! Our crones are wise, and speak to the spirits! They would never offend them so!"

"Many have said that about their leaders," Jaina said, ice dancing around her fingers. "Many have been deceived."
As Thrall concentrated on keeping one of the quillboar disabled, he felt something. There was a presence nearby, a powerful, imposing one. Thrall looked around, and looming above the brambles was a massive spirit-boar. Thrall could see a bleeding wound in his side. The blood that splashed onto the brambles seemed strengthen them, and grew long, thick thorns. "Jaina--!"

"Be still, my warriors!"

Immediately, the quillboar threw themselves to the dirt, and even the one half-frozen in ice tried. Jaina snapped her fingers, and he flew forward in his haste. Thrall made a symbol of reverence. Jaina, on the other hand, looked around.

"What is it? What do you see?" the sorceress asked, and Thrall blinked at her.

*Can you not see it, plain as-- oh, of course. "Jaina, we are in the presence of a great spirit, a... a god."

Jaina waved a little. "Hello. Nice to meet you."

Thrall fought the urge to laugh. *Jaina studies the spirits so respectfully and devotedly, but they are not part of her world. "I will tell you of him when this is over." He bowed deeply to the boar-spirit. "Mighty Agamaggan, we have come to speak to your people about an urgent issue. We believe that one of the crones is--"*

"I heard your words to my people. I am dead, not deaf."

"...my apologies," Thrall said, and bowed again.

"Acceptable. The words you speak are truth. I feel the rot beginning to spread, deep within the kraul. It must be stopped. We are warriors. We are strong. We seek constantly to test our strength against others. Your kind came to this land seeking a home. My children seek to keep theirs. I have seen you expand around their homes, leaving them room while you make homes for your own people. We attack you."

"Yes, we get reports. We lose people."

"That is our way. That loss, that return of blood to the earth, to be reborn into new warriors."

"Your people have declared war on the orcs--"

"No. If you were at war with my children, you would know. You would see their thousands. They would rush through your hills and canyons, destroying everything in their warpath. My children are merely doing what comes naturally to our kind."

*What kind of race would do-- oh. "I think I understand. My people were once like that. We jockeyed for strength, fighting each other to establish dominance."*

"Humans do it too," Jaina noted. "The difference is we tend to call them tournaments... or bar crawls."
Agamaggan regarded Jaina for a moment, and snorted. "The undead speaker does not wish to establish dominance. It doesn't even want war. It wants annihilation of everything, of the spirits of the quillboar, of their very way of life. It wishes to add my children into their great war machine."

"The Scourge seek to turn the world into a wasteland of undeath, to rule a world of the dead," Thrall said gravely. "There are those who have fallen for their lies, or those so desperate that they believe they will never feel or suffer again."

"To be alive is to suffer, but it is also to rejoice. It is to die with a spear in your ribs or to be the one holding that spear, to taste the blood of your enemies, to feel triumph as well as defeat." Agamaggan snorted. "These Scourge must be stopped, and the foolish crone punished. The crones are the wisest of their kind, those who speak to me and ask my advice. Charlga has not spoken to me. She has not used her wisest judgement. She has not consulted with other crones. She has acted on her own to destroy the Razorflank and with them, all quillboar. She must be stopped."

"She will be," Thrall said. "We ask for your guidance, as the heart and soul of the quillboar. Show us how we may act so that we can help your children."

Agamaggan snorted again. "I will."

~ * ~

Thrall studied the map quietly. Agamaggan had ordered the quillboar to help them, and it had taken some time to create the map in question, simply because the quillboar didn't usually map. They relied on instinct and scent to get them places, which made for poor topography. Fortunately, once Jaina was no longer concentrating to keep the warriors under tight control, she could build an illusory map based on quillboar testimony about the state of the inner sections of the kraul. Once Jaina had finished the map, she had compressed the image onto a large scroll of paper, allowing Thrall to make markings on it.

Nearby, other crones were performing rituals of purification and appeasement. To Thrall, Agamaggan was looking on, listening thoughtfully. He shook his head a little.

"What is it?" Jaina asked softly. Thrall smiled, and took her hand.

"I'm not used to spirits taking such an immediate and direct interest in affairs," Thrall admitted. "We perform rituals and I sense the spirits, but we don't worship a specific one. I can see him listening."

"That reminds me of philosophical discussions about faith and belief back in Dalaran," Jaina said. "You must keep in mind, most mages are irreligious. Some of it has to do with the fact that many mages are also elves, who in turn tend to be irreligious, but it also has to do with how we are taught."

"And what are you taught?"

"To be skeptical. Not to trust in the idea of gods or spirits… even the Light can be suspect at time, if there's too much of a concern of being led by emotion and instinct instead of logic. To mages, communication with spirits almost never exists. Ghosts are understood, analyzed and eliminated as
needed. As far as mages are concerned, everything that is can be explained, analyzed, even altered with enough effort. Things that people believe in that are intangible or faith-based tend to be disdained. On the other hand, in a case like this... Agamaggan clearly exists. I can't see him, but I can see the effect he makes on the world. In some cases, creatures we call gods communicate with people directly. This faith isn't intangible, the proof is concrete and it exists. You speak to the elements. You perform rituals and they respond to you."

"Sometimes, but not always," Thrall noted. "Arcane magic seems to be very predictable. The spirits are... not always receptive to requests. They have personalities and desires like you or I do. It's less like tapping into a source of power and more like asking a favour of a particularly mercurial friend who expects you to do them a favour in return."

Jaina nodded. "Something I think most mages would find frustrating. They like to know where their power is."

"You've adapted to it," Thrall said, smiling gently.

"In a sense. It can be hard to believe in something I can't strictly analyze, but I can't deny its existence. I prefer to study the known interactions with spirits instead of analyzing them directly, since I can't see them. I make note of which rituals work and which don't, and why they have the results that they do. I can use this to create a greater picture on the whole of how spirits interact."

"To what end?" Thrall asked.

"So it can be understood. People fear what they don't understand. Dalaran's very existence is due to the fact that the Arathi feared magic. It can be hard to trust those who have practices that you don't understand. That seem to... pray to the air for no reason other than superstition and fear."

Thrall heard Agamaggan snort. "And the only way to do this is to explain it the way you would arcane magic?"

"No," Jaina said. "I analyze spiritual beliefs as a mage because I am a mage. Understanding is always relative to what you can see, hear and feel for yourself. I can use this method to explain spiritual beliefs to other mages. I would have to use a different approach to explain it to practitioners within the Church of the Light, who are more understanding of such situations, but are often not born with the holy powers that they channel, or people who have never experienced any kind of abnormal phenomena, magical, spiritual or divine."

"You would explain magic to people like this as well?" Thrall asked curiously and Jaina nodded. "How would you explain magic to a shaman?"

"Well..." Jaina thought, and then nodded. "Magic is a force that exists all around us in a raw, untamed element. It is an inert, transmutable force that gathers on a plane of existence that rests just beneath the physical one, like skin underneath clothing. There are two kinds of mage: the kind that are born with the ability to channel power and those who learn to do so via study. The former tend to be called sorcerers and the latter wizards. Sorcerous talents must be trained, or in rare cases, drained and sealed off and wizards, since they learn their craft of their own free will, never have to worry about this, and are instead trained strictly on the proper ways to channel this power. All kinds of mages must learn rituals, usually called spells, to channel that power into a specific function. Raw arcane energy is considered the most powerful but also the most volatile and draining to use, and rules the transitive elements of magic, such as transmutation, morphing, but also scrying, teleportation and enchantment. Converting that magic into one of two elemental types
is considered to be more controlled, though more limited. Fire magic tends to represent raw destructive force whereas ice magic tends to be more defensive and rely on the mutable state of water."

Thrall nodded. This new information worked very well with how he understood the elements. Every new conversation we have about magic is a wonder, though... "You said that people with in-born mage talents are called sorcerers... and you're a sorceress. That means your talent is inborn?"

"Yes." Jaina's smile faltered a little. "It was not easy to adapt to at first. Magic is not something my family is known for, so it was difficult to identify what was-- that I had mage potential."

"Jaina?" Thrall asked softly. He squeezed her hand gently.

"Kul Tiras is not without its own superstitious beliefs. Tirans do believe in the Light, but just as much so we believe in the twin forces of the ocean and the weather... Sea and Sky, is the specific oath. Sailors see many things while out on the ocean. Things that many people simply don't believe. Sometimes these things are brought on by delusion, or an inability to take the time to properly analyze something that they've seen. So... they believe in things like mermaids, selkies... sprites. Changelings... spirits that steal away children and leave their own in their place. Fairies. Some of the stories are clear moral lessons to keep children in line, but others..." She shook her head.

"What happened?"

"When I was very young, I channeled magic unconsciously. I didn't know what I was doing and allowed emotion to dictate my actions. I was... frequently short-tempered and easily roused to anger. I still can be, at times." Jaina smiled a little, and then it faded. "My parents insisted that I was fine, but I know they worried. Other people weren't so polite about it. Some people thought I was some kind of spirit, or changeling, or... freak of nature. It was hard for me to make friends and keep them, because strange things kept happening around me. When I was ten, I was playing on the docks with some others. One of them said something to me and I got angry... and I pushed him, and he fell onto ice. He was hurt... bleeding... and I panicked. I ran as far as I could and I hid. I was very fortunate that my father chose to contact Archmage Antonidas of the Kirin Tor. One of the advantages one has when one is a head of state and is also very persistent."

"He loved you very much," Thrall said quietly, and his heart ached, just a little.

"He did," Jaina said. "Antonidas convinced me that I wasn't... broken in some way, that there was a reasonable explanation for everything that happened in the world, a cause to each effect. In my case, that I had a powerful, untamed mage gift and if I trained it, I could become a mage the way he was."

"And you said yes?" Thrall asked. Jaina shook her head.

"I hated it. I hated being different. I told him to take it away. He said it was possible, but a waste. He asked me what I wanted to do more than anything else. I said I wanted to be a pirate. I surprised him, I think. I said that I wanted to sail the world, fighting other pirates and bringing home treasures. I wanted to... rescue people. He persuaded me that mages could do these things with even more ease than pirates, and that I could still travel the world, and fight, and find treasure, and do even more than that. I said I would try it for a little while. With my parents' permission, and mine, he took me to Dalaran and they started to train me. I learned how to control my gift, to not let
my temper dictate all of my actions. I started to read some of the books they had… about the mage-heroes of old, the Guardians. There weren't Guardians any more, not since Medivh, but… I could dream, and I did."

Thrall put an arm around her, holding her to him. "Medivh was less than fond of being a Guardian."

"He was, it was… a little shocking," Jaina admitted. "But there are some things books just don't tell you about your heroes." She kissed his cheek softly, and tucked her head under his chin. Thrall held her for a little while before speaking.

"When I was very young, I had the perspective that humans were right and anything not-human was wrong. The first time I saw my own face, in a bit of glass, I was afraid. Disgusted. I heard Blackmoore joke about it once, how I barely seemed to know I was an orc. That wasn't true. I could never forget it. Looking at my own hands and feet, seeing how I grew… even looking at Tari and her parents. I thought I was inherently wrong for being an orc."

Jaina reached up, caressing his cheek, pale fingers contrasted against green skin. "How you are born can't be inherently wrong. No one specifically requests to be born in any specific way, but you can be proud of it. This face… isn't ugly because it's orcish. In fact… it's very handsome. Dignified."

Thrall turned his head a little, kissing at the pads of her fingers, and brought his hand up to stroke her cheek in turn. "Just as this face is beautiful. It is pink, and pale… and it's yours."

Jaina leaned up, kissing him softly, and Thrall kissed her back, the motions long, slow and sweet, the swell of her lip to be savoured. There was no reason to push for more, there was balance in this, with the careful way Jaina avoided his tusks and yet held nothing back. When he inhaled, he took in her scent, one that hinted at the sharp tang of arcane energy, of dust and sweat, of…

There was a loud snort and Thrall reluctantly broke the kiss. He looked over to see an elder quillboar crone staring down her snout at them with her hands on her hips. "Yes?"

"You must offer your devotion to the Quill God," she said, her voice harsh and grating. Thrall blinked in surprise, as did Jaina. "Come along now!"

"Of course," Jaina said. "Just show me what to do." Jaina pulled away from Thrall and let herself be led, going through the motions with care.

"She cannot see or hear me," Agamaggan said to Thrall, his tone almost conversational, had it not resonated across Thrall's senses. "The rituals mean nothing to her."

"That isn't quite true," Thrall said. "She can't see or hear you, but it doesn't mean she doesn't believe you're there. It simply means that she has to trust that you will understand her even without a clear answer."

Agamaggan snorted. "Strange. It is something that my crones know well."

"One might wonder about the nature of faith," Thrall said quietly. "Is believing that something exists easier or harder because you can't see it, because you will never gain anything other than personal satisfaction and peace for performing rituals?" Thrall looked up at Agamaggan. "Would it be as easy for people to believe that you existed if they'd never seen you, if you did not speak to them personally."
Agamaggan snorted, but said nothing. Once Jaina was finished, Thrall was brought to repeat the same rituals, speaking quietly and sincerely of the ferocity of the Quill God. From the corner of his eye, he could see that Agamaggan was pleased by the words, enjoying the praise, the way that people remembered his deeds, his heroic battle and fall during the War of the Ancients.

*It’s not so different from the elementals, Thrall thought. They like being praised and pleased, though I think that those the Kaldorei call gods actually draw strength from that belief. They demand a sacrifice… time, mostly, in exchange for their blessing and gifts.* As Thrall finished, he felt Snowsong nuzzle against his side, and he stroked his fingers through her fur. *And some people are just shameless.*

Snowsong sneezed on him.
Chapter 16: Late Summer, Year 28


Razoren Kraul was huge and sprawling, the pathways through it churned up by endless marching quillboar feet. Here and there, Thrall could see quillboar homes, composed of twisted wood, briars and thatched roofs. It was difficult to determine where villages started and ended, since there were no walls, no true roads, and no structures that set apart one settlement from another. Only the occasional presence of a huge bonfire, long dead, indicated any kind of habitation at all.


"A friend of mine loves to say that," Thrall commented, thinking warmly of his advisor, spymistress and friend. "But you're right. Even the spirits are quiet." The spirits that remained were, in fact, helping him keep his balance as he picked his way over the uneven ground, while Jaina was mostly unassisted. She walked with the swaying footsteps of a sailor aboard the deck of a ship at stormy sea. He smiled fondly at her, and she smiled back.

"The Razoren Kraul," grunted one of the quillboar elite, gesturing to the entrance. The greatest of Agamaggan's chosen had been assigned to them as bodyguards and witnesses. They paused at the crossroad. If they continued further south, they would come upon the Great Elevator, the brilliant feat of tauren ingenuity that allowed them to travel from the Barrens to the Thousand Needles, home of the Grimtotem clan. To their right lay the depth of the kraul, its entrance framed by a series of briars, snapped off at the tip.

"It reminds me of a rib cage from an old skeleton," Jaina murmured. "Doesn't it? Like Desolace?"

Thrall nodded in agreement. "It feels… inauspicious."

"Well, if that Scourge ambassador is here, he'll feel right at home," Jaina said. "Are we ready?"

Thrall inhaled deeply, drawing both air and spirits into him. "We are."

The quillboar moved into position around them and they walked forward together. The kraul proper was an immense coil of briars, growing from the hard earth that had become like stone in the centuries since its creation. Within its protective walls, Thrall could sense dozens of lives, which felt both slightly intimidating, considering that their guard numbered only eight, and confusing.

Where are all of the others? he wondered as he walked cautiously into the kraul. If this is their stronghold, then there should be many, but there are so few.

As they continued, snuffling could be heard, threading in and out of the sound of their footfalls. Thrall signaled to the others, who moved into defensive positions. Jaina shifted to cover his back, and he changed his posture to cover hers. Within moments, the quillboar of Razoren Kraul were
on them.

It was like a dance, familiar and yet different from the ones that Thrall and Jaina had performed before. Thrall had danced with Jaina literally, each trusting the other not to put a foot wrong, or if they did, to be generous and forgiving of mistakes. They had danced on the political front a dozen times, their goal to create a future where everyone would prosper. They had performed far more intimate dances behind closed doors. They had whirled and skipped past rumours, conflicts, and the potential objections of others. They had, of course, fought side by side as well as against each other. They trusted each other.

It was not as though Thrall's heart didn't leap into his throat when a blow came at Jaina, fast and furious. It was that he trusted her to move out of the way, to blink into a place of security while aiming a retaliatory shot at her attacker. It wasn't that he didn't see the fear in her eyes when something came for him, it was that she trusted that the spirits would warn him and his own instincts would allow him to dodge. It was a dance.

The quillboar screamed and squealed. There was no surrender, not for the proud children of Agamaggan, as fallen as they were. It made Thrall's heart ache to see it. He had no personal grudge against any of them, but they could not, would not, allow the Scourge to gain a foothold in Kalimdor. A foothold, even a small one, could lead to a full-scale invasion, something that both of them truly feared, much more than their inevitable mortality.

"We need to stem the tide!" Jaina called out, shooting one of the quillboar between the eyes. The impact flipped the quillboar end-over-end, sending it crashing into two others. "They'll keep us from getting to Charlga with sheer numbers."

"I'll do my best," Thrall replied and concentrated, trusting that Jaina and their allies would protect him. The briars here were stubborn and proud, but he knew how to speak to them. They were born of Agamaggan's blood, and Agamaggan himself had helped commission them for this task.

*Earth-kin, spear-brothers, hear me, Thrall called to them. We seek passage to Charlga Razorflank, of the Razorfen. Agamaggan demands that she explain herself and her deeds. Help us do his good work.*

*Liar,* replied the briars. *We are his blood-children, as the quillboar are his flesh-children. He would not act against them so.*

Thrall winced, as the briars spoke with much of the volume of Agamaggan and none of the subtlety. *Are we not also with his flesh-children? They are Razormane and Thornsarl, Bristleback and Thornmantle. They are the ones who have not chosen to side with the Scourge. The ones who have not abandoned their god. Charlga sides with the Scourge.*

The briars shivered and began to move. Thrall could hear the disbelieving snorts of his allies. He attempted to assure them, but found his jaw locked closed. Needle-thin thorns moved over each of the honour guard in turn, exploring like delicate, questing fingers. Those quillboar remained still, while the Razorfen snorted in triumph, assuming their victory.

*These ones are pure,* the briars agreed. *They are our flesh-kin.*

*They are,* Thrall agreed, *but what about--* The briars moved over the Razorfen, and a shiver went through them.
"Thrall," Jaina asked, her voice strained as she tried to sound calm. "What are they doing?"

Thrall’s jaw creaked as he tried to open his mouth, but the answer to Jaina’s question became readily apparent in moments.

**Betrayal!** the briars cried out, shaking with fury. **Betrayal!** The earth around them cracked as the briars whipped out, impaling half a dozen quillboar in one swift motion, the honour guard remaining untouched while the Razorfen hooted and snorted in fear. Within moments, the shelter the Razorfen had called home was a death trap. Jaina scooted in to Thrall’s side, and put an arm around his waist.

*What's going on?* The touch of Jaina's mind against his was cool, like running one's hand over a frozen lake, and just as contained. Thrall attempted to reach out for the connection, and found himself unrestricted.

*These briars aren't just plants... they're a fragment of Agamaggan himself, though separated by ten thousand years. I did not quite expect them to be so... violent.*

Agamaggan is fury unrestrained, Jaina said, pressing her face to Thrall's shoulder. *Why can't you move?*

*I believe it has to do with the spiritual energy unleashed here,* Thrall replied. *It will pass... I hope.*

*You hope?* Jaina said, looking up and giving the flailing plants a hard look.

*Jaina, I really wouldn't suggest defending my honour against god-blooded plants.*

*I could take them.*

Thrall chuckled through clenched teeth, and then sighed in relief as his jaw unlocked. "There, I'm... fine." Snowsong trotted up to join him, her jaws heavy with the blood of her enemies. His hand moved stiffly to scratch her ruff, getting used to his returned freedom.

Scattered on the ground lay the bodies of dozens of quillboar, pierced and slashed by thorns. The briars had stopped, though they dripped heavily with blood. Around them, the plant life seemed almost to inhale, with huge, gasping breaths.

"Is it over?" Jaina asked aloud, and her voice sounded peculiar. Strained.

"I believe so," Thrall said. *May we pass?*

The briars withdrew, forming a macabre, dripping arch, creating a path towards their target. Thrall reached for Jaina's hand, squeezed it when the sorceress' fingers tightened around his, and took a step forward, deftly avoiding the bodies. Around them, the briars still moved, blocking off intruders, at best, and at worst, skewering them and drinking in their blood. The spiral path of briars and hard-packed earth led them to a series of huts with thatched roofs and a large fire pit. There sat a large quillboar sow, her quills grey-black and waving lightly as she swayed in her seat, grunting a prayer over and over.

"Crone Charlga Razorflank," Thrall said sternly. "Your god is very disappointed in you."
"And I," Charlga grunted as she opened her eyes, "with him."

"What? Why?" Thrall asked. "He clearly cares for your people, even in death."

"Does he? Does he really?" Charlga stood, and paced. "Why would he allow strangers to invade our lands, to take our hunting grounds? He has even allied himself with you. He has been corrupted. You people are murderers and despoilers."

"Bold words from people who deliberately leave their own hunting grounds and territory to cause trouble," Jaina said. "Bold words to claim a great deal of land. What of the tauren? Do they claim 'your' land too? Or the centaur?"

"Be silent, witch, I have been warned of you," Charlga said. "I speak to the green-skin."

"That is racist," Jaina said, crossing her arms over her chest. "He's an orc. You know that, your people aren't stupid."

Charlga squealed in rage, and Thrall couldn't help but appreciate Jaina's directness. "Her questions are valid. My people came here looking for a new place to live. We did not expect there to be so many people to claim it, but we've done our best to carve out our own niche without disturbing yours. We have expanded such that you aren't restricted and penned in. We have left much of your land completely alone, and only come here because of the bargains you've made with the Scourge. If we are speaking of people who will not respect your personal freedom and customs, it will be the undead."

"You know nothing!" Charlga insisted. "They have promised us total independence, and domination over Kalimdor."

"Scourge domination," Jaina said, her voice soft, even as it was angry. "The Scourge do not share. They consume. They will destroy everything that you hold dear. They will destroy your very free will. You will not march in the name of Agamaggan, or for your thorn homes. You will march for the Lich King."

"Where is Malcin, Charlga?" Thrall asked, hoping to stem the tide of bloodletting. "Where is the Scourge ambassador?"

"He communes with my children," Charlga said angrily. "It is of no matter to me which dead god I serve, but this one will make the quillboar strong! The Lich King reigns--"

Briars whipped through the air, impaling the elder Crone in a dozen places, but they did not kill her. That was reserved for the perfect hole in the centre of her forehead. Jaina was shaking with anger, but her hand, and her shot, had been steady and struck true. Thrall turned to her, and gently closed his hands around hers. "We must go."

"He's not a god," Jaina said, her voice unsteady. "He's just a man, and a fool, and--"

Thrall kissed her softly, pushing her hand down gently. Fight his memory. He didn't push the kiss, he didn't try to touch her in any other ways but these two. Calm, Jaina. We will stop him. He is far from here, too far for you to shoot.

Gradually, Jaina relaxed, and her arms came up, this time to hold him tightly as she kissed him back. Thrall smiled, and Jaina drew back a little, nodding. "We need to find Malcin."
"Is this the only Razorfen stronghold?" Thrall asked of his honour guard. They consulted, and returned a negative. "Then he must be there."

"Hang on, I see something," Jaina said, letting Thrall go. She strode over to Charlga's corpse, and carefully freed a scrap of paper. "This is... we're looking for some place called Razorfen Downs, it looks like. Do we know where that is?"

"South," grunted one of the quillboar. "Closer to the dead river."

"Dead... Thousand Needles?" Thrall asked. The quillboar nodded. "Then we must hurry. Jaina, could you?"

"Easily," Jaina said, frowning at the scroll, and then tucking it inside her robes. "Let's go."

I'll have to ask her about that, Thrall thought as he indicated for the quillboar to get in close. "Remain calm, Jaina is going to use magic to--" And then they were away.

~ * ~

The Razorfen Downs were everything that Razorfen Kraul was not. Instead of a merely empty area, the Downs felt desolate, wasted and empty. To Thrall, the spirits had long fled, and he tightened his grip on the Doomhammer. Snowsong had retreated back to the quillboar camp, citing both horrific stench and a void in the spirit realm that, stalwart as she was, she could not tolerate. It had been left to Jaina to summon light, in this case produced from a crystal that floated in front of them like an anxious bird.

As they walked, Thrall's nostrils began to burn, something acrid and terrible filling his lungs. It was familiar as well: he'd scented it in Undercity, and in the acres of plagued lands in Lordaeron.

"Jaina, they have plague cauldrons here," Thrall said, quietly but urgently. "They've already started."

"Not for long," Jaina said grimly. "And they won't succeed."

"They won't, but the spirits won't reach us here either."

"Then I hope you asked for their blessing before we stepped inside the Downs," Jaina said, checking her gun briefly before moving forward.

"I have you, the spirits have blessed me more than enough."

Jaina paused and smiled at him warmly, her eyes twinkling in the artificial light. "I feel lucky too, Thrall."

There was no chance of the plant life defending them this time: the briars here were dead, necrotized beyond all measure. Thrall reached out to one briefly, only to find the outer layers flaking away from his fingertips. "The plaguelands are like this. I recognize this rot, this aging. Everything is older."

"It's a side effect of necromancy," Jaina noted. "Both aged and ageless. When we killed Kel'thuzad, his body was as if it had already been dead and rotting for a long time."
"Surely, not all necromancers are like that."

"The ones that deal with the plague of undeath seem to be, but I would have to look into it more." Jaina's head turned sharply, firing into the darkness between the rotting thorns. She was greeted by a squeal and a thud, and the rotted briars were pushed aside. "There!"

Thrall took a step forward, and then two, putting his momentum into the swing of the Doomhammer. The first quillboar warrior, rotting and undead, lost his head abruptly to the blow. "Warriors, forward!"

The quillboar warriors bellowed and launched spears into the darkness. Some of the spears struck foes, but even more shredded the fragile, dead briars, tearing away at the shadows and exposing them to the light.

"Fascinating," Jaina murmured, even as she fired at one of them. "They were altered with the Scourge plague while they were still alive, but it doesn't seem as though they ingested it."

"They didn't need to use subterfuge," Thrall noted, striking relentlessly at each undead warrior. "There was no reason to hide behind grain shipments."

"True," Jaina noted, and gestured. Huge chunks of ice fell from the sky, flattening the Scourged quillboars' little remaining cover, and causing many of them to squeal in pain. "It makes one wonder, though, if the Scourge can do that with humans or other races as well."

"They would need to find volunteers," Thrall said, frowning. To one side, he saw a large undead quillboar, a champion, coming up to deliver his challenge. With a nod to Jaina, he charged forward. The champion's arms absorbed the blow of their weapons meeting easily. "Wouldn't they?"

"There's no guarantee that the procedure requires volunteers," Jaina said grimly, snapping off a few shots. "And even if it does, I'm sure that whatever state of mind causes one to join the Cult of the Damned may well suffice for becoming a full-fledged member of the Scourge."

"It's confounding," Thrall admitted as they moved forward against the tide of Scourged quillboar. "I may never understand it fully."

"I hope to," Jaina said, scanning the tangled briars. The breaking of the canopy of corrupted briars had revealed the sky, sad and grey as it was, but there was much more to the Downs left, shrouded in darkness. Jaina pointed towards one of the shadowed pathways. "That way, I think. I can detect a powerful arcane signature."

Thrall nodded, and the group headed down the path. A part of him wished Garona were here, her experience with darkness was invaluable, but he had another invaluable resource right with him. Speaking of which... "You hope to understand the Scourge?"

"Yes," Jaina said. "One of the greatest mistakes ever made is dismissing one's enemy's motivations. I've heard it said that there's no reason to consider what drives the centaur, or the harpies, or the quillboar... or the orcs." She smiled at Thrall. "If we know those things, we can find a way to fight better, or even to stop the fighting altogether. It's invaluable."

"Know your enemy," Thrall noted. "I learned it too, long ago. It's strange how people forget."
"I think it's less forgetfulness, and more--"

"Glutton hungers!"

"More..?" Thrall hurried up, though his eyes widened. The abominations in the under-city had been large and gruesome, but this one was particularly massive. It moved forward with a wet, guttural sound, attacking with two arms. Thrall parried one of the massive meat hooks and ducked under the other. He heard Jaina call out to the quillboar and direct their attack. *It's my job to keep its attention, and so I will.* He took a deep breath and bellowed an orcish warcry before driving the *Doomhammer* into the creature. "You were saying?"

"Arrogance," Jaina said, snapping off a shot, and then conjuring ice in her other hand. Ice and snow formed around the abomination, causing it to twist and turn. "They think there's no wisdom in a defeated enemy's words, but the truth is--" Jaina's form wavered and reformed on the other side of the room. The spiked chain that hurtled towards the place where she'd been standing previously missed her by mere seconds. "--that they don't want to think about how close they were to losing."

"It is a frightening prospect," Thrall agreed. "Jaina, would you mind..?"

Jaina conjured a cloud of frost and wafted it over to Thrall. He held the *Doomhammer* out, and it accepted the blessing, crackling with cold before Thrall slammed it into one of Glutton's arms. The appendage froze, shattered, and the quillboar shouted in triumph.

"Glutton hungers!" With great speed, the abomination lunged forward, grabbing one of the quillboar, and it seemed to swell as it brought the quillboar to its mouth and took a ravenous bite. The quillboar squealed in fear and pain as it died, and its death only galvanized Thrall's resolve.

"Jaina, I need more!" Thrall called, and the sorceress nodded. As the quillboar scattered, Jaina conjured a great storm of ice and wind above Glutton's head. The abomination began to slow. As the storm built up speed, Thrall tilted his head upwards, and the sight reminded him of Alterac. More importantly, he could feel power gathering, and he raised the *Doomhammer* again, just in time to catch the bolt of lightning and hurl the great hammer towards Glutton.

The abomination staggered on impact, and then tried vainly to reach for the hammer sticking out of its chest. "Hun… gry?"

"I think you've had all you can eat," Thrall said as Glutton crashed to the ground, a twitching pile of limbs and weapons. He reached down to retrieve his hammer. "Though I think it bit off more than it could chew."

Jaina smiled as the arcane glow faded from her fingertips and her eyes. "It certainly had its fill of you."

Several of the quillboar gave them wounded looks, and they continued. Jaina cast several tracking spells, finding strong concentrations of arcane magic at the top of a tall, winding path. Skeletons swarmed around, hunting in packs for any intrusion.

"They're going to notice us as soon as we start our way up," Thrall murmured. "I don't look forward to it."

"We could always skip the walk," Jaina pointed out. "I think I can get line of sight to the upper
"Could you do with a bit more height?" Thrall asked. "I can boost you up."

Jaina smiled. "I'll be fine, we're going to want to assume defensive positions, because I've no doubt that whatever's up there will be unhappy to see us, as soon as it stops being surprised."

The quillboar began assuming defensive positions around the pair of them, the circle slightly looser than before. Thrall frowned. "I'm sorry for your loss."

"We are warriors," one of the quillboar said. "To die in battle is to die well." He pulled a face, considering. "To die in battle while being eaten, possibly less so, but nonetheless, he had a spear in his hand."

"I understand," Thrall said. "My people are similar, but I can't help but think that short, violent lives aren't as satisfactory as long, peaceful ones."

"Alternatively, you could have a long, violent one as Tyrande has," Jaina noted. "Patrolling constantly to protect her people from demons and other threats."

"Yes," Thrall said, shuddering slightly. "Tyrande is strong and brave to have endured such a life for so long, especially since she's often been alone."

"Yes," Jaina agreed, though there was a peculiar tone to it. Thrall frowned, and Jaina gestured. "I'm ready, are all of you?"

"I am," Thrall said, and looked over the quillboar. "I believe they are too."

"Then here we go," Jaina murmured, and teleported the group up to the top of the spiral. Thrall immediately focused on the sight in front of him: several massive plague cauldrons, some of them nearly empty, but others still brimming and full. Before them stood a lich, his skeletal hands waving over the cauldrons as he administered liquid death to the quillboar, some willing, some not.

Thrall and Jaina exchanged a glance. The latter nodded slightly, and conjured an icy barricade, trapping the lich in with them. "Ambassador Malcin?"

The lich looked up. "Intruders… you are too late. I will deal with you and finish corrupting this place. I will drive a dagger into the heart of this land, and all shall know not the mere name Malcin, but that of Amnennar the Coldbringer!"

"Coldbringer? Really? For a lich?" Jaina said, laughing. As the lich bristled, she put a hand on the Doomhammer, caressing it gently. Thrall could feel it heat, though his hands remained cool.

"Jaina's element is ice, this must be difficult for her, Thrall thought. But she must have a plan.

I'm going to distract him, I need you to sneak around the back. Even between minds, Jaina's voice sounded strained. I'm going to make you invisible so you can get behind him without him noticing. Be careful, Thrall.

I will. Jaina made a gesture and Thrall felt arcane magic envelop him. He slipped past the quillboar, only half-listening to the conversation. Carefully, carefully, around the plague cauldrons, the undead ones aren't terribly bright..."
"How utterly redundant and uncreative of you."

"What?!" Malcin cried. "How dare you insult me, you petty little ice witch! I am a master of elements that you can only dream of!"

"Oh, please," Jaina said, her eyes never leaving Malcin. "Not only are you uncreative, you're boring. Do you know who I am? I am Jaina Proudmoore, Archmage of the Kirin Tor and ruler of Theramore. I am the one who stood at Hyjal when Archimonde fell. I have mastered siege and storm. You are nothing!"

"You... all the Scourge know your name and face. When the Lich King learns of this--"

"I want him to learn of this," Jaina hissed. "I want Arthas to know that I will never let him win. I want him to know that no mere dagger will stop me. Kalimdor is my home and he will never destroy it!" Thrall, are you ready?

Yes.

"You boast, girl, but the Lich King has horrors beyond your wildest imaginings. He will rip that proud soul from your body and make you his forever, and this world will rot and decay. He is the king of all of Azeroth, and he does not take kindly to those that resist him."

"Resist this," Jaina said and raised a hand. Flames crackled around her fingers and shot out like a jet, striking Amnennar square in the chest. He cried out softly, then looked down.

"Was that supposed to hurt?!"

"No, but this will," Thrall rumbled, and swung the Doomhammer hard. Imbued with fire magic, the blow shattered the lich's spine, sending bone fragments flying in all directions. Jaina's contribution, the seemingly ineffective blow, had weakened the lich and given power to Thrall's strike. Thrall struck the lich several more times, grinding him down.

"Get his Scourgestone," Jaina said. Thrall gave her a curious look. "Powerful undead are given tokens that allow them to command other undead, and if Malcin was an ambassador, he's sure to have one. Studying them will give us more clues about how to deal with them."

"We could simply talk them to distraction," Thrall noted with a grin, but sorted through the lich's remains. The undead quillboar were quickly overwhelmed by the living quillboar champions, and the still-living ones punched into submission.

Jaina strode towards the cauldrons and fished a handful of vials out of her sleeve. She unstoppered one and poured its contents into one of the cauldrons. It smoked and sparked, and then went inert.

"If these are the only plague cauldrons, I should be able to neutralize them all."

"I didn't know you could do that," Thrall commented. "That's incredible."

"Thank the Argent Dawn," Jaina said, opening a second vial. "It's more of a stop-gap than a permanent solution, but at least this will go on to infect no more people."

Thrall frowned. "Until next time."
"Next time?" Jaina blinked, and then her eyes widened. "Oh, I think I see…"

"Yes," Thrall agreed. "We need to leave this place. Our work is not yet done."

"I understand completely," Jaina agreed, neutralizing the other cauldrons quickly. The quillboar snorted in confusion. "Gather for the trip back."

"Got it," Thrall said, half to himself, holding the large, skull-shaped token in one hand, studying it before returning to Jaina's side. She gave him a weary smile, and teleported them all away.

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Their deeds apparently needed little telling as the boar-god seemed to sense when the lich had been destroyed. The quillboar champions were welcomed back into the fold to tell their tales and mourn their fallen.

**The dead ones are no longer a threat to my children or to Kalimdor,** Agamaggan proclaimed. Thrall, who could see him, noted that his spirit form wavered in the smouldering fires. **You have our thanks.**

Thrall and Jaina exchanged a long, meaningful look. "Actually, I think our business is not yet done."

**Oh?**

"Yes," Thrall said. "While Charlga was misguided, her words reached us. We are new to Kalimdor, and we are not leaving, but there's no reason for us to not get along. To be hostile towards one another. To do so, we should do with you as we've done with the tauren and the Kaldorei, which is to respect your land rights. My people do not need all the land of Kalimdor. We can share it, we can have neighbours. If we can better understand each other, we can come to some kind of agreement, and this need never happen again."

"My people are unlikely to expand into Quillboar lands," Jaina added, "but we are allies with the Horde." She smiled at Thrall, and he smiled back. "So we can help both sides negotiate. What affects one of us affects us all."

"So if you would be so kind as to gather the crones together, we will come to an arrangement we can all live with-- no pun intended." Thrall bowed his head to Agamaggan.

"You owe us nothing," one of the warriors said slowly, warily. "If anything, we owe you."

"That's not how it works," Jaina said firmly. "Thrall and I have fought the Burning Legion and the Scourge for some time, and this is our duty, to this world and to you. There will always be those who choose a darker path, but they must in fact choose it, not be forced into it. If we can work out something between us, we will not be speaking of who owes who what, but instead of alliances and shared gifts between our people."

The great boar god considered Jaina for a moment, and turned to Thrall. **Your mate is a servant of the spirits too. I will go to the crones and call together this gathering, for the sake of all of my children, and of yours.**
We thank you sincerely for your understanding, Thrall said, and smiled. And Jaina is a true champion of justice.

Agamaggan moved over to her, and pressed his snout into the back of her head. Thrall tried not to flinch, but Jaina seemed to feel and see nothing. So she is. We will do this thing.

Thrall reached for Jaina's hand and smiled at her. Sometimes the greatest victories are not military ones.

Snowsong, seeming to sense his thoughts, whuffed in agreement.
There was little Thrall loved more than the Harvest Festival, and he believed the vast majority of orcs felt similarly. On Draenor, the orcs had needed to fight every day for food. They had hunted and scavenged, and they had farmed, eking out as much as they could from the dying land. Too often, soil turned dead and sterile under their frantic efforts, driving people away from their ancestral homes in search of more food, sometimes directly into the homes of others. When they were not fighting or gathering food, the orcs put their efforts into weaving cloth, combining the necessity of creating cloth to shelter them from the harsh conditions and protect what little they had and the expression of clan pride, and they shared such efforts at Oshu’gun, the great Spirit Mountain that the orcs had looked to not only as a place of gathering and trade, but also one of great hope.

Durotar was different. Durotar was dry and dusty, but it was framed by an ocean on one side and a river on the other. The blessings of the spirits and the keen intelligence of the goblin engineers had found underground water sources and wells had been dug. Murmured advice from the tauren had given them mills to grind away at grain, turning it into flour and pastes. The hands of the trolls had built irrigation systems for their farms, and of course, the native pig population -- crucially separate from the native quillboar population -- had been tamed and herded. Instead of fighting each other, they fought stubborn boars and persistent weeds. Instead of being driven to conquer their neighbours, they conquered their fear of sailing to bring in fish and seafood, and if, sometimes, they had to fight makrura and murlocs for their coast, well then, so be it. It all came down to this.

In the Eastern Kingdoms, Autumn was heralded by the turning of leaves, by the crunching of grass as it dried out and died. The first hints of cold were coming, the promise of snow and ice on the wind. In Durotar, the year would be warm for some time, though the winds would pick up, driving people indoors and behind sturdy walls. In Lordaeron, Thrall remembered, Autumn also meant that the farmers would be going out to their fields, collecting their golden harvests and preparing them for a long Winter. In Durotar, the Harvest Festival was no less important, and it filled Thrall’s heart with joy for many reasons.

The first was that this was how his people gathered. While the orcs were still closely bound together, there were those who had moved all across Durotar, and some into the Barrens. The Harvest Festival saw people gathered together to trade and to demonstrate their various skills. It was like their own Oshu’gun, though there was no mountain to gather under but the cliffs of Orgrimmar, and nothing to honour but their own accomplishments over the course of the year.

And that is actually a great deal, Thrall thought, grinning. Here were the weaving techniques of his people, some cloth ribbed so that it could be used to grip tools, other weaves so smooth that they could be worn against the skin and feel like air. There was beadwork from the tauren, perfectly picked out images of plains birds and coyotes, under a blue sky. Two booths over were beautiful paintings of Ashenvale, traded from a Kaldorei artist to one of the merchant caravans. Music, too, drifted through the streets of Orgrimmar, the marketplace a riot of smells and sounds.
and colours. This was why he'd fought for so long. This was what he wanted to accomplish most: trade.

No nation is an island, Thrall thought, accepting a delicious, steaming pastry from one of the merchants and blowing on it to cool it, while one of his guards slipped the merchant a coin. Even an island nation. Especially an island nation. Islands made him think of Jaina, of course. I hope her business will be concluded swiftly. She wasn't clear on why she had to travel to Azeroth so quickly, but she felt it was urgent enough to miss this. A brief chill fell over him, and he frowned.

"It can't possibly be that bad, you haven't tasted it yet," chided a familiar voice, and Thrall looked up, smiling.

"Sergra!" Thrall said, and embraced her, one-armed. His friend, fellow shaman, and one-time lover hugged him back, and then stepped back, moving to stand beside Ak'zeloth. The young warlock smiled at his Warchief, and then at his mate, his gaze lingering on her. "You did have some time to spare after all. All we needed to do was find the right motivation for you."

"The spirits granted me some free time," Sergra replied lightly, slipping an arm around Ak'zeloth's waist. "What of you? I was under the impression you've spent most of your time holed up in Grommash Hold, fighting off the goblins."

"They're remarkably patient, as these things go," Thrall said, and bit into the pastry, letting the taste flood into his mouth. "No one has threatened to toss me into the harbour. Each new harvest brings us closer to paying off our debts." He gestured broadly, beaming in pride at the countless rows of Horde booths, dressed in the colours of the many tribes of the tauren, the clans of the orcs and the-- Wait a minute…

Thrall's eyes scanned the merchant corridor. Tauren, orcs, more orcs, tauren, a handful of goblins, and there… Where are all of the trolls? He frowned with concern. There were a number of trolls that lived in Orgrimmar, and Thrall welcomed them warmly. Shandel'zare was one of them, as was Jes'rimmon, but there were others too, the shamans that joined them in the Valley of Wisdom, the weapon merchants and the fruit sellers. They thrived in the summer months, introducing their shamelessness regarding clothing to the orc populace, and tended to be particularly close-knit during the colder, rainier months, which the orcs found comfortable and the tauren found delightful. The Harvest Festival was just on the edge between warmth and chill, and they should have been in Orgrimmar for this.

It is their city, their celebration, so where are they all? Not even Jazabal is here. Thrall contemplated the pastry in his hand, and lamented how much more delicious it would have been with a banana and strawberry smoothie to complement the taste. Perhaps one of my advisors will know.

Nodding to Sergra and Ak'zeloth, Thrall signalled his guards, and they followed him back to Grommash Hold. The Hold was quiet, with most of its occupants still out, haggling with merchants and sampling their wares. The meeting room was empty, though Thrall took in a moment to contemplate the various chairs, from his own high-backed pseudo-throne to the low, sturdy stump-chairs for the tauren, the blocky squares that supported fully armoured orcs like Varok and Naz'grel, to the perches that the trolls used, allowing them to stretch out long limbs and look languid in their own way.

Despite his worry, Thrall smiled. Different people, different faces and voices, different beliefs… one dream. One hope. One driving force. There were few things he loved more than the Harvest
Festival, but his council was one of them. Cairne and Vol’jin both were on his council, though they did not have much time to attend. Sometimes, though not often, Gazlowe would attend the meetings. His goblin friend had been instrumental in helping to construct Orgrimmar, he and his engineers. Surely, his people would still be living in tents without them. Gazlowe was often brought in to discuss the various methods of constructing the ideas brought forth by the tauren and trolls, and sometimes orcs who’d studied the human construction in the Camps a bit more closely.

Nara Wildmane was a permanent member, representing both taurens and druids. Shandel’zare, of course, and Jes’rimmon. Varok Saurfang and Eitrigg, son of Vestagg; the former was out enjoying the Harvest Festival, though the latter was still in the Eastern Kingdoms. Thrall missed Eitrigg, and more, he missed Garona’s pointed, sometimes biting comments about Eitrigg’s waistline. Garona, he’d come to learn, tended to be vocal if she was pleased, even if she sounded like she was complaining, and silent when she was angry. She brooded, the silent guardian of Orgrimmar. He hoped her time in the desolate wastes near Feralas was productive.

Ak’zeloth was a member of his council, though Sergra was not. Ak’zeloth, the only warlock to be treated as something other than an enemy. He had been Neeru’s apprentice, and even now the spirits did not like him, but Thrall did. Ak’zeloth remained in Orgrimmar as a councillor for the same reason Jaina sought out necromancers and warlocks to teach in the fledgling school that she’d opened in the late summer, beaming with pride: because threats you refuse to understand don’t go away. No necromancer endorsed by Jaina Proudmoore would serve the Scourge, and no warlock of the Shadow Council -- truly of it -- would be permitted on Thrall’s council. Besides, Sergra would bite him -- and not in a pleasant way -- if Thrall disdained the one who had given so much to help Orgrimmar.

Naz’grel rounded out the circle of advisors, and Thrall was looking for ways to incorporate emissaries of the quillboar and the Forsaken both into his council, and of course... there was Jaina. Jaina had no formal place on the council. She did not possess her own chair or favoured spot that would be occupied by someone other than its owner on pain of withering discourse. She had her own city to run, her own council of mages, engineers, soldiers, fishermen and occasional bold farmers to work at reclaiming the northern parts of Dustswallow Marsh for farming, and yet if she was in Orgrimmar for whatever reason, there was no question that she attended the council. There was no question that when she spoke, people would listen. No question in his mind, even as Garona warned him and Naz’grel and Shandel’zare grumbled. Jaina belonged at his side.

Thrall hesitated. He knew where these thoughts were leading. He loved Jaina. That revelation, after the first time they’d made love, had been startling. Now it felt natural, and he couldn’t disassociate Jaina’s name or likeness from a feeling of warmth, of security, of simple and complex joy. He’d simply never told her. Perhaps he showed her, through his actions. Perhaps the fact that they were lovers, persisting through sometimes prolonged absences, helped solidify this feeling of closeness, but there was trepidation too. It was one thing to take a lover and another to take a mate. Jaina had nearly been married before, and while Thrall fought against Arthas Menethil’s memory, some things might be, could be, a step too far.

He rubbed his face with his hands, sighing deeply. Perhaps I should say something to her. We’ve had so many wonderful conversations, about all kinds of things, perhaps... we need to start making decisions about this now, I--

“We should tell him,” Shandel’zare said, and Thrall’s head jerked up. No one had come into the council chamber while he was wool-gathering, so he walked out of it, following the sound of the conversation.
“It be our own affair, ‘Zare,” Jes’rimmon replied. “You be knowin’ that better than any of us. Vol’jin be expectin’ us, we need t’ be goin’ before the Bossman--”

“Before I what?” Thrall asked mildly. “Shandel’zare, Jes’rimmon. What’s going on?”

Jes’rimmon fell silent. Shandel’zare glared at him. Thrall looked between them and sighed slightly.

“I would have hoped that you would trust me with this,” Thrall said. “I don’t know what is going on, but I can tell you what I do know. I know that the trolls of Orgrimmar have disappeared. I know that the two of you are still here, which means they have not been abducted, but have gone willingly, probably to the Echo Isles. I know that Vol’jin does know what’s going on and has elected not to tell me. I also know that if he is in some kind of trouble, if your people are... your people are my people. That’s what our council represents, that you are a part of the Horde. That’s what the Harvest Festival represents, a celebration of all that the Horde has built together. I am your leader but I am also your friend. I have never once balked at helping one of my friends, one of my allies, when they are in danger, and so I would sincerely ask that you tell me what’s going on.”

“Bossman--” Jes’rimmon began, but Shandel’zare raised a three-fingered, blue hand to silence him.

“We will not tell you, because regardless of how I feel about the matter, we have been forbidden from telling you by Chieftain Vol’jin, may makrura eat his toes.” Shandel’zare said in a clipped tone. “I will, however, show you. Come with us, we were just leaving.”

Thrall nodded to her, and Shandel’zare stepped back. She formed a rune in the air and the rune formed into a serpent, writhing around in the air, which in turn created a passageway through the Twisting Nether. Briefly, Thrall caught the scent of brimstone and old, old rot, and then it was gone as the space peeled open, and instead there were new scents, those of the sea, of dust, and faintly, of metal as it was being sharpened. It occurred to Thrall that Garona would yell at him for leaving his armor behind. It also occurred to him that turning back would cause him to lose this opportunity. He nodded.

Jes’rimmon, a rather resigned look on his face, stepped forward first, and Shandel’zare jerked her head towards the portal. Thrall nodded to her. “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me yet, Warchief.” Her reply was nearly lost as he stepped through the portal, and she followed quickly.

Thrall stepped out into Sen’jin Village. This, Thrall recalled, was a point of transition between the Echo Isles and the rest of Durotar. It was a small, seaside village where people, sometimes, processed fish or skins, or trolls taught the fine art of smoothie making, or how not to get their arms bitten off every time they encountered one of the roaming raptors or wild boars of Durotar. Often, though, the place seemed to be quiet and at rest. Not so this time. This time, there was a vast crowd of trolls. Thrall picked out Jazabal from the crowd, and the good-humoured smoothie seller was armed with a killing edge, all traces of pleasantness gone, her usually wild dark blue hair bound back in tight braids. He recognized some of the tradesmen that usually worked the Drag binding spears with dark blades, the signature weapons of the trolls, and handing them off to people he’d only ever seen handling animals.

Master Gadrin, the elder of Sen’jin Village, was murmuring to his students, instructing them on the proper bottling of the contents of the steaming cauldron, though their voices trailed off when they looked up and saw Thrall following Jes’rimmon and Shandel’zare. They looked uneasy. Vol’jin was standing with a circle of other trolls. Thrall recognized some of them: Deeno and Uthel’nay,
mages who usually resided in Orgrimmar, as evidenced by their robes, a handful of shamans, including Vanira, her brow wrinkled in concern, and a large, sleek tiger, orange and black fur rippling in the sunlight. She snarled, her lips curling upwards, and Vol’jin glanced over.

“Ah, ‘Zare, Jes, you be here-- Thrall.” His expression narrowed to one of great annoyance. “Jes’rimmon, why he be here? I be tellin’ ya not t’ let him follow, and now here he be! And Shandel’zare, I be expectin’ better of ya, why did ya not let the portal close--”

Shandel’zare moved to him swiftly, and slapped the side of his head sharply, striking first one ear, then the other. “Stop being a fool, Vol’jin. I am not one of your wives, to listen to you whine and posture. Tell him, as I urged you from the beginning.”

The tiger seemed to chuckle. Vanira did as well, even as Vol’jin grumbled. “She be right, my mate.”

“She is right,” Thrall said mildly. “Vol’jin, we have been friends for some time. Longer than I’ve known Jaina, longer than I’ve known Cairne. I am hurt that you did not feel you could trust me with this.”

“It be not a matter of trust--”

“I believe that it is.” Thrall caught his gaze and held it, then looked around at the assembled crowd. “Listen.” His voice was louder, a rolling peal of thunder, and yet he did not yell. It was the spirits that gave him strength, that entered him with every breath. He could feel them watching, peering from Gadrin’s fire and from the waves that lapped onto the shore. “The Darkspear Tribe are members of the Horde. You are my people, no less so than orcs, than tauren, then goblins or ogres or Mok’nathal. Finding your people on the brink of destruction was as much the spirits’ will as it was my total inability to sail.”

This elicited chuckles from the assembled crowd, easing some of the tension. Thrall half-closed his eyes, and held his palms up. “You are the Horde, the spirit and tenacity of your people, your gifts, your contributions. You are missed at the Harvest Festival, and my council chamber is empty without your sound advice. As Warchief of the Horde, your joy is my joy, and your troubles are my troubles. Your burdens are my burdens. As we lifted the walls of Orgrimmar together, let me help you. Let me assist you in ending whatever it is that troubles you. Please, my friends, let us work together.”

“Ya always did have a silver tongue,” Vol’jin grumbled, and knuckled away a tear. “My da, the Bwon keep his soul safe, said so too. Alright... I be tellin’ ya the tale.” He turned, looking towards the crowd. “Form the circles! We be storytellin’!”

The trolls that were waiting for weapons moved obediently into circles, creating rings around Vol’jin. He sat down, forming the first ring with Thrall, Vanira, the tiger, Shandel’zare and Jes’rimmon. The other trolls began to drum on what they had, on the hard-packed ground, or on the sides of shields. Thrall felt a shiver run through him, the sound reminded him of a pounding heart. Vol’jin reached into the pouches at his side and threw a handful of herbs into the air, and they reminded Thrall of dried peppers. His nose twitched a little.

“We of the Darkspear were once of the Gurubashi. They had many tribes, the Skullsplitters, the Bloodscalp, the Shatterspear...the Hakkari. We lived in the jungles of Stranglethorn Vale, in the ruins of the great Gurubashi Empire that fell long ago. We followed the loa of the jungle... the bat, the snake, the spider, the tiger, and the panther. They were great, and they made us strong... but not
strong enough. Not for some. We not be proud of this, Thrall. That be why I be keepin’ this from you.”

“You are one of my oldest friends,” Thrall said, his voice quiet, though as before, it reached every pair of ears. “You know as well as I do that orcs have done things in the past that were foolish, dangerous... shameful. I believe that all those who reject the things that make us ashamed are those who should be the most proud. If you were shunned by those who believed in taking some dangerous path, you have nothing to be ashamed of.”

Vol’jin nodded, the stiff bristles of his bright red hair waving. He threw a second handful of spice into the air, and the wind caught it, forming shapes. Thrall blinked, and then narrowed his eyes in concentration. He could see trolls, moving through the jungles, or using ropes to swing from tree to tree or to move down onto unsuspecting travelers. Still others stalked their prey from the shadows, and there were other shapes... goblins, and... orcs. Thrall’s eyes widened in surprise as he saw armour that was as familiar to him as his own skin.

“Orgrim... your people met orcs before we came to the Maelstrom Isles?”

“I be not old enough to remember them, but my Da was. He teach us your language, an’ when he see your armour... he knew.”

It was Thrall’s turn to wipe his eyes, offer a silent prayer to the spirits for the former leader of the Darkspear, and then nod to Vol’jin to continue.

“There be another loa, a... dark spirit. I be not sayin’ that a panther does not kill, or a spider does not toy with their food, but this was... evil. The worst kind of evil, as bad as the worst voodoo. It be a Blood God... Hakkar. He have priests, the Atal’ai, that sacrifice to him and feed his hunger. He be weak though, without body or vessel... and that be because of my Da. The chief among the Atal’ai, he be named Jin’do the Hexxer. He be clever and he be cruel.”

“He is dead, if there is any justice at all,” Shandel’zare muttered bitterly, and Jes’rimmon patted her hand. Thrall made a note to ask about it later, but otherwise pretended not to hear, so as not to throw off Vol’jin’s rhythm.

“Sen’jin be gettin’ word that Jin’do be plannin’ foolishness, to bring Hakkar into this world, and he said ‘no’. He said ‘it be wrong’. He be sendin’ word out to the Zandalari, the First Tribe. The Zandalari be neutral, residin’ on Zandalar Isle, in the south of the Great Sea, not far from Kezan. They be small but strong, and after the Twin Empires be fallin’, the High King Rastakhan be keepin’ his nek out of Gurubashi affairs... but not this.”

“The Zandalari would have not arrived in time had Sen’jin not interfered directly,” Shandel’zare said. “Jin’do took the sacrifices, of which there were many, to the altar inside Zul’Gurub. It was once the seat of power of the Gurubashi Empire, but had since fallen to ruin. There... those with power were gathered... drugged, subdued. We -- they -- were helpless. Sen’jin stopped the ritual. You knew him, briefly, as an addled old man. He was not always this way. He was very sharp, as sharp as a blade. He countered all of Jin’do’s magic with his own. They duelled, and Sen’jin defeated him. Jin’do seemed drained, if not dead. Sen’jin reclaimed Hakkar’s heart, and intended to destroy it. Then the Zandalari arrived.”

Vol’jin nodded. “The Zandalari be takin’ the heart, sayin’ it be too powerful to be destroyed and too dangerous to be left where the Atal’ai could find it. They be takin’ it with them, for safe keepin’... and so that’s what we thought until Zalazane arrive on the Echo Isles.”
“Who is this Zalazane?” Thrall asked. “He was not mentioned previously.”

“Jin’doo’s apprentice,” Shandel’zare said. “One of many, there were quite a few who wanted to learn his powerful magics and become powerful themselves. Zalazane was promising and ambitious. I remember him well. According to Zen’tabra, Zalazane arrived on the coast with a number of other trolls, all voodoo masters, and began setting up piles of skulls. Some, but not all, of those skulls belong to fellow trolls. Approaching these skull piles caused the dark spirits within them to be released, seizing control of anyone nearby, and worse... having them compel others to approach these... these...”

“Hoodoo piles,” Zen’tabra snarled. “I be sniffin’ out the bad magics. “They do not work on animals... so they not be wasted. It be cleverer to stay a tiger.”

Thrall nodded to her. “What does he want? Why is he here?”

“Blood for the Blood God,” Vol’jin said grimly. “He has found the heart of Hakkar, and now he be needin’ blood... and skulls for his throne. We be sendin’ word to the Zandalari once more, but... they be unhelpful in the past.”

“But they took his heart away,” Thrall said, frowning. “And this time..?”

“After Sen’jin stopped Jin’doo and the Atal’ai from raising Hakkar from spirit to god, the Zandalari left,” Shandel’zare said grimly. “They had to know what would happen next and they did nothing. We were banished by the other tribes. We had invoked the wrath of the Zandalari, and worse yet, some believed that Hakkar was the only way we could become powerful again. Foolishness, of course. A being of Hakkar’s nature does not share its power. It would have consumed them all, but they did not care. We were sent away from Stranglethorn Vale with nothing but curses in our ears.”

The image shifted with Shandel’zare’s words, and Thrall saw the Darkspear, faces he recognized and more that he didn’t climb into wooden boats and begin to paddle as trolls stood on ghostly shores, jeering. He frowned.

“We be goin’ to the Zandalar Isles first, and they be not hearin’ of us stayin’,” Vol’jin added, and stroked his fingers through Zen’tabra’s thick fur. “So we go north to the isles... and of course, there be the Sea Witch. We be havin’ no choice but to stay, and fight, or hide... until you be seen in Sen’jin’s visions.”

“He said as much.” Thrall sighed, sorting it out. “So, Zalazane has come across the sea, seeking out the Darkspear’s lives to fuel the foul rituals that will raise Hakkar up from spirit to god, as you said. He has controlled people who live on the main isle, and will kill them if we do not stop them. How long do we have?”

“I don’t believe we be havin’ a lot of time,” Vol’jin said. “I be... very angry, I send some warriors after him and they all be taken by the voodoo. He mighta gotten the fishermen further out to sea before we even be seein’ him. If Jin’doo be comin’ too...”

“Then we must move quickly,” Thrall said, standing. “I can understand why you would want to deal with Zalazane as a people. Sometimes, it’s about proving that you can overcome the impossible odds, the shame of your people... so I won’t insist on bringing in the Kor’Kron. This is for the Darkspear, but...” He took the time to meet Vol’jin’s eyes, and offer his hand to the Darkspear chieftain. “Sen’jin cannot be here in body, though he may be in spirit. He cannot be
here, so you must take his place... and I ask, as your friend and as your Warchief, if I might stand in yours, to assist you in any way I can.”

Vol’jin nodded, and put his hand in Thrall’s. “I be honoured, Thrall. Da be honoured too.”

Shandel’zare put her hand over Vol’jin’s, and then Jes’rimmon put his hand over hers. Vanira put her hand over Jes’rimmon’s, and Zen’tabra put her paw over Vanira’s.

“Jus’ one thing,” Zen’tabra added. “You may not be wantin’ to take it too literal, I be thinkin’ Lady Proudmoore not be likin’ it if you decide to ride the tigah.”

Vanira laughed, and Vol’jin chuckled. Even Shandel’zare, despite the levity of the situation, managed a faint smile.

Thrall blushed.
Chapter 18: Early Autumn, Year 28

Chapter Notes


See the end of the chapter for more notes

The sun was sinking below the horizon, staining the sky bloody red. It seemed like an omen, and Thrall’s skin crawled. Boats were being filled with warriors and pushed out to sea, and the waters between Sen’jin Village and the Echo Isles were crowded with them. He could hear drums, pounding in the distance. To him, they felt like nothing less than the pounding of weapons on hard-packed earth, or perhaps, the beating of an immense heart.

Thrall shivered a little, as if a cold breeze had found him. Snowsong whined in concern. His hand dropped to the scruff of her neck, and he thanked the spirits and Shandel’zare both for allowing him to return briefly to Orgrimmar for his spirit familiar. Thrall did not wear his armour, and he could practically hear Garona lecturing him, but if he were to fight in Vol’jin’s stead, he needed to look the part.

Vol’jin had painted his skin with Darkspear sigils, and each one tingled a little from the protective magics mixed into the paint. The bright red, blue and white stood out against his green skin. As a shaman, he merited numerous necklaces of bones, teeth and shells, though he possessed few such decorations himself. Instead, Vanira and the other shamans had each offered him one of their own necklaces, and now he chattered and clattered as he walked. He held a spear in one hand, its tip darkened with soot so that it would not catch the light or draw attention to itself, the shaft decorated with raptor feathers. It felt oddly light in his hand. At his belt was sheathed a wicked looking knife, the hilt wrapped in battered leather. This had belonged to Sen’jin once, and Vol’jin had insisted on giving it to him, saying his father would have wanted it that way.

Thrall was touched and fingered the well-worn hilt. Lend us your strength, old friend, Thrall thought. We do battle with your great foe, and the lives of your people, your son, are at stake. Watch over us, guide us, lest the forces of darkness prevail.

“You wear it well, Warchief.” Thrall turned to look, and raised an eyebrow. Shandel’zare was no longer wearing the close, restrictive robes she wore even in the hottest of Durotar’s summers. Instead, she too was painted with a mix of white and blue, with only a few hints of red. There were two streaks down either side of her face, both red, and she appeared to be draped in strips of blue-dyed cloth. There was a band that went around her neck, and then long strips down each arm, which ended at the bands on her wrists. From the arm strips dangled dozens of strips of blue and white cloth, many of which were hemmed by white beads that clacked as she moved. She bore a staff, topped with a blue-white pearl. Her blue hair was half-braided and half-spiked, and woven through with raptor claws and a few feathers.

Thrall nodded to her. “And you... I didn’t know that you owned such garb. It’s very... fancy.”

“It is the garb of the great mages,” Shandel’zare said, almost reluctantly. “I am one of only a handful of this generation to merit it.”
“You’re an Archmage?” Thrall said. “I didn’t realize, I--”

“It isn’t treated the way it is for the humans, and ‘Archmage’ isn’t quite the right word for it,” she replied, raising one of her arms with a rustling that reminded Thrall of leaves in the fall. “Nor is shaman ever entirely the right word, nor any other term used by the humans, or the orcs. We simply adapt, and use what fits.”

“You had to change a great deal when you joined the Horde, didn’t you?” Thrall asked, his tone wistful with regret.

“We did, and I am glad of it,” Shandel’zare replied, giving him a stern look. “Not all about our ways was good. I can hold onto my title amongst the trolls, treasure it. I also look forward to not starving, nor having to warn my sisters to constantly look over their shoulders. I can look forward to knowing that should Vol’jin, his wives, and any children they have be assassinated by the most vile and evil person imaginable, that our tribe will not suffer because you will not stand for it. You respect our ways, but only so far. We are not to be turned into junior orcs, but we also will not undergo the chain of catastrophes that resulted in the fall of the Twin Empires. You are a good man.”

“And I will choose a good person to succeed me when the time comes, should a vile and evil person assassinate me,” Thrall said. “I will never let your people down.”

“You will live forever, so long as your council watches your back,” Shandel’zare said with a rattling shrug. “Not only Garona... we all would give everything to protect you. I have studied the stories of Blackhand and Doomhammer. There will be no assassination, no lance in the back. Bwonsamedi will not come for you, not for a long time, if we have anything to say about it.”

“If anyone could fight your skull-faced death god, it would be you,” Thrall said, smiling despite the grim topic. “He must be angry with men like Zalazane.”

“He is,” Shandel’zare agreed. “Darkspear souls rightly belong to him. He is not a jealous god, not like Hakkar. He does not demand our lives early, for the most delicious souls are the ones heavy with the experience of living. Hakkar simply demands skulls and blood.”

“And his servants, like Jin’do, bring them to him.” Thrall watched Shandel’zare’s firm expression flicker. “You knew him, didn’t you?”

“We were lovers,” she replied. “He had power, and he vowed to protect my family with it. When we were Gurubashi, female trolls were all but slaves to the males. Unless we were priestesses to one of the loa, we could be traded like bangles or baskets of pearls. Or for bangles and baskets of pearls. Female trolls sought mates as quickly as they could, because the married had more privilege than the single, as did young girls. I have many siblings, many sisters. You know them: Zalzala, Akashala, Zarimuna, and my brother, Yahto. We had parents too, once.” She paused, touching the red streaks on her face, and Thrall realized with a start that the streaks represented tears. “Jin’do had them, my family. He took all of them because he could use the relationship we had to gain access to them. My parents were sacrificed, but my sisters and brother were saved in time. I was exiled for standing with Sen’jin, and I wear it proudly. I never wish to return to Stranglethorn Vale, and I will fight Zalazane or any other who thinks they can bring this poison to Kalimdor.”

“I’m sorry,” Thrall said, feeling woefully inadequate. “Of course the Darkspear will always be
welcome here. It isn’t demons or the undead, but we will fight this.”

“Even if it makes you more enemies? Even if Hakkar offers you more? A solution to the Scourge problem, perhaps?”

“There are some prices that are too high to pay. If I accepted his offer, would I have to sacrifice my people? What about my principles and my ideals? Are these the steps that took Gul’dan and Ner’zhul down their dark road? Did Grom think he was helping his people by drinking demon’s blood? I know he did, we spoke at length while he was recovering from being cleansed. If blood is to be spilled, it will be because we are fighting for what’s right. Not because we’re looking for an easy way out.”

Shandel’zare smiled. “Do you know why I constantly oppose your plans until you justify them?”

“I assume because you’re a contrary old troll,” Thrall admitted. “But it helps, I think, to spell out my reasoning. It allows me to form plans that don’t have logical dead ends.”

“That is exactly why I do it,” the troll mage replied, and she gestured, and her beads shivered against each other. “All people are subject to their whims. But the whim to get a muffin instead of a jam roll is very different from the whim of deciding to accept a people into your greater organization. A leader who makes such an important decision on a whim can abandon that whim just as quickly. I want you to be certain of why you’re doing what you’re doing. That you aren’t simply doing it because you feel like it. Not when thousands of people depend on you. Justify yourself. Reason it out. Then, when the final decision is ready, bring it before us and we will see how feasible it is. Your job is to dream. Ours is to make sure that your dream does not become a nightmare.”

“I do think out things very thoroughly,” Thrall said. “I do my best to see from all perspectives. I know I have changed your people. I don’t want your people to simply become different looking orcs. I respect your heritage, but I also respect my people. I will not have them live in conditions I myself would be miserable in. No slavery. Equal opportunities for all. The freedom to wear whatever you like and not fear for your life, and the restrictions on behaviour to assure that other freedoms are not being violated by the vile and evil.” He smiled warmly at Shandel’zare. “You may trust me in this.”

“We do trust you. We all trust you.” She reached out and grasped his arm. He squeezed hers in return.

“So does that mean you’ll stop—”

“No.”

“Very well.”

Vol’jin approached, flanked by Vanira and Zen’tabra, the latter still in her tiger form, and the former painted similarly to Thrall. For Vol’jin, though, they had gone all out: he was adorned with beads in red, blue and white, as well as raptor feathers in yellow and purple. The bristles of his red mohawk had been streaked liberally with black, giving him an even more deadly and intense look, and his face had been painted with a white skull. His brace of potions had been filled up, and Thrall imagined that they hissed. He held a gnarled staff in one hand, festooned with skulls, though these belonged to raptors, and not to trolls.

“We be goin’ now, and we be stayin’ until it be done, one way or another.”

“One way or another,” Thrall agreed, and was echoed by the others nearby. Slowly, the painted warriors made their way onto boats, which began to glide through the water as soon as they’d been filled. Snowsong nosed her way to the front of the vessel, her nose high in the air. She whined, softly.

“I smell it too,” Thrall said, keeping his breathing steady, though he could not escape the coppery tang on the wind. “Blood.”

Darkness was gathering over the Darkspear Isles, and it wasn’t simply blood. Thrall could feel the spirits of the dead being called to the Isles. He had visited the home of the Darkspear more than once, and he could feel his heart clench to see the low pyramids appropriated for such terrible purposes. There was low chanting on the wind, coming from the enthralled trolls. It was a name, over and over: Soulflayer. Hakkar comes.

The plan, Thrall thought. We must stick with the plan.

When the boats brushed against the sand, Zen’tabra and Snowsong leapt out of the boats, heading towards the hoodoo piles. Snowsong moved first, her white coat plainly visible in the dying light. A troll, her eyes hazy with the hoodoo control, turned her gaze towards the sight. Snowsong darted along the ground, whining. Slowly, the troll began to follow. Snowsong went quiet, and still. The troll frowned, and made to turn back, when Snowsong whined, and then barked sharply. The troll whirled, and Snowsong took a few bounding leaps. The troll followed.

Zen’tabra crept forward as Snowsong’s antics continued, rippling like a living shadow, moving unerringly towards the hoodoo pile. As the troll reached the apex of her patrol, and was about to be forced to turn back, she struck, massive jaws crunching down on the pile. It shattered, and skulls became dust and then wind. The troll fell to her knees, clutching at her head, and Snowsong went to her side, whining and nuzzling at her. Slowly, the troll grasped at the frostwolf, clinging to her as she gulped down air, trying to keep herself from crying. Snowsong nosed at her cheek.

“We must go, there are at least three more that will need to be destroyed,” Zen’tabra called out, and Snowsong yipped in acknowledgement, nudging the troll towards the beach. Then they moved on, using the same tactics again at the second and third pile. At the fourth, there were two trolls, one controlled, and one not. This troll wore elaborate armour, and on one shoulder, there was a skull, whose smile was widened by long fangs.

As Snowsong distracted the other troll, Zen’tabra pounced on the pile, destroying it easily. While the other troll sank to his knees like the others, the armoured troll’s eyes widened, and he opened his mouth to sound the alarm. Zen’tabra leapt at his throat, sinking her teeth into it and tearing, sending out a spray of blood along the green, waving fronds. The armoured troll gurgled and clawed at her, but Zen’tabra did not stop until his head had left his shoulders, and had rolled towards the broken hoodoo pile.

“Beachhead secure,” Zen’tabra said, licking her jaws. “Warriors, assemble!”

Thrall jumped into the water and waded the last few feet to the shore, offering first Snowsong, then Zen’tabra a scratch. The shapeshifted troll purred, pleased, and licked his fingertips briefly before
heading into the shadows. Zen’tabra and Snowsong continued to destroy the outer perimeter, while Thrall looked over the controlled. He could see haunted expressions and a confidence shaken.

*Spirits, loa, give these people strength,* Thrall called out, and while the spirits did not respond to him, the loa did, touching the trolls with the strength of the raptor, tiger, and scorpion. backs straightened and expressions cleared, though Thrall did take the time to embrace each of them, and give them a pat on the back.

Once that was done, Thrall followed the warriors marching into the shadows, listening to their whispering steps. Past the perimeter lay the home of the Darkspear. The village was large and sprawling, with low, single-floor huts lining wide streets with dozens of shady alcoves for sleeping in. The village was arranged in tiers, and there were roads leading up to the pinnacle, where there were altars. When Vol’jin ruled, this altar was dedicated to the loa, and the rituals of old were carefully altered and rearranged to honour them with sacrifices of food, drink, and hand-crafted weapons. With the presence of the Hakkari, those altars were soaked in blood and adorned with skulls, and it was beginning to trickle down the slopes, though it dried before long.

*If that blood reaches the base... we have not acted soon enough,* Thrall thought with a shiver. The Darkspear moved through the village, ambushing the Hakkari patrollers and shoving them towards the dark alcoves that had been once the favoured lounging spot of the indolent and drunk. There was none of the trolls’ usual good humour present on their faces, their eyes narrowed and their expressions grim, mouths turned down in frowns.

Priestesses of Hakkar patrolled with their bodyguards, bearing skull-topped scepters and bony wing constructs that sprouted from their backs, bringing them closer to their god. Fighting warriors was one thing, but fighting the potent magics of the Atal’ai was something entirely different. Vol’jin called forth Shandel’zare and the other mages. The mages worked in groups of two and three, relentlessly pelting the priestesses with frost, fire, and the raw stuff of magic until they collapsed, while their guards were taken care of by the Darkspear warriors. As the Darkspear became injured, they fell back, and other warriors took their place, allowing the Darkspear to heal. Cuts that did not maim scabbed over quickly, and the dried blood became part of their combat paint, making them look fiercer and harder yet.

Thrall and the trolls circled the base of the pyramid, killing all that they could find with grim efficiency. Those who were controlled were taken back to the distant lines if they could not fight, and joined the reinforcements if they could. There was little time for hugs now. Thrall’s head turned at a faint movement, and he threw a dagger with lethal force, though three more warriors advanced, stabbing and then beheading the troll. One returned Thrall’s dagger to him with a nod.

In one sense, it was unfortunate to have to be so brutal, but in another, it was necessary. They could not have enemies at their backs. They could not afford the regeneration of the Hakkari to reinforce Zalazane when the Darkspear had become utterly committed to the fight.

*If I believed that it would help the Darkspear, I would urge them to show mercy, but it won’t. I will not allow guilt to be Hakkar’s ally,* Thrall thought, and made his way up the tiers. The lowest tier was that of the common people, the hunters and fishers, the harvesters and crafters. The second tier was that of the warriors. Some societies viewed warriors as second only in caste to the noble, but it was not a method of rank, but instead one that placed priority on duty. Those who hunted, fished, and farmed were at the bottom because it allowed them to be the closest to their craft. The warriors, next, were able to watch over the hunters, but also to create a wall between threats coming up the pyramid and those that specialized in certain kinds of magic. This tier was particularly well reinforced, and more of the Darkspear were forced to fall back.
Now it was time for the healers: one of Shandel’zare’s young sisters moved through the injured, murmuring to each of them, touching them. Their wounds began to close rapidly, and they breathed in deeply, taking in the strength of the snake that shed its skin and the turtle that presented a hardened front to the rest of the world. They nodded to one another and charged. The Darkspear were a wave, crashing over the Hakkari with bloodied spears. They stabbed and whirled in a blur, and the Darkspear began to fall, though they took a half-dozen Hakkari with them each time. In and out of the front lines darted other shapeshifters, jaguars and snakes, collecting up the fallen and returning them to the healers to see if lives could be saved, but they were being left behind, guarded by the injured.

The momentum was with them, surging like the tides at moonrise, and up they climbed. The third tier was that of the mages, shamans, and priests. Artifacts created by the mages were being used as foci for the Atal’ai, Hakkar’s priest-caste, and they were like rocks, breaking the advance. Thrall’s mind raced. Months -- years -- of talks with Jaina flooded his memories, and he clung to one of them.

“They have a matrix!” he shouted, hoping the Darkspear understood the words. “You must shatter them!”

“We be on it!” cried Vanira, and she raised her arms. Thrall felt the ground rise beneath them, and moved back. An elemental of the earth, a core of magic surrounded by a whirling ring of stone and metal, moved forward, towards the foci. The Atal’ai cried out in alarm, and the elemental punched the nearest magical focus, causing it to crack. Spells seemed to knock away pieces of rock, but it continued, striking again, and again. The focus shattered, and the elemental seemed to add the pieces into itself, and hunted for another. The Darkspear swiftly followed, while Zen’tabra crouched at Vanira’s side, snarling at any who dared approached.

Thrall called out to the earth, summoning his own elemental, with broad ‘shoulders’ and a tall stature, reminding him more of orcs than something of the wild earth, and smiled grimly. He directed it towards more foci, dodging and stabbing. He did not have the regenerative qualities of the trolls, but the elements of wind guided his body, and those of water kept him from adding more blood to the pyramid.

“For the Loa!” Thrall cried. “For the Horde!”

“For Vol’jin! For the Horde!” cried the Darkspear. The Atal’ai began to flee up the pyramid, to the great altar.

“Fools! Cowards!” cried a voice. Thrall looked to Shandel’zare, and though she was angry, she did not curse Jin’doo’s name. Vol’jin, on the other hand, looked angrier than ever.

“Zalazane...” he spat. “So, it be true. You be followin’ Jin’doo’s path.”

“Ol’ friend,” Zalazane replied, and the blood on his face cracked as he grinned, showing off yellowed tusks. “You be sheddin’ a lot of blood this night. You be joinin’ us to call Hakkar?”

“Never,” Vol’jin said, disgusted. “We be puttin’ an end to you now.”

“Come, try it,” Zalazane said. “My master be puttin’ a stop to you, right quick--” His gaze fell on Thrall, and there was a flash of something there: fear. “Oh, you be bringin’ the whole Horde with you now?”
“I did, yes,” Thrall growled, gesturing to the Darkspear. The mages were already moving, paired off with the shamans, as they began to counter the blood magic all around them. “The Darkspear will never be alone again. They do not need to fear being abandoned by their allies and rejected by their homeland. The Echo Isles belong to the Darkspear. You will leave, now.”

“We won’t be walkin’ out of here, just because you ask pretty,” Zalazane sneered. “You be weak.”

“Who said we’d be asking you? I intend to punt your head into the ocean,” Thrall replied.

“Darkspear!”

“Darkspear!” cried the trolls, and they surged forward again. The Atal’ai surrounded Zalazane, and made their final stand. Shouting, the hexmaster pointed at a cluster of warriors. Some of them became toads, hopping around helplessly, while others turned on their fellows. The shamans cried out, fighting Zalazane’s dark magics with that of the loa. Eyes cleared, and they redoubled their efforts. Zen’tabra surged forward,shrugging off the hex with palpable contempt, and drove fang and claw into the first line of the Atal’ai.

“Blood, blood, blood...”

Thrall’s head snapped up, looking for the voices. The Atal’ai were too busy with the Darkspear, and Zalazane, while he spoke, was not chanting. No, the sound was coming from somewhere else, somewhere-- “Vol’jin, look!”

Above the altar was a ghost. No, not a ghost... a spirit, a corrupted loa. It was a huge wind-serpent, and while the wild ones of the southern Barrens were anything from hostile to shy, this one had eyes that were blood red and gleamed with malevolence. As each troll fell, be they Darkspear or Atal’ai or Hakkari, the spirit pulsed, becoming more distinct.

“Blood, BLOOD, BLOOD...”

“It be coming, we must stop it!”

“I’ll handle Zalazane, you get Hakkar!” Thrall cried, drawing Sen’jin’s dagger, and charged headlong into the hexmaster. The Darkspear closed rapidly, protecting Thrall’s back. Zalazane struck out at him with magic, and Thrall called on the spirits, and other memories. Jaina’s lectures had served him earlier, and Sergeant’s would serve him now.

‘Jab at his ribs, boy,’ the human urged him as Thrall feinted left and jabbed right. ‘If he can’t breathe, he can’t cast spells, eh? Now he’s panicking, punch his jaw, but don’t hit them damned tusks.’

Thrall smiled as Zalazane’s head rocked back. ‘Don’t ever give up the advantage. You’re big and strong, and people hate you and what you represent. It makes them angry. Let their anger be your weapon’.

‘Do you hate me?’ he’d asked, looking up at him, and Sergeant had paused, and there was no snap of bone, not like now, as Thrall punched again, and again.

‘Well, I suppose I don’t,’ Sergeant had replied, after a moment, and put his hand on Thrall’s shoulder. ‘But I also don’t want to fight you.’
Thrall was fast, faster than it seemed right for an orc of his size to be, and without the heavy armour he’d inherited, it felt like he could walk on air. With Zalazane off-balance, Thrall shoulder-charged him as he staggered, knocking him to the ground, scattering skulls everywhere. Zalazane was afraid, and Thrall recognized the look. Blackmoore. Blackmoore had been that frightened, when he realized he was going to die by a weapon of his own creation. The dagger flashed, and Thrall brought it down, a spray of blood hitting his face and lips. Grimly, he stabbed again.

“BLOOD, BLOOD, BLOOD!”

One more monster never to plague this world again. Thrall thought as the dagger tumbled from his fingertips. For caution, he snapped Zalazane’s neck, and then picked up the dagger. One step closer to the freedom of harvest festivals and celebration instead of fear and violence.

Vol’jin stood on the altar, holding his staff up, until it seemed to touch Hakkar himself. He shouted the words, old when the Twin Empires were young, throwing Hakkar back into the spirit world. The Blood God bellowed in rage, striking out at Vol’jin. Winds ripped away his feathers and the beads. It flattened his hair against the back of his scalp, and his eyes were wide. From behind Vol’jin’s back arose a second spirit.

Thrall opened his mouth to cry out and then stopped as it took form: the spirit was a troll, and its skin was black. A skull was painted over its face, the jaw over the troll’s jaw. It wore nothing but a loincloth, adorned with skulls, and they seemed tiny, until Thrall realized that they were normal sized, it was the spirit that was enormous, expanding rapidly.

“Hakkar, this be not your land, not your place,” the spirit boomed. Vol’jin continued to chant, his voice sounding harsh and raw as the words came out as desperate cries. He held onto his concentration and sanity with a white-knuckled grip. “Go back to the beyond. I be dealin’ with you soon.”

“BLOOD! SKULLS! THIS PLACE IS MINE. THE DARKSPEAR ARE MINE!”

“Go... fuck... yourself... with... a spike,” Vol’jin managed, raising his staff higher, striking Hakkar’s skull with his staff, screaming the last words of the ritual.

Hakkar bellowed, lashing out one final time, and flattening everyone on the altar, Vol’jin included. Thrall forced himself onto his elbows, watching as Hakkar disappeared into a puff of smoke, leaving only Hakkar’s heart, the centre of the ritual, behind. There was silence and stillness. Hakkar’s heart stopped pulsing and lay inert. The scent of blood became old, and then, simply dust. Vol’jin was curled on his side, the staff far from his grip, shattered into a dozen pieces.

The spirit troll leaned over him, curiously, poking him this way and that.

“Bwonsamedi,” Shandel’zare called out. Her garb was stained with blood, and burned, and ragged, but she stood proudly, moving to Vol’jin’s side. “He is not one of yours. He lives yet.”

“Ah, Frostmaster Shandel’zare,” the spirit said, and Thrall winced. “Do you challenge me? That be unwise.”

“I do,” Shandel’zare said, setting her jaw. “Shoo.”
“Shoo?” the troll loa of death said, disbelievingly. “That be what you be sayin’ to Bwonsamedi?”

“It be what she says,” Vanira said, moving to her side, her fists clenched. “Vol’jin be our greatest leader, aside from the Bossman. Shoo.”

Thrall felt a flush of pride at her words. Zen’tabra moved up, relaxing her shape into that of a troll, and her green hair fell over her shoulders in a shaggy, wild fall, and she wore a necklace of tiger claws, a loincloth, and little else. “Shoo.”

Jes’rimmon limped up to Shandel’zare’s side. “Shoo, Bwonsamedi. Shoo.”

The Darkspear, injured and limping, crowded the pinnacle, placing themselves between their leader and their loa. Thrall moved up too. “Shoo. I will not let you take my friend.”

“Eh, I be only curious anyway, and you all be comin’ to me in the end.” The spirit looked around. “I be takin’ my own skulls this day, from the brave and the foolish alike. See you ‘round.”

Bwonsamedi disappeared, fading out, and the world seemed to grow brighter. Vol’jin stirred, muttering and swearing.

“Get you... stupid... buck-toothed... butterfly...”

Vanira fell to her knees and kissed him, grasping each of his ears and giving him a shake, starting in on a lecture about his recklessness. As Vol’jin batted at her, helpless as a kitten, Zen’tabra took up the task. Vol’jin searched pleadingly for Thrall, and while exhausted, he seemed as sharp as ever.

Thrall laughed in sheer joy, holding his arms up to the skies. There was a crack of thunder, a flash of lightning, and it began to rain.

~ * ~

It took three days to clean up the rest of the Isle. Those the least injured, accompanied by shapeshifters, or mages, or shamans, patrolled the isle, destroying the last of the hoodoo piles and hunting down the Hakkari and Atal’ai that attempted to flee. The rain, which had not stopped until the third day, cleansed the altar and the pyramid of blood, leaving puddles behind for troll whelps to splash in, expressing their joy in a simple, yet meaningful way.

Once all traces of the invading force was erased, then it was time to celebrate. Thrall lounged on a mat of straw and wood, sipping a banana and strawberry smoothie. Jazabal winked at him, and walked off. Thrall sighed happily.

_I am going to be very drunk by the end of today_, Thrall thought, tasting the kick behind it. _Fortunately, I had little to do anyway, other than enjoy myself._

At war, the Darkspear were all business. At peace, they went all-out, and he could hear drums, and bells, and thrumming strings. Laughter chased away the last of the ghosts of the dead, and the trolls were doing a great deal of that, telling each other stories about their combats, and the Hakkari
that they had slain. The stand of Vol’jin’s friends against Bwonsamedi was told over and over, and each time, they were toasted. Darkspear lounged in shady alcoves, most of them naked, and sometimes, a companion would rouse enough to want to celebrate in a different, but no less enthusiastic way. Thrall was not far from Vol’jin, and he had been toasted a number of times as well for his own efforts regarding Zalazane, and it had been with great, ritual pride that he had thrown Zalazane bodily into the ocean to be eaten by crabs.

It was hot, the last trace of Summer before Autumn truly hit them, and the Darkspear were enjoying the heat. Thrall had to admit, dressed in only a loincloth, with a cold drink in his hand and nothing better to do, the heat was quite nice.

We did it, Thrall thought, taking another sip. We fought Hakkar, and we won. No one, but no one, messes with my people. His gaze drifted over a trio of nearly-naked troll women, and he sighed again, though wistfully. If only Jaina were here...

“Chieftain! Bossman!” called one of the less drunk trolls, and Thrall looked over. The youth looked worried as he addressed them both. “We be seein’ ships comin’! Lots of them!”

“Ah... the Zandalari, I be thinking,” Vol’jin said, and not even alcohol could lubricate his tone into something other than bitter. “They be wantin’ the heart.”

“I’ll come with you,” Thrall said, and moved to his feet. He gave the ground a stern look, ordering it to remain steady. It remained obdurate in its silence. Fine, then. Be that way.

It was not so much a march, as the party moved out of the village and spilled onto the beach, displacing some of those who had chosen to celebrate there. As they approached, Thrall could see the descendants of the first trolls. Their dress was like that of the formal battlegarb of the Darkspear, though it was different too, or perhaps...It is the Darkspear that have changed and adapted, and the Zandalari that have held onto their roots as tightly as they could.

A trio of Zandalari stepped onto the water, leaving nothing but light impressions as they made their way to shore. Vol’jin, with Vanira and Zen’tabra at his side, and Shandel’zare, Jes’rimmon and Thrall at his back, met them.

“Chieftain Vol’jin of the Darkspear Tribe,” began the lead troll. “We have come to retrieve the Heart of Hakkar, and return it safely to the vaults of King Rastakhan, long may he reign. I see that you have succeeded in ending the threat of Zalazane, so you must have it yet.”

“We be havin’ it,” Vol’jin said, though his tone was sour. “You be needin’ to pay better attention to it, hm? It got away from the vaults.”

“We be havin’ it,” Vol’jin said, though his tone was sour. “You be needin’ to pay better attention to it, hm? It got away from the vaults.”

“The concern has been taken care of,” the Zandalari said. “Now--”

“No,” Thrall said, startling them all. “We will not give it back, and I will tell you why.”

“Warchief,” Shandel’zare hissed softly. “You speak to Molthor, the hand of the High Chieftain himself.”

“Is this the hand he uses to scratch himself instead of being useful?” Thrall demanded, and the trolls stiffened.

“You are not Zandalari, you know nothing of our ways,” Molthor said, annoyed. “We know of the
“Good for you,” Thrall spat. “Now you will know of the present. We fought Zalazane and the Hakkari. We fought the Atal’ai. We fought Hakkar. We sacrificed. We lost warriors. We did so because the Darkspear had lost two homes and would not lose a third. We did so because when there is evil in the world, we must fight it, not sit around and do nothing until everything is over, and you claim the final prize.”

“We are neutral, we must provide a place for all of the tribes to gather, to speak and to negotiate. We cannot take sides.”

“That’s not what being neutral is,” Thrall insisted. “When you are neutral you must defend the suffering, regardless of who is doing that suffering. What if Zalazane had won here? Would you still be neutral then? Would you let the Atal’ai destroy all that has been built here? Would you let them invade the human lands once they were empowered by the Blood God? Do the humans deserve to die more than the trolls do? Or the orcs? No, they do not. You are not neutral... you are lazy. This is the Darkspear’s victory. This is the Horde’s victory. Get back in your boats and leave. You cannot be trusted to do what is right.”

“Will you let the blood of Hakkar pollute you?” Molthor demanded. “Vol’jin, will you allow this?”

“I be trustin’ Thrall more than I be trustin’ you, Molthor,” Vol’jin declared. “I be standin’ with my Warchief. Don’t be makin’ us shoo you.”

“And I know someone I can trust that will be able to contain this threat, and she will not allow it to be stolen by fanatics. She knows how to keep an evil artifact safe.” Thrall crosses his arms over his chest, keeping a careful eye on his smoothie. “Go.”

Molthor looked around, and his lips were set in a grim line. “Very well. You are making a mistake.”

“No, we are not,” Shandel’zare said, her voice firm now. “Tradition is not a shackle, it is a frame for something greater. You use it as a crutch. We use it when we need to, and we create new traditions when the old have outlived their usefulness. If you care to maintain the tradition of keeping Hakkar out of this world, look into Jin’do and his followers. Then this need not happen again.”

“The High Chieftain will know,” Molthor said and turned away, heading back to his boat and snapping orders.

“Do you be thinkin’ Jaina can handle it?” Vol’jin asked quietly as the Zandalari rowed away.

“Of course I do, I believe in her,” Thrall replied, drinking deeply. “I’m sure she’ll return soon.”

Thrall raised his gaze to the skies, smiling to himself. The enormity of speaking out against the Zandalari would hit him in time, but for now, as alcohol simmered in his stomach, he would simply enjoy the rest of the day as it came.
This is, unfortunately, the end of what I have written out, but I do intend to keep writing. Next is Unity: Defiance, which fills in what Jaina’s doing, and then the story will resume, some day, with Chapter 19. Thank you for reading and commenting, I cherish each hit, each kudos, and every comment.
Chapter 19: Early Winter, Year 28

Chapter Summary

And here it is! I will be posting chapters over the course of the week, probably every three days or so to give people time to read and not feel overwhelmed. Also, because I enjoy watching you squirm. Ehehe.

Thrall stood in the Ring of Valour, and took in a deep breath. It wasn't easy to admit that he still got a little thrill out of being in the arena, albeit under vastly different circumstances: instead of being a half-grown child, he was an adult. Instead of a slave, he was a Warchief, not simply a leader of his own people, but of many. They were watching now, the visiting tauren and resident trolls, even other guests.

He turned slightly to smile at Jaina, who smiled back, though the expression was slightly strained. He resolved to spend time with her after the matches, so she could run her fingers over his tired, sore, sweaty muscles and assure herself that he was fine. Jaina never saw much point to these demonstrations. She preferred the similar and yet different violence inherent in organized sports such as rugby and football, and the occasional log roll.

Garona was standing just behind Jaina to her left, keeping one practiced eye on the matches, and the other on Jaina herself. Varok Saurfang sat with the lady of Theramore, discussing the latest claimants that brought them to this particular situation.

“Krenna is assigned a relatively minor post and has been overlooked for promotion several times. Her superiors report that she is violent, aggressive, and unreasonable in her demands of her soldiers, and that giving her a higher position risks both their lives and the integrity of the treaties with your people and the Kaldorei,” Varok was saying. “While Krenna feels that her superiors are cowardly, and disinterested in defending orc interests or encouraging excellence in their soldiers so that they remain in power.”

Jaina nodded slightly. “One of the ways to say you disagree with someone is to claim they're being unreasonable,” she replied. “But this…”

“It is the old way, brought up in a new light,” Varok said. “Orcs could challenge their leaders at any time, though doing so often came with its own risks. A Chieftain could answer their own challenges or appoint a champion. Strength of arms was said to be a sign of wisdom, that the spirits were with the correct party.”

“…just because someone could beat me in a fistfight doesn't make them smarter or wiser than I am,” Jaina pointed out. “Though admittedly, just being able to punch someone making an idiot assertion could be more satisfying than endless rounds of debate.”

Varok chuckled. “Be that as it may, humans still have tournaments to show off their prowess, and challenges can be issued there as well, can they not?”

“Well, yes,” Jaina conceded. “And some of those tournaments are very useful, and I suppose they
can put paid to festering grudges, but they still prove nothing. Only that someone is better with a lance than someone else.”

“Sometimes, that's all you want to prove,” Varok pointed out. “Sometimes it's not about greater philosophy, it's about strength of arm. When you come from a land where daily life is a struggle against the land itself where only the strong survive, you want to ensure that your leaders are all the strongest they can be, and that the weak no longer burden the strong.”

Thrall’s ears twitched as he heard Garona’s derisive snort, and he turned, moving towards where they sat.

“In any case,” Thrall said, smiling up at Jaina, “the challenges are not fatal. When a grievance is brought before me, combat is one of the many ways that it can be resolved. Krenna has asked for evaluation by combat to prove that she's worthy of being promoted, despite what her superiors believe. If she puts in a good showing, she will have proven that she is strong. If she doesn't, then she will have to put aside her complaints for at least another full year.”

“I see,” Jaina said, though emotion played across her face. Thrall put his hand on the low, wooden wall, and she brushed her fingers across his. Varok politely declined to comment on the gesture. “Good luck... here. If we're going to insist on tournaments to prove things, many knights wear tokens of those they hope to impress.”

“I would be honoured to take a token of yours,” Thrall said, and Jaina smiled. “I've seen such tokens, usually a handkerchief, or another piece of cloth in the lady's colours.”

“Unfortunately, I don't usually carry one,” Jaina said. “Here...” Flicking her sleeve, Jaina opened the chamber of her gun, and slipped out one of the enchanted bullets, handing it to him. “It's not precisely visible, but it's a token.”

“It suits you perfectly,” Thrall said, and slipped the bullet into his pocket as Jaina closed the chamber and the gun disappeared up her sleeve once more. “Win or lose, I'll be fine.”

“I know that you will,” Jaina said. Their eyes met, and Thrall felt warmth flood his chest. His fingers brushed hers again, and then he returned to the middle of the arena. Krenna's challenge wasn't the first Thrall had fought today, but hers was the most serious, and indeed the most important.

*Krenna is the old Horde's ideas in the new organization,* Thrall thought. *Someone who grew up with the idea that humans were the enemy, that orcs were superior, and that might makes right. I want her to see we can embrace new ideas and old ones together.* Thrall looked to Lor’tar, who nodded back.

“Sergeant Krenna challenges Warchief Thrall,” the Warsong herald called out. “Krenna claims that she is strong enough to become the leader of Windshear Fortress. She demands that her skills be recognized by Warchief Thrall in trial by combat. Her victory represents immediate promotion to General.”

There were equal parts cheers and boos from the crowd. Some, Thrall knew, wanted someone like Krenna to have more power. Her attitude, her aggression, would make way for similar attitudes. Others, however, wanted absolutely nothing to do with that kind of old attitude. As Krenna strode into the arena, dressed only in a harness and leather pants, bare feet bringing up dust with each confident step, another woman, this one fully dressed, watched worriedly.
I wonder who that might be? Thrall wondered, curious. He let his gaze linger on her while Lor'tar explained the rules of the challenge. Even worried, her features were softer than Krenna's, but similar in other ways. Not a lover then, a relative? A sister? Distantly, he could hear Jaina asking Varok who he was looking at.

“That would seem to be Gorgonna, Krenna's sister. She has military training but she isn't formally assigned anywhere,” Varok said. “I haven't spoken to her at length, but--”

Thrall’s focus returned to the matter at hand: Krenna agreed to abide by the rules of the challenge, and Thrall voiced his support. Lor'tar declared that the challenge had begun, and moved out of the Ring. Thrall and Krenna circled each other.

Thrall had fought many opponents in the past. Some, like Garona, betrayed little emotion, and struck fast, testing blows. Others, like Sergeant, had struck first, but methodically, teaching Thrall how to dodge, parry, or meet his blows. Still others, like Jaina, when they could be convinced to duel, fought with smiles on their faces, the expression a challenge, as if inviting him to try. In these instances, he was the aggressor, though he still advanced with intelligence and a swiftness that belied his size.

Krenna was unlike those opponents, because her goal was to come in with a rush, striking hard and fast to put him down with a single blow, as she did now, coming at him with a cry. Thrall preferred these matches to be kept clean, with no permanent damage done, but from the tightness of her fists and the way her eyes blazed, Krenna did not share that desire.

She seeks to injure me badly, sloppy, Thrall thought, dodging her blow and bringing his palm up to strike at her elbow. The blow was jarring and she cried out in surprise as the strike numbed her arm. She shook it a moment, eyes blazing with anger. In response, Thrall smiled at her. She snarled and rushed at him again. This time, when she struck at him, knuckles pale from the strength of her clenched fists, she did not leave herself vulnerable to that particular tactic. Instead, as she moved, Thrall slid his foot along the ground, causing Krenna to stumble as she found his foot where she'd thought there was nothing but smooth ground.

It's a trick, it's just a trick, Thrall thought, grabbing her as she stumbled and slammed her down, knocking the wind from her lungs as she landed hard. The follow up to such a move, the foot stomp, he held back from, instead watching her struggle for breath. He offered his hand, and she slapped it away, growling as she rolled herself to the side and to her feet. Old gladiator tricks. Thumb gouges, paralyzing strikes. Make it look good for the crowd.

As Krenna caught her breath, she stared at him, caught between anger at his mercy and surprise at his relentlessness. Thrall let his gaze roam over her as her chest heaved and her fingers trembled briefly before tightening again. Thrall felt his lips tug down, stern and disapproving now where he had once been warm and welcoming.

It’s time to end this, Thrall decided as he moved, driving forward with blows that were precise and aimed, slower but heavy. He could feel the spirits whisper around him. Snippets of information came to him, weaving in and out as Krenna dodged and spun. A girl, big for her age but still small against fully grown warriors, as beaten down and worn as they had been, biting and punching and kicking to get to the pitiful offerings the humans made. Thrall growled softly at the image. He had been in the Camps only briefly. Krenna, it seemed, had grown up there.

Well, grown up in the sense that she's an adult, Thrall thought and caught Krenna’s arm as she
came in, bellowing incoherently. He hefted and flipped her over his back, slamming her into the hard-packed dirt. Her roar became a pained whine as she flopped and lay still. The spirits settled around him, their approval silent but apparent. *Part of her never left.*

“The spirits have chosen Warchief Thrall as victor!” Lor’tar called, striking his drum three times. “Lok’tar ogar! For the Horde!”

“Sergeant Krenna, you fought well,” Thrall said formally. “The spirits have brought me victory in this matter. Do you accept their judgement?”

Krenna lay silent on the ground, trying to catch her breath. Thrall moved over to her, offering her his hand. Resentment smouldered in her gaze, and she pushed his hand away again before forcing herself to rise. Angrily, she battered away at the red dust on her trousers, remaining silent.

Thrall bit back a frown. “Sergeant? I need your reply.”

“Yes, Warchief.” Each syllable was spat out, and punctuated by another slap at the dust. “I accept judgement.”

“You truly did fight well,” Thrall said, keeping his voice pitched low and as conciliatory as possible. “I saw how you learned to fight this way. The spirits showed me a vision of your childhood and--”

Krenna snarled at the back of her throat, and as one, the Kor’kron snapped to attention, and Thrall could feel Garona poised to strike. Instead of lunging for him, Krenna turned on her heel and stormed out of the arena, kicking up more dust to coat her brief clothing.

*I'm lucky she decided to leave and not bite,* Thrall thought ruefully, and gestured for the Kor’kron to stand down. *I should remember that just because I'm used to some people accepting help, not everyone does.*

“That was the last challenge!” Lor’tar called out, striking his drum three times. “Honour to the Warchief! Honour to the combatants! Honour to the Horde!”

Thrall let the roar of the spectators wash over him and turned towards where Jaina was sitting. He took the bullet she'd gifted him from his pocket and kissed it, smiling broadly at her. Her smile in return was brittle and she glanced just off to the side. Thrall turned and noted that Gorgonna was still hovering on the edge of the arena. He turned towards her and nodded, then approached her.

“Warchief Thrall,” the young orc woman said with a brief smile. “You fought well.”


“I am, yes,” Gorgonna replied. “It is as a sister that I say, I'm very glad that you won. A promotion would not suit Krenna at all. It will sting her pride, but another year and perhaps she'll realize that. I hope in that time she'll become more patient.”

Thrall blinked in surprise, and then nodded. “The spirits spoke to me during the duel, but I want to hear what *you* have to say. Will you walk with me?”

“I will, Warchief, and thank you,” Gorgonna smiled at him briefly. Thrall nodded to her, and hurried to where Jaina and Varok were sitting.
“I'm going to have a chat with Gorgonna, I'll meet with you as soon as I'm done, Jaina.” Thrall smiled up at her. “If you don't mind?”

“No, no. Go ahead,” Jaina said. “I know the way.”

“Thank you.” With another smile and a nod, he turned away, back towards Gorgonna. Exiting the arena proper, there was plenty of space left behind by the spectators to walk side by side with the woman, even as the slightly cooler Winter air prickled along the sweat on his skin. “In your own time.”

“My parents died during the war. My sister was just ten years old, I was only six,” Gorgonna began, letting her gaze sweep over the vacant seats of the arena. “We were kept in the camp near Lordamere Lake. That place was mostly women and children. You... likely remember it.”

“I do,” Thrall said, anger coming to the fore. “Were you hurt?”

“I was too young, even for such tastes,” Gorgonna said. “Krenna, I couldn't say, but I do remember the first time Krenna fought someone. It wasn't uncommon for the guards to short us once or twice a week on food. No one was happy about it, and those with sense knew to go early before the food ran out and we were told we were too greedy, too ungrateful. I'd always been told that orcs gathered in circles around communal cauldrons, but humans insisted on lines, so we lined up. Krenna was holding my hand, and someone pushed me. I fell and I cried. I did a lot of crying back then.”

“Children cry, it's what they do,” Thrall said. “I seem to recall crying over the littlest things as I was growing up. I was inconsolable after my adopted father accidentally stepped on my pinecone knights.”

Gorgonna peered up at him and nodded. “I can see it, you have a bit of crybaby left in you.” Thrall opened his mouth to object and she laughed, and he couldn't help but laugh with her. “I didn't see who pushed me, but Krenna obviously did because she flew at him, kicking and punching. I think she startled him more than she hurt him, but she pulled me up beside her and told me to stay close.”

“I saw that,” Thrall said. “In the vision, her fighting people.”

“She did that regularly. She was determined to take care of me, to keep me strong. As we grew up, as the children grew up around us, she had to fight more of them. The adults were mostly less trouble. The guards should have put a stop to it, but they thought it funny, I think, or at least entertaining.”

“Humans of a certain stripe are more than happy to watch us fight ourselves, so they can feel superior about having beaten us,” Thrall growled. “Never mind that they're afraid it won't work out as well the second time. Not every human, but humans also don't wear signs of their tolerance and compassion.”

“Though some may give you a better opportunity to find out than others,” Gorgonna murmured, and Thrall smiled. “As I grew up, the fights became less about survival and more because Krenna was big and strong. She could push people down and take the best of what the humans offered us... the greatest fish in a small pond. She still believes that, that she can take what she wants instead of earning it. I wonder if she resents orcs as much as she does humans, that her enemies are those who
“It can be hard to work your mind out of that attitude,” Thrall replied. “She was trying to protect you back then, but now...”

“She isn't protecting anyone but herself,” Gorgonna finished, her tone wistful. “It's not as if I'm not grateful for how she protected me, but we aren't in the camps any more. The humans here aren't the ones who watched her fight. Her commanders aren't those who pushed me down.”

“No, and that's why I couldn't allow her to win,” Thrall said. “As Warchief, it's my first duty to keep the people of Orgrimmar safe, and that includes finding good commanding officers who will keep the peace between humans and orcs, as well as elves and orcs. We can't erase our past, and some wounds will never heal, but we can keep from opening new ones until we are nothing but bleeding sores.”

“I agree entirely, Warchief,” Gorgonna said, her smile full of gratitude. “Revenge achieves nothing, and resentment is poison.”

“I'm glad to hear it, and if you asked for a promotion, I don't doubt it would be granted,” Thrall replied. “I fear Krenna will be more angry than wise as a result of this.”

“I wouldn't ask for one,” Gorgonna replied. “I'm a warrior, but I chose a more distant posting. I have no desire to rule from a fortress.”

“What led you to that decision?” Thrall asked curiously. “It seems as though you would be a wise commander.”

“I... don't want to fight wars against the living,” Gorgonna admitted. “If the demons return, or when we go to fight the Scourge, I will take up arms without question, but I don't wish to be involved with border disputes. We should be better than that.”

“We should be, but as a very wise woman has said, the price of peace is constant vigilance,” Thrall said. “What is it you do, in that case?”

“I'm presently assigned to Sun Rock Retreat, in Stonetalon Mountains,” Gorgonna replied. “I help protect the retirees from harpy attacks.”

“Oh, a friend of mine lives in Stonetalon!” Thrall exclaimed, his voice warm. “Her name is Seereth, and she helps monitor the situation in Stonetalon. She's a shaman, and a few years ago, Jaina helped me set up scrying pools between Orgrimmar and Stonetalon to help improve communication.”

“Stonetalon is a very nice area, and the means to speak instantly to people across the land has been extremely helpful,” Gorgonna agreed. “Many Kaldorei still patrol the area and live there. I think they would be more hostile if it weren't obvious who was living there and why. The retirees are certainly grateful for the mountain air. Some of them still pick up a bow to help fight the harpies, but they can go and rest if they need to. It won't do any good to tell them what they can't do, just to support them when they're done with what they can do.”

“I know that in the days of old, the very elderly were difficult to support. Some even supported them going on journeys to die fighting something dangerous and terrible, but... no.” Thrall shook his head. “If I've learned anything, it's that the oldest of us have accumulated the most wisdom and
that letting them go out to die simply because they can only lift an axe one time out of three isn't
good enough."

“If it was a time of scarcity, I could understand it,” Gorgonna said. “A grandfather seeing his
granddaughter starving might hand her his food and go out to walk, but here? Now? In these lands
of prosperity and hope? It would be disgusting, counter to all you've promised us.”

“I'm glad you remembered my promises,” Thrall said. “Humans call it triage. Pouring support into
those who have the best chance to survive, even at the expense of other lives. It's not a good
decision but sometimes it's the only one they can make, but triage is an emergency measure. There
is no emergency here. We have farmers that have bountiful harvests, and if I choose to buy food
and goods on behalf of those who can't support themselves, then everyone benefits. An elder I save
could have stories of the old clans, or remember a weaving technique thought lost, or simply just
be. Every life is worth something.”

“Every life,” Gorgonna agreed. “Our... allies believe this too, don't they? Lady Proudmoore?”

“Oh, yes,” Thrall replied, his tone warming. “Jaina and I have had many discussions about support
systems for our respective people. Humans tend not to have formalized traditions for it, but in
times of strife, the elderly have been left without proper support. She mentions that while Tirans
don't always live long lives, the Dalarani have extensive programs to support any non-mage as long
as they might live, which has led to her own ideas, which she's passed on to me.”

“I'm grateful for her wisdom, then,” Gorgonna noted. “As are you.”

“Yes, always,” Thrall agreed. “She is an incredible ally, a good friend, and a stalwart companion. I
won't say that it hasn't been difficult, and we don't always agree, but it's never about anything that
might damage our alliance. She doesn't entirely approve of this.” He gestured towards the arena.
“But she accepts it.”

“She gave you a token of some kind, didn't she?” Gorgonna said. “Why was that?”

“Humans have tournaments too, and sometimes they air grievances through them,” Thrall said.
“Jaina finds that to be foolish too, but she gave me one of her bullets because she doesn't carry her
colours around. Not conveniently, at any rate.”

“A bullet seems like an odd token, especially for a mage,” Gorgonna said. “May I see it?”

“Certainly.” Thrall slipped the enchanted bullet from his pocket again and let it rest in her palm,
the runes brightening briefly before becoming all but invisible. “Proudmoores are taught how to
use guns by their goblin allies. They come in different sizes and shapes. Jaina prefers a hidden
weapon, one that fits just in the palm of her hand. She enchants the bullets for different effects,
though most of them are designed to stun rather than kill. She also has bullets blessed by members
of the Church of the Light to more effectively fight the undead or demons. I'm not sure how she
switches them in and out. Really, it's part of the magic.”

“And she gave you one,” Gorgonna mused. “There are rumours... they're true, aren't they?”

“That we're lovers?” Thrall asked. “Yes. The rumours that her actions, and mine, during the
invasion of Theramore were because we were lovers are false. It cost Jaina much to side with the
Horde, and it means that those who died to Daelin Proudmoore's invasion will never know
revenge, but revenge will avail us nothing. All we can do now is trust in one another, be united in
our purpose to make Kalimdor a home for all who live here, human or orc, tauren or Kaldorei, quillboar and furbolg. We stand united against the demon, the undead, and the warmonger.”

Gorgonna reached out and touched the bullet lightly, though she did not attempt to take it. “I think you're both very lucky to have such a powerful relationship. I hope that I can be as happy some day.”

“Your first goal should be to have a happy life, I think, rather than a relationship,” Thrall urged. “Good things will come after that, but a good life is the greatest goal we can strive for.” He considered briefly. “You said that you had no trouble fighting the undead, correct?”

“Yes, Warchief, that's so,” Gorgonna replied, taking on a pensive look. “What are you thinking?”

“It's not uncommon for the Argent Dawn to recruit from Orgrimmar,” Thrall said, tucking the bullet away again, though he let his hand rest on it. “They live hard lives in the plagued lands of Lordaeron, but they're always accepting recruits, regardless of race. If you wish for more than caring for retirees, you could go there.”

“Oh!” Gorgonna said. “I hadn't thought of that, I might look into it. Ships sail to their port, don't they?”

“It's a fair distance away, yes, but you could make it. The goblins also run airship routes between Kalimdor and the Eastern Kingdoms, though I haven't taken one. Sailing was bad enough.” Thrall shuddered. “But they say every journey begins with a great sacrifice.”

“Including one's lunch, I understand.” Gorgonna smiled, and put her fist to her chest in a salute. “Thank you, Warchief. I value our talk.”

“As do I, Gorgonna.” Thrall saluted her back, his fist making a meaty noise as it struck his bare chest. “The next time we speak, I look forward to seeing the colours you wear.”

So dismissed, Gorgonna turned to leave, picking her way across the arena. Thrall smiled to himself, and turned. Jaina sat alone in the arena, her expression drawn with concern. Thrall blinked and hurried over to her. “Jaina! I thought you were going to wait for me elsewhere. How long have you been waiting?”

“You spent some time talking to her, I was a little worried you'd forgotten about me,” Jaina said lightly, smiling as Thrall offered his arm.

“I would never, could never, forget about you,” Thrall said, leading her to his room. “We were mostly talking about her sister Krenna and her own future plans. I've suggested that she might like to join the Argent Dawn.”

“Not that I object, but why?” Jaina asked, startled. “Wouldn't you want to keep her around?”

“I would, she is wise and compassionate,” Thrall answered, and squeezed her arm lightly. “But she doesn't want to involve herself in the conflicts between allies, and I think she would do well under the Dawn's wing. If only Eitrigg had returned. He hasn't checked in, I'm concerned.”

“I can send a message to the Argent Dawn's mages if you like, but it may simply be there isn't time.” Jaina squeezed his arm in return. “We both know how the Scourge can advance swiftly and without warning.”
“Of course,” Thrall murmured, and leaned in to nuzzle at her neck. “We should try to contact them when we can, just to make sure everything is going well. I don't want to send warriors to a place that's already been overrun.”

“Mm,” Jaina replied, closing her eyes. Her hand moved from his arm to around his waist, tugging at him. “We should keep people safe, though I'll be sad if we lose the Argent Dawn. Think of all the good they can do.”

Thrall lifted Jaina into his arms easily, cupping her behind as her legs tightened around his waist. He carried her to his bed between kisses and set her down on the edge of it. He knelt down on the floor, giving her the advantage of height. “I admire their ability to work together as a cohesive group under such severe pressure.”

Jaina leaned in, nibbling softly at his jawline. He groaned, fumbling with the fastenings of her robe. “We managed it, but we had a defined goal that had a short timer,” Jaina moaned between nibbles, and shrugged her robes from her shoulders. “It may be years or even a decade before they can grow their own food.”

“I was just discussing Durotar's own food production,” Thrall murmured, nuzzling between Jaina's breasts as one hand stroked a line down her chest with the backs of his fingers. “We do keep supplies against emergencies, it's possible we could cut into that a little, but it would leave us short against a drought.” His hand moved down to stroke over her stomach. “Though we have the opportunity to--”

“Thrall.” His hand froze, hovering briefly over her stomach before withdrawing it. He sat back a little, looking up at her. She held up her wrist. Wrapped around it was a series of runed beads, a decoration she'd worn as long as he'd known her. Four of the beads were glowing, pulsing with arcane purple and frost blue.

“What is it, what's wrong?” Thrall asked urgently. “Are you alright?”

“Something's set off my wards,” Jaina said. The playfulness in her voice was gone as she stared at them. “These are all third tier wards, I'm not sure what happened. Those should only go off if there's a major magical incursion.”

“Then we should find out what it is.” Thrall nodded to her, and reached down. “Let me just hand you your robes--”

As his fingertips touched the ground, there was a great sound, like the beat of a drum. His eyes widened as he pressed his hands to the floor. He felt the beat again, and again, like the slow thrumming of the heart of the planet. His heart slowed to meet it, and he felt emotion rush through him. Anger, fear, hate. The spirits swirled around him, crying out in panic.

_They are coming! They are coming and there's nothing we can do!_

Thrall jerked his hands from the floor, his heart racing now that it was freed, and his breath coming in ragged pants.

“Thrall, what is it?” Jaina asked urgently. She reached for him and he leaned into her touch. Her arms wrapped around him, drawing him in close. “Tell me what's wrong.”
“The spirits... something is coming, something terrible,” Thrall mumbled. “Something that's come before and cannot be stopped.”

“Could this... no.” Thrall felt Jaina shake her head, and he squeezed her briefly. “This never happens.”

“What doesn't?” he asked, letting the feeling of hands stroking through his hair comfort and calm him.

“My wards are purely arcane in nature, and while they can fend off ghosts or the undead, the spirits themselves can pass through them harmlessly,” Jaina said. “I had no intention of disturbing their natural function.”

“And I'm as blind to the inner workings of the arcane as you are to the spirits,” Thrall said, shifting to rest his head against her thigh. “Our powers don't overlap, except for now.”

“Except now,” Jaina agreed. “We need to get dressed and deal with this, before someone--” Jaina's last words were drowned out by the sound of pounding on the door.

“Warchief! Warchief Thrall!” cried a voice and Thrall took a deep breath, forcing himself away from Jaina so that he could retrieve her fallen robe – and feel the steadily thrumming heartbeat – and pushed himself to stand. He pushed opened the door, keeping his body in a position to block Jaina from sight until she dressed.

“Ak'zeloth,” Thrall said, looking over the youthful warlock, and then at his companion. “And... Rehgar, is it?”

“Correct, Warchief,” said the older orc. “Rehgar Earthfury, though I am of no relation to Muln. I am... a warlock no longer, but like this young one, I felt what just occurred and I believe we have insight into what we just felt.”

“I'm not that young,” Ak'zeloth muttered, and rolled his eyes, running a hand over the thin scar along his face. Thrall recalled the day he'd received it clearly, and it had been to save lives. “May we speak, Warchief?”

“We may, just a moment,” Thrall said. “Jaina, are you prepared for company?”

“I am always prepared for company,” Jaina replied. “The question is if they are prepared for me.”

“Hello, Lady Proudmoore,” Ak'zeloth called, and Rehgar blinked as the implication hit him at full force.

"Hello, Ak'zeloth," Jaina replied, tugging her robe back into place. "How are you and Sergra doing?"

The young warlock ducked his head, but smiled. "We're hoping for good news soon. The spirits speak to her, and..."

"That's excellent news," Thrall said warmly. "Come, let us go to the council chamber."

Rehgar and Ak'zeloth stepped back and Jaina came to stand next to Thrall. He smiled down at her, even as his sense of unease grew. Jaina took his arm and he led the way, letting his visitors trail
behind. He heard Rehgar inhale suddenly, and he stood a little straighter.

*It's not as if people aren't aware of our relationship, Thrall thought. I haven't shouted it from the heavens, but neither have I kept it completely secret. It's impossible to do so with orcish sense of smell.*

The council chamber was empty when they arrived, and Thrall escorted Jaina to Eitrigg's seat in absentia, and sat next to her. Az'keloth took his own seat, and Rehgar found a place to sit down. Thrall noted Garona slipping into the room in uniform and nodded to her slightly.

Ak'zeloth gulped at the sight of Garona, but nodded and continued. “Both Rehgar and I felt something very recently. A surge of fel energy, similar to summoning a demon, on a very grand scale. Rehgar said in addition to the surge, he also heard the spirits speak to him and convey a sense of danger.”

“I felt the same thing,” Thrall said. “The spirits spoke of a returning danger, and I felt a great deal of negative emotion.”

“You said it was a surge of *fel* energy?” Jaina said sharply, and Ak'zeloth nodded. “That would explain why my wards went off. I wanted to be prepared in the event of... another...” Jaina's eyes went wide. “No, it can't be. It's impossible.”

“What is it, Jaina?” Thrall asked urgently. “What's wrong?”

“I'll have to get readings, communicate with Nethergarde, compare it to the measurements left by Archmage Khadgar but--” Jaina stood and leaned forward. On the great, round table that dominated the council chamber there was an expertly done carving of Azeroth and its continents, used more as a symbol of what they had sworn to protect than a strategic map. Jaina's finger stabbed down, pointing at the most southern part of the eastern continent. “It's possible that somehow, the Dark Portal has once again opened.”
Chapter 20: Early Winter, Year 28

Thrall stared at Jaina wordlessly as her words echoed in his mind. *The Dark Portal could be open.* “How is such a thing possible? Didn't Archmage Khadgar close it permanently?”

“He did, as evidenced by the sudden and immediately onset of the Lethargy amongst the imprisoned orc populace,” Jaina replied. “According to all of his notes and journals about the matter, the initial Portal was opened via a conspiracy between two persons, Medivh and Gul'dan. This was possible because Sargeras, the leader of the Burning Legion, had possessed Medivh from an early age and was manipulating him. Gul'dan, in turn, manipulated the orcs into invading Azeroth in search of a more hospitable place to live.”

Thrall made a point of not glancing back at Garona to confirm, but he remembered her tales. “Gul'dan and Medivh used raw power to rip open a passage between Azeroth and Draenor, though it was far more powerful than a traditional mage portal.”

“Correct,” Jaina said, offering him a warm smile. “This particular style of portal is permanent without the intervention of outside forces, and in fact causes a number of collateral factors, including seepage.”

“...seepage?” Rehgar asked, uneasy. “I remember it happening, but I don’t recall it ever being discussed by the… others.”

“The Shadow Council opens its mouth, garbage and lies fly out,” Ak'zeloth growled. “The seepage was what caused the land to die.”

“Yes,” Jaina said, her voice gentle with sympathy. “It also accelerated the decay of Draenor, from the reports that were sent back and compared to reports gathered from speaking to orcish agents sympathetic to Stormwind's cause.”

Jaina's voice, extremely light, caused Garona to tense, and Thrall could feel it. With a start, he realized that other council members had begun to trail in, some less pleased to find their chairs occupied, others taking their vacant seats. Thrall nodded to Jaina to continue.

“In any case, we managed to partially close the portal,” Jaina said, and tapped the southern tip of the eastern continent again. “Archmage Khadgar petitioned for a garrison to be built here to observe the potential regression of the seepage, along with a number of other factors. Nethergarde Keep, just here.”

“We have an outpost in Stonard,” Varok noted, leaning heavily on the table. “Just there, above the cut off.”

“It was only slightly improved from Rockard, as I recall,” Rehgar muttered, and he and Saurfang exchanged a knowing look, and then chuckled. Jaina smiled broadly.

“As useful as it is creatively named, I’d imagine. In any case, Nethergarde Keep was the first to know that the Dark Portal had opened again as it was attacked by new orc forces that swept through Azeroth. Reports indicate that these new clans, including the Warsong and Black Tooth Grin, struck hard and fast, reinforcing very little, striking only at certain key locations before abandoning them to burn.” Jaina tapped each location on the map in turn. “Stormwind, setting back
the construction efforts and taking the Tome of Medivh. Gul'dan's skull from the Bonechewer clan, Dalaran to seize its Eye, and Kul Tiras to steal ships to sail to the Tomb of Sargeras to steal his scepter. These artifacts were taken to Draenor. Scraps of intelligence gathered indicated that Ner'zhul, the chieftain of the Shadowmoon clan, was responsible for this order, and he conspired with the death knights to do so. The Warsong and their allies were merely distractions, which was certainly true considering they never retreated."

“The only ones that escaped were those who were clever enough to go back through the Portal, for all the good that did them,” Varok noted. “Deadeye and the Bleeding Hollow clan, as an example. Weren't there dragons involved too?”

“Yes, it's indicated black dragons did traverse to Outland, though their alliance with the orcs has never been entirely clear,” Jaina said, frowning. “Members of the Alliance will member red dragons most vividly, not black.”

Thrall reached over, touching Jaina's hand lightly, and she smiled warmly at him, taking his hand briefly before squeezing his fingers and releasing them. “In any case, Archmage Khadgar and his expedition realized that the only way for them to close down the portal was to do so from the other side. Ner'zhul was, meanwhile, in the process of performing a ritual to open multiple portals, seemingly with the intent of escaping to multiple potential worlds.”

“This was the act that caused the destruction of Draenor,” Shandel'zare noted, folding her hands on the table. “At least, that was what the Alliance believed, and hailed those who went through as slain martyrs to a greater cause.”

“Sadly, correct,” Jaina said. “We mourned the dead and we rebuilt Nethergarde. Terenas proposed the Internment Camps that everyone here is familiar with. Moving forward to a few years ago, there is the matter of Illidan Stormrage.”

“Tyrande hoped that Illidan would help us fight the Legion,” Thrall said with a frown. “He failed to be the champion she hoped.”

“Also correct,” Jaina said. “Though from Tyrande's report, he was cooperating, for her sake if no one else's. He claimed to have been confronted by Arthas in the Felwood, and that Arthas told him of a powerful demonic artifact he could use to defeat Tichondrius, one of the dreadlords who were responsible for the fall of Lordaeron. Illidan absorbed the artifact and succeeded in killing Tichondrius permanently, which is actually an extremely difficult feat to accomplish, though it damned him to a half-demonic, half-elven hybrid form.”

“That seems like cutting off your nose to spite your face,” Nara said, wrinkling her own muzzle in demonstration. “It doesn't grow back for everyone,” she added, for the benefit of the trolls.

“It is very like that,” Jaina agreed. “Though, it did do one thing. The artifact in question was the Skull of Gul'dan, seemingly lost on Draenor, but returned. The prevailing theory on that is 'evil things wish to be found', though it's possible Ner'zhul was able to keep it with him. We learned that Ner'zhul became the being known as the Lich King from one of his former subjects.”

“We did?” Ak'zeloth asked, sounding surprised. “When was that?”

“It was in your orientation package,” Shandel'zare pointed out. “Along with your bureaucratic instructions.”
“I must have missed everything past 'not on the rug','” Ak'zeloth grumbled. “How was such a thing possible?”

“According to the source, he was caught by Kil'jaeden, Sargeras' lieutenant, tortured, and transformed into the Lich King,” Thrall said. “Further, he spent decades working on the Scourge plague we've all heard of, first experimenting on local creatures, like the Nerubians, until it was sufficient to use on Lordaeron.”

“Yes,” Jaina said, and there was sadness in her voice. “It worked all too well. In any case, the destruction of the Skull of Gul'dan did prevent a further invasion of Azeroth from Draenor, assuming it still existed.”

“Which it does,” Rehgar finished, following the logic. “Otherwise, there would be no opening now.”

“Yes, but we knew that beforehand, or rather, the Kaldorei did and told us,” Jaina said. “Initially, Malfurion exiled Illidan from Kaldorei lands. He returned there with the naga as his allies, seeking out ships to make a much longer journey to the Tomb of Sargeras. There, Illidan stole the Eye of Sargeras. His motives were unclear until his defeat in the ruins of Dalaran by Malfurion and the Warden, Maiev Shadowsong. He told them that Kil'jaeden had recruited him to defeat the Lich King, which he was attempting to do when he unleashed a force that might have split the world in half. Again.”

“Stormrages don't do anything by halves,” Nara sighed. “Either of them.”

“Tyrande says that all the time,” Jaina noted. “In any case, Illidan was no longer exiled, though he did leave Azeroth... by opening a portal to Draenor and stepping through it. Presumably, this wouldn't have been possible without there being something for him to travel to.”

“That be a reasonable t'ing to assume,” Vol'jin mused. “But where be Illidan now?”

“We have more reports, accumulated from various sources,” Jaina said, frowning. “A group of elves, primarily composed of the Sunfury Army, disappeared from Dalaran through a portal described similarly to the one that Illidan summoned when he departed Kalimdor. These elves were led by the heir to the Phoenix Throne, Kael'thas Sunstrider. They were seen in the company of Illidan's naga allies.”

“Our source also said that there was a major assault on Northrend after that, on Icecrown itself, the heart of the Lich King's power,” Thrall said, his voice a soft growl. “That we are not free of the Scourge is indication enough that Illidan's venture failed.”

“We must assume Illidan survived, and that he has opened this portal,” Jaina said. “Though what it means can't be good... I didn't have all of my wards up, but I'm certain the shamans wouldn’t have felt those portals open if they were merely for quick teleportation. We wouldn't be getting a warning.”

“I had no knowledge of these events without being told, and neither did any shaman I communicate with,” Thrall added. “This isn't a small, isolated event. This is a major incursion.”

“I can communicate with Nethergarde Keep,” Jaina said. “They'll have the answer for certain, but we must prepare for the worst. Demons are returning to Azeroth.”
Varok cursed softly under his breath, and Shandel’zare looked grim and angry. Nara’s brow wrinkled with distress, already counting necessary supplies. Though she was just out of sight, Thrall felt Garona tense as Jaina gave voice to their fears.

“Their goal could be any number of things,” Thrall said, pitching his voice deep to banish doubt, and nodded slightly as his councillors sat up straighter, and shifted their full focus to him. “We have known the Legion to orchestrate invasions of human and Kaldorei lands, to consort with the undead as well as demons. They have had conspirators amongst every race. We need to be prepared for anything. Ak’zeloth, Rehgar. I need all of the information you have about demons.”

“Of course, Warchief,” they chorused, and saluted.

“Warchief,” Varok said slowly. “There is... something I would like for you to consider as well.”

“Yes?” Thrall focused on the elderly orc warrior, whose expression was, against all odds, animated and bright. “What is that?”

“That if Ner’zhul failed to destroy Draenor, our people could still be living there.” Thrall blinked, and Varok continued. “Not every clan joined Gul’dan and Ner’zhul's marches to Azeroth. I know that Fenris Wolfbrother, while he came to the councils on Azeroth, did not commit his clan. Neither did the Bonechewers, or several other clans. The Bleeding Hollow could still live. They were the largest orc clan, far larger than even the Blackrock, for we were upstarts. Others simply refused to leave. We thought them fools, but perhaps they were the wisest of all.”

“It's been... decades,” Thrall said, the implication hitting him full force. “Could they have survived?”

“Assume they have not,” Garona said, her voice an angry rasp. “Assume only demons are on the other side. We can't get lost in nostalgia.”

“You say that because you left no one behind,” Varok snapped. “I left my mate behind, my son. I made a promise to see them again, to survive.”

“And will you be the one to plunge your axe into their chests when you find them to be demons, slavering over the deaths of all on this world?” Garona demanded. “Or will you kneel and weep and force one of us to do it?”

“If Dranosh has become a demon, I will kill him myself,” Varok snarled. “Do not question my loyalty.”

“That's enough, both of you,” Thrall said, standing. “G-Akia is right, we need to focus on what is, not what could be. Varok is also right, we need to be prepared to mount a rescue mission to what remains of Draenor. We could save lives. Orc lives, human lives. The Alliance will want to know what has happened. Jaina, could you make contact and serve as an intermediary? Nothing can be done until we visit the site itself. Until then, this is to be kept quiet. Do you all understand?”

There were nods all around.

“I'll contact you as soon as I can,” Jaina said. “But I'll need to go now.”

“Go swiftly, Jaina,” Thrall replied, his voice warm. “We need your wisdom.”
“You'll have it, I promise,” Jaina smiled, and from one moment to the next, she was gone. Thrall let his gaze linger on the place she'd been before turning to the rest of his council.

“Dismissed, but be prepared for anything. Be certain that we have forces ready and prepared,” Thrall said, his voice grave. “It's extremely likely that we'll need a small, elite force that can travel via zeppelin or magic. There's no realistic way to sail there in any amount of good time. Force will avail us nothing.”

An affirmative was sounded, and the councillors rose, some grumbling and stretching, others quiet. Thrall let his gaze sweep the room. None seemed disturbed or unprepared for the battle to come, only curious and wary. This comforted him. Varok's lined face was still twisted in a scowl, and Thrall nodded encouragement to him. As they filed out, Thrall turned to Garona, still clad in her Kor'Kron black and gold.

“We need to talk,” he said quietly. “Garona, walk with me.”

“Am I being censured, Warchief?” The question, calmly asked, cut through him like a knife. If there had been anger there, accusation, perhaps it would have brought his anger to the fore, or disappointment. Instead, he remembered Garona's stories about her childhood.

“No, I wouldn't do that,” Thrall replied. “I do want to know why you spoke that way to Varok. I know you don't hate him. You hardly ever call him useless, and you don't speak of him with contempt. You knew about the vow to his son. You were there when we... found him. You know his history. Why would you confront him like that?”

For a moment, Garona looked away. Thrall did not press her, instead making his way from the council chamber to his own room. Opening the door, he could still detect a hint of his scent, intermingled with Jaina's, and he couldn't help but sigh. With our luck, we won't get another chance for months to be together alone and in private. It's not as though I don't love every part of our relationship, but she's been so worn out lately. Is she getting enough sleep? Could she be worried about our relationship? If so, I should--

“I hate Draenor,” Garona said finally, disrupting Thrall's train of thought. “I hate what it turned us into. I hate how people still idealize it. I hate the idea that when you see it...”

Thrall waited for to continue, and when she fell silent, he faced her, blue eyes meeting grey ones. “I will not want to bring back the old order. I'm excited to see Draenor. I was born on Azeroth, in Alterac. It is a place I've never felt particularly attached to. I grew up in Lordaeron, a place that is full of good and bad memories. Durotar is my home. Orgrimmar is my home, one I built with both hands. I love this place, and I love all of the people in it. Draenor was where we came from, but for many like me, it will never be home.”

“Promise me,” Garona said softly. “Promise me you'll see what you need to see and come back home.”

“I swear it on Orgrim's hammer and our friendship, I will come home,” Thrall said. Carefully, he reached over to Garona's helmet. He watched as she held herself very still while he took her helmet off, and then moved his hands to just above her shoulders. “May I hug you?”

Garona said nothing, only nodded once. Thrall leaned in to embrace her gently. Slowly, she put her arms around him and hugged him back, her grip as tight as his was loose. Carefully, Thrall stroked his hand along her thick braid of hair and down her back, offering all the comfort he could. Softly,
he murmured to her again and again that he would return.

“If you think I'm not going with you, you're wrong,” Garona replied, her voice muffled by his shoulder. He could feel moisture against his bare skin, and it chilled there. “Just don't expect me not to complain about it.”

~ * ~

There is something deeply satisfying about cleaving a demon in two, Thrall thought grimly, ducking as the demonic blood sprayed out from the wound he'd gouged deep in its torso. The blade of the axe he held melted and he discarded the weapon. The Doomhammer remained at his side, within easy reach. The battles of old had taught him not to waste his precious heirloom weapon on the Legion's chaff. Instead, he signalled, and a dwarf, resplendent in purple, red, and gold, hurried towards him, ducking between dead bodies to bring him another rapidly forged axe, the product of Nethergarde's forges.

“What news from the Portal?” Thrall asked of the dwarf as she took a breather, moving between still forms, checking for friendly casualties.

“The elves report another wave massing just on our side, Warchief,” the dwarf replied. Thrall frowned. “Not much to be gained being scattered on the fields.”

“I'm afraid orcs have always fought scattered on the fields,” Thrall replied. “Still, we'll retreat and regroup back at the Keep. Thank you, Enohar.”

“You're welcome, Warchief, feel free to grab a brew,” Enohar Thunderbrew said with a brief smile, and then she was off, picking her way through the battlefield.

Thrall looked around, watching his warriors pick off the last of the scattering of demons, masses of limbs, wings, talons, and tails, and put his free hand to his lips. “Warriors of the Horde! The next wave comes. Return to Nethergarde Keep and prepare yourselves! For Azeroth! For the Horde!”

The cry was taken up by the warriors scattered across the battlefield. Thrall saw more demons cut down, though his forces retreated in good order, sometimes taking a scrap of demon hide, or shaking the shoulder of a fallen comrade to see if they yet lived, or taking their weapon if they did not. Further afield, a dark shape moved over the fallen enemy, darting through the killing fields like a shade.

Despite her words to Varok, or perhaps because of them, Garona had been the most vigilant. Rather than shadowing Thrall constantly, she had been out in the thick of the killing, stabbing and slaying with her blue steel knives. Amongst the demons were orcs, lost to rage and bloodlust, and seeing one for the first time had nearly cost Thrall his life. Their faces had been twisted with hate, scarred and mutated, and yet they had been entirely recognizable. In their expressions he recognized Grom and the fallen Warsong. He recognized that this was the fate that Gul'dan had had in store for them, Blackhand and his followers, and that realization had been the first blow, and the second had been blocked by Garona.

“This is what I always told you about,” she had hissed. “Now pay attention! We can't lose you.”

So he had. He had cut down the fel orcs without mercy, and they had asked for none. They had said very little, driven by mindless bloodlust as they were. Varok had said nothing during those battles, merely done his duty. Garona was the one to check each one, looking at their faces,
studying hard. She was the one to examine tattoos and clan markings, calling out Shattered Hand and Bleeding Hollow, Bonechewer and Laughing Skull.

*She may have been right,* Thrall thought, tearing his gaze away from Garona and focused on returning to the Keep. *It could be that all hope for the orcs in Outland is lost. Two decades of exposure to demonic energy, utterly unabated, with no shamans to guide them away from darkness. They won't even be aware that Mannoroth is dead and gone, that we are free.*

The notion was sobering, and it was these grim thoughts that kept Thrall company as he approached Nethergarde Keep. As human military bases went, it was an unlovely place: the high stone walls were worn by harsh winds and caked with red dust, and the outbuildings looked as though they were huddling against attack. The ground here was not the rusty but fertile soil of Durotar, and instead was polluted, sick, and utterly useless for anything, including building.

*Jaina and Garona both said it was due to leakage from the Dark Portal,* Thrall thought, scuffing his foot briefly against the barren dirt. *How long did the Portal stay open? Ten years? Fifteen? And it spread this quickly, this far. What would have happened if we had won? Would it have kept spreading, eating the Eastern Kingdoms whole? Was this the inspiration for the Scourge blight? At least this doesn't actively hurt the living. What will the remains of Draenor look like? How can anything have survived this?*

The banners of Dalaran fluttered brightly and unabated on the high, defensive walls of Nethergarde, preserved by magic that was nearly two decades old, though those enchantments obviously did not extend to the walls. Twin gold eyes picked out on purple peered down at Thrall and he paused, letting them scan him. The system was not perfect, but he had seen beams of pure arcane energy strike at stray, unlucky creatures too mutated to be properly identified as rabbits that ventured too close to the gates.

*And no one dares find out if the beams only work on rabbits,* Thrall mused as he walked into the stronghold's courtyard. In the years since its creation, near-destruction, and rebirth from the ashes, Nethergarde had grown haphazardly for the most part. Two large barracks flanked the gates. Home at first to the best forces the Alliance could muster, the population had dwindled, first from war, then from a lack of interest. In many ways, fulfilling its goal, to shut down the Dark Portal permanently, had signed Nethergarde's death warrant, but it had clung to life stubbornly.

Thrall followed the narrow road up to the primary barracks on the right-hand side, slightly closer to the Portal, while soldiers garbed in purple and gold bustled past. The primary barracks was the home of Nethergarde's officers and many of its active troops. The secondary barracks was converted into a hospital as well as a residence for the families that made Nethergarde their home. This was where the Horde's forces were staying, though with some reticence from the humans and dwarves that lived there.

In the heart of Nethergarde, standing above all others, was the mage tower. While Thrall had limited experience with such, he felt that Jaina's home had given him a good idea of what to expect: magical artifacts and books, scrolls and shelves, crammed to the brim in a haphazard way, as though its resident had more important things to do than organize. Nethergarde's mage tower was quite different. Aggressively clean, its first two floors were dedicated to a library of every possible book about demons there was to find on Azeroth. On the third floor, there were skeletons and collections of bones retrieved from the demons that had been fought at the Dark Portal, along with the occasional orc, mutated by demonic energy. No spirits whispered their names to Thrall, so old and so forsaken by the elements were these fallen.
The fourth floor was for processing. This was where testimonies were collected to be turned into more books for the library, and the mages of Nethergarde were not shy about asking for insight. Thrall spent an hour each evening reciting his experiences to a pen that was enchanted to understand his every word and record it. *I almost want one of my own, but then my penmanship will fall out of practice and people will laugh at me when I write like a child.* The fifth floor, intended to be a mage's bedroom, was reserved for experimentation on organic tissue, soil samples, and arcane devices and recordings. A small adjoining room had been remodelled for Watcher Mahar Ba, the senior presiding mage. While all others had their own quarters in the barracks, the Watcher had chosen to remain near his devices, and that habit had served Nethergarde well in its most recent hour.

Near the mage tower was the large smithy that, even now, was pumping out billowing clouds of smoke, evacuated from the forges. While the blasted lands of the southern swamp was incapable of providing fertile soil, it allowed for the opportunity to open large, labyrinthine mines. A great many braces had been necessary, but the ore deposits were rich, practically falling into waiting hands. Such would have been the envy of Azeroth as a whole were the resources not committed to battles against the demons. Strummer Flintheel, the primary overseeing blacksmith, had provided weapons and armour for the defenders using the ore taken from the mines, and while his own collection was smaller, he too had a library of smelting techniques and notes regarding the dissolution of metal due to demonic ichor.

*You can tell that this place was founded by mages,* Thrall mused. *Because no one leaves things unwritten for very long.* He nodded to the purple clad guards as he headed inside the primary barracks. *Most especially because all too often, those with wisdom are the first to fall.*

Despite the worn condition of the outside of the building, within it was pristine, well-maintained by the same people who repaired the walls. Along the hallways were hanging tapestries, images from battles fought and won, or lost. Thrall paused briefly, gazing on the image of General Turalyon, sword held aloft, the battered shield of Anduin Lothar on his arm, battling a great Doomguard, its mouths grimacing under the strength of his holy Light. He touched the worn spot next to the tapestry for luck, as he had observed the soldiers of Nethergarde doing, and continued upstairs.

As Thrall ascended to the second floor, he could hear a loud conversation. Following the sound, he came upon the meeting room. At the table stood an old man in battered silver armour, one gauntleted hand curled in a fist and resting heavily against the table. At his side stood Gorgonna, arms folded behind her back at attention. Thrall gave her an encouraging smile, and she smiled back at him, one cheek dimpled. On the other side of the human stood another orc, tall and male, dressed in black and red armour, though the emblem that would go with it, that of the Blackrock Clan, was notably absent. This was, as he had introduced himself, Ariok, son of Eitrigg. Thrall had been startled by him, and moreso startled by the fact that Jaina knew him, and had urged him to remain and reinforce Nethergarde’s soldiers instead of heading north.

Across the table from the others stood Jaina. Through means that Thrall had on good authority were ‘magic’, Jaina’s white and blue robes remained pristine and free of the red dust that tended to coat everything in the blasted lands of the Swamp of Sorrows, though her sleeves were nonetheless spotted by ink from her note taking. Were it not for the dire situation -- and the weariness behind Jaina’s smiles -- Thrall would have considered this to be a perfect place for her to be.

*She works far too hard,* Thrall thought. *Sometimes I think she acts as though the whole weight of the world rests on her shoulders. It does, often enough, but she doesn’t need to bear it alone.*
The final figure was an elf, and one that Thrall did not immediately recognize. He was slender and stood only a little taller than Jaina. His hair was long, blond and hung loosely around his shoulders, draped artistically over robes of gold-trimmed red and black silk. His eyes were bright and green, and Thrall felt uneasy as he gazed at him, as though there was something familiar but untouchable about him. Around his necklace he wore a pendant in the shape of a firebird. Catching his gaze, the elf’s disdainful smile turned into a smirk.

Thrall stiffened slightly, and ignored him, turning instead to his beloved. “Jaina.”

“That’s not the Prince?” Thrall stiffened slightly, and ignored him, turning instead to his beloved. “Jaina.”

“Thrall,” Jaina replied, the warmth of her voice banishing weariness. “This is an old friend of mine, Kylian Firesong.”

Once again, Thrall found himself surprised. “This isn’t the Prince?”

“Sorry to disappoint, Warchief,” the elf cut in, and gestured with one hand adorned with a heavy gold ring, the green gemstone on it flashing briefly. “But Kael’thas is too busy for petty meetings. I’m sure you understand.”

Thrall shifted forward. “The meeting can’t be that petty if Kael’thas sends his second in command to a meeting in his place, and a second in command that inherited the position from his father, of the second oldest house in Quel’thalas.”

The elf -- Kylian --smiled slightly. “Second because the first is the House of Sunstrider, and not third because the Windrunners were too busy counting all of their children to make sure they had them all to get into line second. You know our history.”

“As I’m sure you’re well aware of mine,” Thrall growled softly. “Why are you here?”

“That is a story we’ve been trying to extract for the last half hour,” the human man said, annoyed. “He said he’d explain when--”

“The gang’s all here, and now it is,” Kylian cut in again. “No point in telling the story twice, after all.”

“It’s definitely a story we need to hear,” Jaina said. “Everyone, please, sit. Kylian, commence the theatrics.”

“You know me all too well, Sunfish,” Kylian replied, and those assembled took their seats, though he did not, instead pacing about the room. “This story is one of daring, drama, betrayal and mystery. A tale of magic and martial prowess.”

“I miss the rangers,” the human muttered, and rested his tanned chin on his fist. “They were quieter.”

“Commander Vines, I’m certain that what Kylian has to say is extremely important,” Jaina said, giving him a polite nod. “Kylian, go ahead.”
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For a moment, Thrall thought that the elf would argue or dissemble, but as Kylian glanced at Jaina’s serious expression, he seemed to change his mind. “Yeah, yeah. Alright. It starts in Dalaran. After what happened with Kael… you remember what happened, right? The f--”

“I remember,” Jaina said, tersely. “Please.”

“Right, okay,” Kylian agreed readily, though Thrall saw something gleam in his eyes behind the aetheric glow of magic. “Sorry. We were too late to stop Quel’thalas from falling, or Dalaran. Kael realized pretty quickly that we couldn’t just sit around, so he gathered as many survivors as he could -- mages, members of the army, civilians when we could find them -- and decided to go hook up with the Alliance. We’d heard that there was a major initiative to push the Scourge out of Dalaran. Pretty much, we weren’t starving then, but we knew we were going to start soon enough.”

“The Sunwell was tainted by the Scourge, ruined,” Jaina said. “You would have lost everything. All of those golems, the weather control… the runestones.”

“Yeah, pretty much, everything was completely fucked,” Kylian agreed, and emotion twitched across his face briefly. “But there might have been something left in Dalaran, or so we hoped.”

“There were several groups of survivors in Lordaeron,” Thrall noted with a frown. “The Silver Hand reformed into the Scarlet Crusade, for instance, intent on taking back Lordaeron from the Scourge.”

“Really,” Kylian said, with slightly too much of an edge to his voice to sound as casual as he hoped. “Where are they, again?”

“I believe based out of Hearthglen, though there was recently a schism amongst them,” Thrall noted. “Some of their number left to form a splinter group, the Argent Dawn. They're based out of Tyr's Hand.”

“Fascinating,” Kylian noted, a hint of boredom to his tone, and Thrall glanced briefly at Jaina, who was giving Kylian a hard look in her turn. “What caused the schism?”

“From what it sounded like... there was a disagreement in the upper echelons about the presence of non-humans within the order, many felt that only humans should be responsible for saving Lordaeron and so the non-humans should be turned out,” Thrall said slowly. “Those that disagreed with this treatment left. If there are elves or dwarves that survived, they'll be with the Argent Dawn.”

“Ah, I've heard that song before,” Kylian said, waving dismissively, but there was another gleam in his eyes. “Shall I continue?”

“Please,” Vines snapped. “It's not gossip time.”

“Of course, Commander,” Kylian said, smirking. “We made contact with a local Alliance commander, Grand Marshal Garithos. I see you know the name.”

“We've met, briefly,” Vines growled. “Useless as tits on a bull, and has the bull's manners. If the
Alliance is ever about cooperation between nations, between races, Garithos was its anathema. He didn't just hate other races, he hated the wrong kinds of humans, too."

"Mages," Jaina murmured. "Even now, far too many people just hate mages."

"Exactly," Kylian said. "We didn't know, couldn't know. We showed up, with our supplies and our army, full of mages, led by a mage, and he was ready enough to use us to the fullest extent of our abilities."

"So long as you would die along with it," Jaina finished, looking angry. "Tyrande talked about it, she remembers Kael fondly. He saved her life."

"That's skipping ahead in the story," Kylian rebuked mildly, and then held up his hands in surrender. "Fine, fine. Tell me what you know."

"What Tyrande told me was that she and Maiev met Kael while they were traveling across Lordaeron, searching for Illidan. Kael was fighting off Scourge and finding caches of supplies to bring with them while they attempted to meet with the remainder of Alliance command. Tyrande saved the army from a Scourge incursion and was swept downriver. She came aground on an island and fought them off until Illidan found her." Jaina traced a figure in the air, blazing a trail across an illusion of Lordaeron. "Malfurion said that Kael and his army assisted him in defeating Illidan, and then revealed Tyrande's fate."

"Kael never intended to deceive Malfurion, that was all Maiev. He owed Tyrande for saving us, but that was all before Dalaran. The last Malfurion would have seen of all of us was when Illidan took off through his portal to Outland, and Maiev went after him." Kylian shook his head lightly. "That was a complete clusterfuck."

"That's the part we haven't heard much about," Jaina said, folding her hands on the table and watching Kylian intently. "What happened in Outland?"

"We basically showed up to watch our Lord and saviour, Illidan Stormrage, getting thrown into a cage and dragged off by the Warden," Kylian said. "Not exactly the most morale-inducing sight to see right after our own jailbreak." He shrugged a little. "We managed, though. We freed him, we put the Warden down."

"She was only doing her job, and Illidan was dangerous," Thrall noted with a frown. "Surely there was a way to capture her instead."

"I'm surprised the person who used an earthquake to murder a bunch of Alliance soldiers is really on the 'law and order' side," Kylian replied, giving him a nasty look, and Vines turned to stare at Thrall. "But okay, if you want, yeah we could have, but we didn't see the need. It was Maiev or Illidan, and we picked our side the minute we stepped through that portal."

"Durnholde was empty when I tore it down," Thrall snarled, half-rising before he could fully stop himself. He felt Jaina's hand on his and sat down. "Are you deliberately trying to annoy me?"

"I don't know, do you feel deliberately annoyed?" Kylian asked breezily. "Anyway, we followed Illidan as he marched across Hellfire Peninsula. Charming place, seriously, but the dust gets everywhere... and we found things. People."

"People?" Vines asked, distracted from Thrall. "The expeditions?"
“Yes, and no,” Kylian said. “There were signs of old fortifications, ruins really, of the old Alliance bases. Our brave, sacrificial lambs had built up bases of operations near the Dark Portal, the ruins of which we could see from where we were standing, but they had been discarded. That wasn't so much a surprise, and the hordes of rampaging fel orcs weren't much of one either.”

“Was there any sign of uncorrupted orcs?” Jaina asked, even as Thrall felt his heart sink a little further. “Or any of the Expedition?”

“No in Hellfire, but more than that survived the sundering of Draenor,” Kylian said. “We didn't go far, because Hellfire was our base, but what we did do was encounter non-orc natives. The Draenei, predictably.”

“There were reports that there were human-like aliens on Draenor, according to information provided by Archmage Khadgar himself,” Vines mused, rubbing at his chin. “And there are reports from the Swamp of Sorrows of a handful of them wandering around, though they didn't seem much like humans to me.”

“Times, everything is measured on a scale, of being 'very like a human' to 'very like an orc', and there's a lot of room in between,” Garona observed. Thrall did not jump at her sudden arrival, and he bit back the urge to ask her what she'd found. Jaina, interestingly, did not jump either, but the others at the meeting started, with Kylian's perhaps the greatest of all with a touch of exaggeration.

“Holy shitfuck, where the hell did you come from?” he demanded, holding his hand to his chest.

“Outside,” Garona replied, her voice muffled by her Kor'Kron helm. “Warchief, I have not found what you were looking for.”

“Thank you, Akia,” Thrall replied. “So, these Draenei... what were they like?”

“Afraid,” Kylian said, letting his gaze linger briefly on Garona before returning to his audience. “Fel orcs had hunted them across Hellfire, and longer than that. The war between the draenei and the orcs is an old one, if you can even call it that at this point. Illidan was looking for something specific, but he ordered us to help the draenei in the hopes that they would have some kind of information for us.”

“There are worse motivations for helping someone,” Jaina pointed out. “And it helped a people in need besides.”

“Yeah, pretty much. As it turned out, not only did they have information, but they had useful skills too, and they pledged themselves to our cause. Their leader, Akama, got a promotion up to lieutenant, just like Kael and Vashj. We figured out that the fel orcs were being commanded by a pit lord, and that killing that pit lord would put an end to all the demon summoning and crap they were doing.”

“A pit lord... Mannoroth?” Thrall asked, his tone urgent as he sat forward. Kylian shook his head.

“Magtheridon, a huge, ugly fucker,” he replied. “But there are a dozen of them, as far as I know, maybe more.”

“Pit lords are a lieutenant-class type of demon, sitting third in ranking below the Eredar,” Jaina
noted. “We fought several of them at Hyjal as well. Mannoroth is dead, which is a rare enough occurrence that it's worth marking the occasion.”

“Yeah, and so's Magtheridon,” Kylian said, nodding to her. “We stormed his stronghold, a place called the Black Citadel that was being run by fel orcs. It was brutal – we lost a lot to their machine defences – but we managed it.”

“Who was leading them?” Garona asked. “Bladebist? Deadeye?”

“Uh, would have been a guy using the handle 'Maim Blackhand',” Kylian replied. “Missing a tooth, kind of an idiot.”

“That's not a pseudonym, that's his real name,” Garona said. “His twin brother's name is Rend.”

“You're shitting me,” Kylian said. “Who names their kids something that dumb?”

“Blackhand the Destroyer, first Warchief of the Horde, and great tactical idiot,” Garona replied. “Though his daughter's name was Griselda. Is Maim dead?”

“Yeah, very dead. Once we took the fortress, we pretty much immediately were confronted by the shit Illidan didn't want to tell us, namely that the reason he'd gone to Dalaran was because he'd been asked to by Kil'jaeden. If the top rung of the Burning Legion is Sargeras, the second rung is Archimonde and Kil'jaeden.”

“And Archimonde is dead,” Jaina said. “I watched him explode.”

“Yeah, and Sargeras is MIA, so it's Kil'jaeden now,” Kylian agreed. “We found out that when Illidan killed Tichondrius and absorbed the Skull of Gul'dan, he prevented the Legion from invading Azeroth again. You'd think this would be the best news ever, but Kil'jaeden also recruited Illidan to fight Arthas and the Lich King, who decided to rebel or some shit.”

“The Legion used the Scourge and then discarded them... and then lost at Hyjal,” Thrall said Slowly. “And Tyrande did say that Illidan told her that he never wanted to rule the world, only that he wanted power, magic.”

“Yeah, well, he got it. Problem was, when Malfurion and Maiev stopped him at Dalaran, he broke his deal with the demons. Illidan was trying to cut the demons off from Draenor by closing those portals and killing Magtheridon, only to have Kil'jaeden waltz in to tell him to get the fuck back to Azeroth and do his job.”

“It's almost as if this Illidan person tries to do the right thing, and is just utterly selfish about it,” Ariok noted, speaking for the first time.

“Illidan Stormrage, a study,” Kylian said, by way of agreement. “Also, largely unsuccessful and whatever he tries to accomplish that isn't manipulating people.”

"Not exactly fond of this Stormrage, are you?" Ariok observed with a frown. "How do we know that you aren't just making him look bad?"

“And who are you to ask?” Kylian asked, answering question with question. Ariok drew himself up with pride.
"Ariok, son of Eitrigg, of the Blackrock clan," he replied. "Sworn to find my father once more and
tell him of my survival--"

"Yeah, yeah, okay. Look." Kylian gestured, and left a trail of sparks that dispersed harmlessly. "I
don't actually give a shit about your life story. Illidan Stormrage was known to us before he
showed up. Ten thousand years ago, he gave the first Sunstrider the means to create the Sunwell,
the core of our society until Arthas decided to dump a dead body in it and fuck us all over. He was
a hero, right up until the point where we actually met him. Then we realized the same thing any kid
learns when they meet their hero: that people are seriously flawed."

"Or, they meet their hero's son, and learn she was actually not a particularly good parent," Jaina
murmured. Kylian raised an eyebrow, and she added, "I've met Medivh."

"Oh, how was he?" Kylian asked, even as Vines' mouth fell open in shock. "Still all demon-y?"

"No, actually," Jaina replied, ignoring Vines. "He was dead, first, but his ghost was liberated from
Sargeras' control, but was still fully invested with his Guardian powers, which allowed him to
manifest in the time of Azeroth's great need, which did directly correspond with Arthas sticking a
dead body in the Sunwell and fucking us all over."

Thrall raised an eyebrow at Jaina's turn of phrase. "I didn't think you used that kind of language."

"That's not even close to the worst thing I've ever heard Jaina say," Kylian interjected. "You don't
exactly know her very well, do you?"

"Get back on topic," Thrall growled, even as the remark stung. "What about Illidan and the
demon?"

Kylian smiled. "Right, how silly of me. So, Illidan got Akama and his people to secure the Citadel
against the remaining fel orcs, while we geared up to go to Icecrown. All good humour, forced or
otherwise, drained from his expression, and he continued, much subdued. "Illidan opened a portal
and we went through with the naga. Vashj and Kael established strongholds in the far north while
we attempted to stop Arthas along the coast. We failed and fell back. He had a dragon. He had a
fucking dragon."

"The Scourge always have an advantage," Jaina said, her voice laced with sympathy. "Anything
they can kill, they can take. You lose your fallen twice."

"Not to mention, Arthas and Kael have a history, even besides that," Kylian said, and shook his
head briefly. "Illidan primarily focused on seizing control of special runestones that looked like
they had been cribbed from the Runekeepers that could create bridges to the Frozen Throne, where
the Lich King was waiting for Arthas. We did everything we could to stop them... Arthas had been
losing strength, or so it seemed. The Lich King did... something to him. He came back strong, he
had allies, this huge insect-beast, looking related to the other ones we saw in Northrend, but undead
instead of living. He drove Vashj back, and... he destroyed our base. I remember the gargoyles
coming in. Flying over us, checking to see if there were any survivors. If we moved, we were dead.
We lay in the snow, waiting for them to send the necromancers. Kael got us out, he burned them
from the sky."

Jaina stood up, crossing to Kylian's side and pulled him into a tight embrace. Kylian put his arms
around her, clinging to her and murmuring too softly for Thrall to hear. Jaina whispered back, and
after a moment, she drew away. Kylian nodded to her, and wiped briefly at his eyes.
"There was no time to collect our dead or burn them to spare them from the Scourge. We had to tend to the living. Illidan realized that he couldn't gain control of those runestones, so he made one final, suicidal charge at Arthas. We were... too exhausted to participate. Kael was trying to gather power to get us away. I still remember the sound of the battle, the sound Frostsmourne made when it hit Illidan's blade... how we thought Illidan was going to win because he stabbed Arthas in the chest, but it left him open... and Arthas isn't alive any more. He stabbed Illidan in the chest and it dropped him."

“So... he's dead then?” Gorgonna ventured in the silence that followed. “He's not the one that did this?”

“I wish it was that simple,” Kylian said, shaking his head. “We thought Arthas was going to turn Illidan. That's how he made death knights, killing them, twisting their souls... but not Illidan. He might have, but something called him, the Frozen Throne, I guess. When Arthas turned his back, Kael ran to Illidan. He said... he said he was still breathing, that we had to get him to healers. To the relative safety of Outland. To... to the magical caches we'd kept aside.”

“How did you get the portal open again?” Jaina asked, sympathy warring with curiosity. “Kael is powerful, but you said you were exhausted.”

“Yeah, we aren't... you know, you or anything, but we're good at working as a team. Kael led the circle, he was... it fucked him up. It was so fucking cold the tears were frozen to his face, but he had it together enough to rip open a portal between Northrend and Outland and took us to the home we were stuck with while fucking Arthas Menethil walked up to the Lich King to give him frozen blow jobs or something.”

“They merged and became a single entity,” Jaina said, her voice so soft that Thrall shivered. There was no sorrow in her voice, not now. Only anger. “He's the Lich King and the Lich King is him.”

“Fucking great,” Kylian muttered. “Just what we needed.”

“What happened to Illidan?” Gorgonna prompted. “You said that he lived, but I'm not certain as to how. Few survive such a wound.”

“I've always personally felt like Illidan was way too much of a pain in the ass to die,” Kylian said, but nodded to her. “We lost a lot of people once we got back... mages, the weakest of the circle. They gave everything they had to get us home, and then their lives. It wasn't pretty.”

Thrall frowned as something tugged at his memory. “I know that mages get fevers when they use too much magic – I've seen it – but how is it possible for it to kill them?”

“What Kael did wasn't shit they teach in Dalaran... when you channel the Sunwell, you use a full circle of mages. All of the mages involved pool their energy together, and when it's over, it redistributes, and those with the most energy are the most drained, and the least the most renewed, because the Sunwell is providing the power. When we did it, Kael was our focus, and we pooled everything we had together... and when we used it up, we didn't have a bottomless wellspring to fill us back up. It burned people out, past just getting mage fever. Past just being sick. It was like striking a match... they burn bright, and then they're ash.”

“I had no idea Kael could do something like that, and the cost... did he know it would kill them?” Jaina asked, aghast. “He never asked me to--”
"We all went to Northrend knowing we could die," Kylian replied bluntly. "If some people were going to die anyway, it's better that they did it saving the lives of others instead of having their souls violated by the Lich King. You would have made the same call, you know it."

"I would have offered myself up first before others, you know it," Jaina retorted, setting her jaw. Even as Thrall admired her determination, a shiver moved through him, the ghost of fear anchored in memory of that great battle in Hyjal, of Jaina's collapse moments after the World Tree had immolated Archimonde and saved Azeroth.

"And that's why Kael never told you how it worked," Kylian shot back. "You would have gotten yourself killed before you ever hit Archmage because you always want to be the hero, you always want to put yourself in danger for others. You don't know how to delegate responsibility because you think you can do everything."

"I promise you, I know what it's like to have people die for me," Jaina hissed. "But I don't see a reason to throw people's lives into a grinder."

"Neither does Kael, and neither do I," Kylian snapped. "You don't know what it was like out there."

"Try me," Jaina replied, folding her arms over her chest, and Thrall felt the room grow icy, as though he were standing next to a cold box.

"Like I said, the weakest mages, the ones that lost the most, burned out and died, but the rest of us weren't a lot better. We burned through a lot of reserves trying to heal from it. We took to using whatever sources we could, and there's a lot of magic in Outland, all wild and loose and disobeying the strictures of the Kirin Tor. You'd hate it, nothing follows the rules. We got Illidan to the healers and they managed to patch him up, but... for a long time, he was just laying there. Not moving, hardly breathing. Akama and Vashj poured everything they had into him, and our healers did too. There were shifts moving in and out of his room in the Citadel, just trying to see if they could get him to wake up. We tried... a lot of things, everything we could think of, and Kael..." Kylian shook his head wordlessly. "Kael was there every second. He wouldn't eat, he wouldn't sleep. He just sat by Illidan, holding his stupid fucking hand and praying that he'd wake up, somehow. I don't even know half of what Kael offered to get him to wake up, or to whom it was being offered, but about three months later, Illidan finally woke up. He... recovered pretty fast after that. A big ol' scar on his chest and none the worse for wear. Everyone was really happy about it... until he started opening his mouth."

"Opening his mouth... what did he say?" Jaina asked, her tone thawing a fraction.

"I'm not going to mince words here, Illidan was fucking Kael, and while I thought it was a stupid, dangerous idea, Kael seemed to be okay with it. When Illidan woke up, he acted like the very idea was disgusting to him. It hurt Kael a lot, and it's not like it's the first time he's been rejected, but at least that had some kind of context." Thrall glanced briefly at Jaina, whose expression had only grown more stony. "He accepted it, and moved on... or out, as the case may be."

"What little I know of Illidan indicates that this is surprising," Thrall noted. "Did he ever give a reason why?"

"You know, finding out what's up Illidan Stormrage's ass was not high on my list of priorities," Kylian replied, his voice threaded with anger. "It was more important to figure out where the hell
we actually stood within the hierarchy. The answer was pretty much how the Alliance treated us: disposable, but useful from time to time anyway. So he'd send us out to investigate various sites around Outland, looking into magical caches and old ruins. We found a place that seemed steeped in arcane magic. We started calling it Netherstorm. We were, for lack of a better term, mining it for magical essence."

“Raw magical essence is dangerous,” Jaina objected. “And the refinement of such is considered to be reckless--”

“Yada yada the Kirin Tor expressly forbids, no one gives a crap,” Kylian cut in. Jaina's eyes blazed with anger.

“The Kirin Tor forbids things that get people killed,” she retorted. “And now that they're gone, someone needs to make sure we aren't overrun by idiot mages who think that they're good enough to break the rules that prevent reality from ripping open and sending a flood of demons after everyone!”

“Since I'm pretty sure Medivh didn't make you Guardian when he died, it's not your fucking business to police people about their magic usage, no matter how much you might want to,” Kylian snapped back. “We did what we needed to do, that's all you need to worry about.”

Jaina stood up, slamming her hands against the table, startling Gorgonna and causing Ariok to growl low in his throat. “Just because you half-ass your own duties to the point you can be shown up by an eleven year old doesn't mean that I do!”

“This has nothing to do with--”

“You know,” Commander Vines said, leaning over to Thrall, amusement warring with irritation. “I could have sworn they came into this room as friends.”

“I believed so,” Thrall murmured, his gaze on Jaina's face. Her eyes blazed with anger, as he had seen a handful of times before, and he had no doubt that if she had been an orc, the emotion would have been in her body scent, and would lie more heavily on her body language. This was not an anger meant to arouse. If anything, it would leave someone utterly cold. “I wonder what either of them mean.”

By now, the crux of the dispute had shifted to an incident that Thrall didn’t recall being told of, but it had something to do with chickens. He shook his head briefly.

“Don't know, but we're not going to get anywhere if they get into a fistfight over some magical philosophy or another,” Vines said. “I think I could take the elf, but I don't know about the lady.”

“I can handle Jaina,” Thrall replied. “On three?”

Vines nodded. “Aye. One, two...”

“Three.” Thrall stood, and crossed to Jaina's side, putting his hand over one of hers. Vines went to the other side of the table and grabbed Kylian's arms, jerking him back from the table. “I know that Magister Firesong is obnoxious, ignorant, and almost certainly deliberately antagonistic--”

“Wow, thanks for that,” Kylian muttered, and tugged ineffectually at Vines.
“--but we need to know what happened, so he should have the chance to speak before you turn him into an adorable rabbit.”

“She turns people into rabbits, and you're arguing with her?” Vines asked, incredulous.

“It was one time,” Jaina groused, and took a deep breath. “You're right, this can... keep.”

“Very good.” Thrall smiled at her, and Jaina's lips formed one of her own, blossoming slowly. Thrall nodded to her and sat back down, and she seated herself a moment after.

Vines released Kylian and returned to his own chair, leaving Kylian to stand, eyebrows raised as he glanced between them. Thrall frowned at him forbiddingly, and the look disappeared.

“Right, so, where was I?”

“Mining for magic, I believe,” Ariok said, and glanced over at Jaina. “Which we agree is a poor idea.”

“Yeah, yeah. We needed it, though,” Kylian muttered, though didn't elaborate further. “The important part is that while this was happening, Illidan was up to something. We knew that he had a deal going with Kil'jaeden, and when we failed at Icecrown, it was only a matter of time before he came to yell at Illidan again. So, we waited. While we were waiting, people started... disappearing. Changing.”

“Changing, how?” Jaina asked, frowning.

“Disappearing, from where?” Thrall asked, a moment after. Kylian glanced between them.

“You have to understand, we weren't in good shape when we were in Outland. Outland – or at least, the part we were in – wasn't really meant to be lived in. Not by people who didn't know the lay of the land really well. The land was sick and cracked and dying, and this wouldn't have been a problem if we had the magic and the anchors to landscape the area into something more comfortable, and we thought that was our goal, in Netherstorm, but the magic was too volatile for anything but short-term consumption... so we had to improvise. We suffered for it. At first, we thought people were disappearing because they went on a magic bender and burnt themselves out... and then we found out where they were going.”

“You're leading up to something,” Ariok noted, and Kylian gave him a dirty look.

“It's fucking hard to talk about, is the something,” Kylian snapped at him, and then took a breath. “They were going to Illidan. Like, behind Kael's back, to Illidan, and he was... changing them. The first project, the one that was only mostly a complete failure, at least made sense, but the second one...” Kylian shook his head. “He was turning them into demons.”

Silence descended on the group as the words sunk in. Thrall's first instinct was to disbelieve. Kylian was brash, rude, and dismissive... but the image of the twisted faces of the fel orcs he had fought filled his mind, and then that of the Warsong who had succumbed to Mannoroth's tainted blood once more. Looking at Jaina, he saw similar realization and horror steal over her expression.

“All demons of flesh were once of mortal races,” Garona said, breaking the silence. “The tainted Kaldorei became satyrs, orcs become fel orcs... they might have been given a name if there were enough of them. No one knows the Eredar as anything other than demonic, though they existed.”
“Yeah, that about covers it. There already weren't a lot of us, and when that got out – and I sure as fuck made sure people knew about it – we started fleeing from Illidan in droves, taking refuge where we could... but then we caught wind he was going to fully open up the Dark Portal again. While we were running off and hiding in the fucking woods, Illidan had made nice with the fel orcs. They still had leaders that were slightly less stupid than the rest of them --” Garona snorted, but didn't interrupt “-- and he made deals with them. The draenei, Akama's people, were completely caught out in the open, and he turned them into slaves. The naga... who even fucking knows about the naga, Vashj always had her own agenda. She took Leotheras and fucked off somewhere into the marsh.”

“Leotheras?” Jaina asked.

“Marsh?” Garona asked, at the same time. Kylian glanced at Garona first, avoiding Jaina's gaze entirely.

“Yeah, they called it the Zangarmarsh. Something something huge ass mushrooms something something endless cycle of water draining and returning. I don't get it, I assume it's esoteric floating in the Twisting Nether bullshit, but it maintains a level of humidity and dampness that can safely be considered 'fucking terrible'. ” Kylian shrugged. “Apparently the draenei love it. There were nicer places for us to live, and Illidan himself gave the Citadel back to the fel orcs and left them to oversee the Dark Portal while he moved to some temple.”

“The temple of Karabor?” Garona asked, and Thrall watched her dig her fingers into the edge of the table.

“Yeah, I guess. We always called it the Black Temple because it was a huge, ugly pile of fel-tainted iron and bad vibes. I'm not exactly superstitious, but most of us were pretty sure it was haunted, if by nothing else than the ghosts of bad taste.” Kylian paused, and when no one laughed, he continued. “It was pretty much the last straw. Illidan used us and then he was done with us. We threw our lives away for a fake saviour. So when the Dark Portal opened, and the demons were rushing through, we went through too. We can't go back to Quel'thalas, it's completely fucked. We can't stay in Outland, we'll wind up as demons or fodder and fuck that. The Alliance screwed us, Illidan screwed us, Dalaran screwed us. We're not sure what we can do, other than move forward.”

“Theramore,” Jaina said. “Well, Kalimdor, but we have strict treaties involving where we can and can't expand, so Theramore is a better bet. I have control over most of Dustswallow Marsh, and agreements with the rest of those who live there, but Theramore can handle more refugees. It's what I built it on, refugees, survivors, and dreamers.”

“Jaina, I...” Kylian licked his lips briefly, and nodded. “I don't lead these people. I'm not sticking around, especially now that I know what's waiting up north, but I'll tell them. They might go with you, or they might try to find their relatives here. We're... not a united people, not any more.”

“What about Kael?” Jaina insisted. “Why did he allow this, where is he now? Didn't he bring people through?”

“I don't know where Kael is, and fucked if I actually care.” Jaina blinked, and even Thrall had to stare at the way anger, pure anger, twisted the elf's features into something deeply ugly. “He fucked off to do his own thing, maybe screw another demon or three, but he sure as hell didn't clue us in to the bargain. We can't rely on him at all.”
“Then you should be leading, your people need direction--”

“And they'll find it from someone that isn't me,” Kylian cut in bluntly. “Firesongs don't lead, we follow. Talk to Ghlorie, or Voren, or even Rommath... not me. I've got shit to do.”

“She's not going to put up with your bullshit, you realize,” Jaina said. “She has a reputation.”

Kylian smiled weakly. “I'm counting on it.”

The meeting did not continue for long after that, with Kylianexcusing himself and Vines turning to Thrall and Jaina. “How long do you think this attack is likely to last?”

“It's hard to say,” Jaina said, her gaze following Kylian out before focusing on the human commander. “On the one hand, if Illidan really is seeking to invade Azeroth, it could take weeks or months to fully stave off the invasion. Fortunately, unlike the previous invasions, we're aware of it as it happened, and not weeks or months after the fact. They won't be able to establish a foothold on Azeroth.”

“A miscalculation on their part,” Ariok growled. “We are ready for them this time, and you humans aren't alone. We stand fast with you.”

“Indeed.” Jaina smiled at him and nodded briefly. “Though I can't help but wonder if it isn't a miscalculation at all.”

“How do you mean?” Vines asked. “You implied there was another possibility.”

“There is,” Jaina agreed. “On the other hand, the Burning Legion has a great many forces, slaves and demons. When they come, unless it's by accident or through carelessness, they come in force. They come with subtlety first, and then when they believe they can spring things on us, they apply extreme pressure. The Scourge were a direct assault, and we broke under that pressure.”

“There are no demons of the higher orders,” Garona observed. “It's all fodder, the fel-twisted, the common demons. Demons have hierarchies, and organized forces are led by powerful demons, who are in turn directed by even more powerful demons. None of those are present here.”

“Which could mean they're still coming,” Vines cautioned, weariness stealing over his face for a moment.

“Or they aren't coming at all,” Jaina pointed out. She stood, and with a gesture, summoned an illusion of Azeroth, spinning lazily. Thrall watched the image in appreciation, watching dark Lordaeron and bright Winterspring spin past, hot Tanaris and icy Northrend, the swirling, chaotic storm of the Maelstrom, and the great banks of fog and darkness blanketing the far ocean between the Eastern Kingdoms' eastern coast and Kalimdor's western one. “Every invasion the Burning Legion has made has had a purpose.”


“The first time, the Burning Legion wanted the Well of Eternity, and willing slaves,” Jaina agreed, and the globe flickered, showing a whole continent that fragmented, the pieces pushed out violently by a massive explosion that faded into the Maelstrom. “The writings of the Guardian, Aegwynn, seem to indicate Sargeras' attempts to return were... probing, but ultimately foiled by
“The task that Gul'dan was set to was to retrieve Sargeras' avatar body,” Garona noted. “Presumably so that he would not have to suffer a human's body, and once Medivh was dead, no one would be able to stop him.”

“He reckoned without the Kaldorei,” Gorgonna observed. “They fought back against him.”

“With help,” Jaina corrected her. “Our help. The Scourge built on the pieces of the orc invasion... Ner'zhul's failure, the weakened state of the primary Alliance members, and their pawns, put carefully into place. They couldn't have known, or anticipated, Medivh's return, or the return of shamanism to the orcish people.”

“Or the cooperation of one of the most powerful mages in Azeroth,” Thrall added, his voice warm. Jaina smiled at him, matching his warmth with her own. “I was his third choice, but I maintain the best. The question remains, though, what is motivating this invasion?”

“Revenge?” Ariok guessed. “He failed to stop the Lich King once, he isn't well-regarded by his peers. He could be lashing out.”

“Illidan isn't beyond acting out of revenge, but this seems to be too far-reaching... if he can teleport anywhere, why not return to Icecrown, or to Kalimdor? He's never met humans, or not for any significant length of time, and if he was doing it for his allies... well, Kylian is a lot of things, but I don't think he's exaggerating about his people being used.”

“He could be a pawn for the Burning Legion, but acting in the least useful way possible,” Thrall offered. “The way one might if they were sent out to fight an enemy they didn't want to fight. Delay tactics, slow movement, looking just busy enough.”

“So you're proposing that Illidan's not even trying, brilliant,” Vines grumbled. "I'd hate to see what he'd be like if he were trying." "What would his motivation be?" Gorgonna wondered. "He's abandoned his old allies and thrown in with the new. If this were a ruse, surely Kael'thas or Kylian would know of it."

"Unless that's why Kael'thas disappeared, and Kylian wasn't important enough to know," Ariok countered. "He doesn't seem like someone good at keeping secrets."

"Kylan'thas Firesong is not bragging when he speaks of his family being the second family of Quel'thalas," Garona reminded them. "His father served Kael'thas' father, Kylian would have been groomed for the same task. If Illidan did intend on creating a deception, it's dangerous not to at least make certain that your troops won't abandon you. That kind of trust, once broken, is hard to mend even with the best intentions."

"Let's not forget what Illidan was supposedly doing to the elves," Jaina murmured. "There's no excuse for that, no forgiveness. I don't understand this plan."

"A distraction for another strike?" Thrall suggested. "One closer to Ashenvale?"

"It would take much effort, would it not?" Gorgonna asked. Frowning, she leaned in and looked at the map. "And he's using up all his fodder here. Surely he would have to know that people would
answer him. If he didn't want to catch our attention, he should have been more careful."

"Unless..." Jaina stared at her summoned globe. "Unless he wanted to be noticed."

"That brings us back to the question of why," Thrall growled softly. "Why throw lives away, why attack Nethergarde? Why open the Portal at all?"

"To provoke action from us?" Ariok guessed. "We couldn't leave such a challenge unanswered. No warrior could."

"Humans don't always act as orcs do," Gorgonna reminded him. "He couldn't have known exactly how the humans would react, or that we would join them. Humans and orcs have not been allies long."

"About four years," Jaina murmured. "But if he's not attacking..."

"He wants us to go through the Portal," Garona finished grimly. "Which we are perfectly willing to do, because we have people we want to find."

"I don't like dancing to this demon's tune," Ariok growled. "What game is he playing?"

"That's my decision to make," Thrall said. "We can't get through the Portal until the way is cleared regardless. We'll make the decision to proceed once we reach that point and not before. A demon lord could come through that Portal next and completely change our perception of the situation. The two of you should go north when you can, and..." He looked briefly at Jaina, before clearing his throat. "Watch Kylian. It's still possible that there are things he hasn't told us, and I won't have a rogue agent threatening the mission of the Argent Dawn, no matter what he claims."

Jaina's face creased with unhappiness, but she nodded once. "I don't believe Kylian would be working for Illidan, but I don't like how vague he was about Kael, or what the Blood Elves were doing. He's hiding something for certain."

"We'll keep an eye on him, Warchief. Lady Proudmoore." Gorgonna saluted, and Ariok did so a moment after. Thrall nodded to both of them.

"Meanwhile, we still have demons to fight," Commander Vines said, pushing himself to a standing position. "Ladies, gentlemen. We fight."

"We fight," Thrall agreed. "If you'll excuse me, I have matters of great importance I need to attend to." Thrall rose, and nodded slightly to Garona, who nodded back.

"As do I," Jaina said, and the globe vanished into nothingness. "And there's much to consider."

Thrall allowed Jaina to depart first, and as he turned to go, he noticed Ariok and Gorgonna exchanging looks. *You've only known each other for mere weeks, Thrall thought sourly. You can't possibly be speculating as to our relationship already.*

Garona caught his look, and raised an eyebrow. He growled.
Chapter 22: Early Winter, Year 28

It was late evening by the time the attacks abated long enough for him to withdraw and rest. Sunset, raw and bleeding on the horizon, had brought another swarm of warriors, crazed and relentless. Kylian and Jaina, along with a handful of other mages, had battered the demons back with fire and ice, causing explosions clear across the Blasted Lands. When the battle had ended, the cracked and dusty soil had been carpeted with bodies.

Even now, Thrall knew, Garona was moving over the battlefield like a crow in her assassin's black, still searching for one familiar face. She doesn't even wholly know what the boy will look like, only what he might look like. The thought made Thrall pause at the entrance of Jaina's tent.

“Come in,” Jaina called softly, breaking him from his reverie. “I was just getting ready for bed.”

“Good, you need to sleep,” Thrall said as he crouched down, making his way inside. “You did hard work today.”

“Not as hard as Hyjal, I promise,” Jaina replied, and smiled at him. “It felt good to work with other mages, though.”

“Yes, you work well with Kylian.” Thrall gestured Jaina over, and she moved into his lap. He wrapped one arm around her waist, and kissed her neck softly. “Let me rub your back.”

“I'd be happy to submit to such,” Jaina murmured. “And yes, Kylian and I have worked together before.”

“Were you involved with him, in Dalaran?” he asked, and brought his hands up to rub at her shoulders, massaging lightly. “They way you argued with him... you must have been close.”

“We were good friends, I met him at the same time that I met Kael.” Jaina relaxed under his touch, shifting her position so he could work his hands over her. “But never romantically or sexually. Kylian used to joke that I was twelve, mostly to annoy Kael, I think.”

“I can see why that would be annoying,” Thrall said with a frown. “Were he and Kael...?”

“On and off, mostly to distract each other, I think,” Jaina replied. “Before they left Quel'thalas for Dalaran, Kylian was very briefly involved with a girl he'd been friends with for some time. He said something very stupid and broke her heart. He spent years regretting it, and trying to drown his sorrows in steaks and men. Mostly human men, paladins when he could find them.”

“That's... very unfortunate,” Thrall noted, though he felt a shiver of relief. “So... wait, is the person he's looking for...?”

“The girl he screwed things up with completely? Yes, as far as I know.” Jaina made a soft noise as he dug his thumbs in. “I hope he intends to make things up with her. The resolution will do them both good, even at a time like this.”

“I hope so... does he love her? After hurting her so?”

“I believe he does. We all say stupid things we don't mean, Thrall.” Jaina touched his knee lightly,
then braced against it as his touch became firmer. “She isn't obligated to forgive him for his stupidity, but it might help.”

“I see,” Thrall mused. “What do you think the elves will do now?”

“I'm offering them a home in Theramore,” Jaina said, and made an annoyed sound when he paused. He chuckled and continued. “If Kylian won't lead them, and Kael is missing... well, someone needs to help them. If I'd known before, I would have helped before. As it stands, I'll help them now. It won't be Quel'thalas, but it will be enough.”

“It will have to be.” Thrall worked his thumbs down, and felt himself stir at her moan. “I wanted to ask what your intentions are, once the attacks slow enough to make a push for the Dark Portal.”

“I intend to stay on Azeroth,” Jaina said, digging her fingers into his knee. “I would very much like to see Outland, or look for Kael, but I'm needed in Theramore. Aside from taking in the elves, I managed to extract a promise from Varian during the Autumn that he would come to visit Theramore. Since he insists upon sailing, it might take a full season to get to Kalimdor and it would be quite rude to miss him. You're still planning on going, aren't you?”

“I am,” Thrall said. “Even if this is a trap, even if we are being provoked, it doesn't change the fact that there are orcs on the other side, not to mention the Alliance expedition. If there's any sign of them, I'll send back word, and... I want to go. I want to see Draenor for myself, or whatever's left of it.”

“Then you should go,” Jaina said, and leaned back, looking up at him. “I'll miss you, but I won't stop you.”

“Then I want to spend the time with you that I can,” Thrall murmured, the words slipping out easily. “Because I'll miss you very much when we're on different worlds.”

“Come to bed with me, then,” Jaina said, reaching up to embrace him. Thrall bent down to kiss her, and slowly their positions changed, with Thrall kneeling over her, and Jaina reaching up, tugging at his tunic. He was acutely aware that his scent was strong from sweat and effort, that Jaina had dark smudges under her eyes.

"Have you not been sleeping well?” Thrall asked as Jaina scooted back towards her bedroll, his voice pitched with concern. "Is it magical strain?"

"I'm fine, just some uneasiness in the mornings. It might well be my proximity to the Portal.” Jaina smiled at him, and he bent to kiss her, softly at first and mindful of his tusks. Jaina's hands ran along his arms and then to tug at his tunic, more insistent than before.

Thrall broke the kiss only to pull his tunic off and discard it, then kissed her again. Her mouth was eager and warm, and he felt another shiver of desire move through him. Whether we see each other one day out of a season or a dozen, I always want her more. I need Jaina in my life.

Jaina moaned softly into his mouth, and smiled against her lips. Carefully, he opened her robes, running his hands along her stomach and down to her underclothes. He slipped a finger under the waistband and tugged it down her long legs, admiring the length of them, their strength and their weakness. Once discarded, he ran his hands up between her legs again. Her hips bucked up, eager for his touch. With some haste, he fumbled one-handed at the fastenings of his trousers, growling softly as he finally managed to tug them open.
"I'm not in a complete hurry," Jaina murmured. "Take them off, I want to see all of you."

"You may not be, but I might," Thrall teased, a little breathless. "Very well." With some care, he shifted until he could take his trousers off and push them aside. Already he was hard, made more eager by every scent that wafted his way. He knelt down, resting on his heels, and made a slight noise. She nodded to him and he moved in, lifting her hips up and cupping the smooth, rounded curves of her behind.

Jaina propped herself up on one elbow, admiration shining in her eyes as she looked him over, and reached out to grasp him, stroking him slowly, her hand slick with lubrication. He groaned and thrust against her hand. "Did I ever tell you, Kylian's ancestor invented this spell, or so the Firesongs always claimed."

"Really," Thrall managed between thrusts. "I'll have to thank him. It's very helpful."

"Along with the vibrating wand, and half the spells banned for enabling criminal activity," Jaina said, thumbing along the slit of his cock. Thrall groaned again. "Adaraxiel was by all reports an incredibly colourful character."

"So it-- oh!" Thrall's hips bucked. "Jaina..."

"Let me activate..." Jaina murmured under her breath, and with a squeeze that caused his vision to briefly go white from pleasure, Thrall felt magic tingle along his arms and sparkle along the edges of the tent. "It will dampen sound and scent."

"Scent too, clever," Thrall managed. "Are you..?"

"I'm ready." Jaina's hand withdrew, and she laughed at the soft whine that escaped his lips unbidden. Thrall lifted her hips a little more, and lined himself up, nudging at her entrance. "Please."

"I should tease you too, but I couldn't last," Thrall grumbled, though without rancour. He pushed into her slowly, and was pleased by her soft groan. She lowered herself back down to her bedroll, and once in place, he began to thrust, smooth and easy, though as promised there was little that would allow him to be slow, only as gentle as possible.

At first, all he could do was move, and respond to the soft noises she made. When he could open his eyes again, he admired the way her golden hair fell against the grey-green material of her bedroll, and the way her cheeks were flushed pink. He admired the way her thighs squeezed his hips each time he plunged deeply into her, the way her hands grasped his wrists and held on tight. His eyes drifted closed again, and he lost himself in the rising haze of pleasure. You are perfect and I love you, Jaina Proudmoore. There is no one I'd rather be with. If only we could...

Jaina's soft cry scattered his thoughts to the wind, and he let her guide him, thrusting deeply. Pleasure built up, rising like a wave that washed over him as he released, his hips pumping as they moved together. Thrall heard his name on Jaina's lips, and he smiled. When they were both sated, Thrall eased her down, stroking along her legs and thighs, and then bending over her to kiss her, and laughter bubbled on his lips at her fierce reply, and the way her hands tugged him down, though he balanced much of his weight on one arm, and not on her.
When Jaina broke the kiss, her eyes were sparkling. "Thrall, I..."

"Yes, Jaina?" he asked, smiling broadly. Jaina brought up a hand, her fingers trembling to trace over his lips. He kissed her fingers fondly.

"Stay with me," Jaina insisted. "Keep me warm tonight."

"Of course," Thrall replied, and moved to lay at her side. "Though we're going to be a bit cold if we just sleep on top of everything."

"Well, you will be," Jaina said, and with regret, indicated for him to move. "I will be quite toasty." Thrall did so, and the next few moments were devoted to rearranging the blankets and the bedroll. Thrall slipped into bed and held his arm out. Jaina crawled into the bedroll and curled up against his chest, and he wrapped his arm around her, holding her close.

“Sleep well, Jaina,” Thrall murmured. My beloved.

“Thank you, sleep well.” Jaina’s eyes drifted closed. Thrall kissed her temple, and watched her features relax as slumber took her.

I should tell her, we should talk again about our relationship... I love her. Not at the height of passion, but at quiet times like this... I need her. I just don’t know what our future would hold, how many would accept a Warchief with a human mate. This is the wrong time to decide, if I’m going to Draenor and may not be back for weeks or months... Thrall sighed softly. I’ll tell her when I get back. That should be enough time to decide.

~ * ~

Three weeks after the Dark Portal exploded to life, the demonic attacks ceased, with only a handful of flying demons flapping lazily around the shimmering green expanse that floated above the crater.

Work had been done, in haste, to build a platform that would allow the Second Draenor Expeditionary Force, as they had decided to call themselves, to pass through the event horizon of the Portal.

Much of the Expedition consisted of orcs. Varok Saurfang and Garona Halforcen flanked Thrall, each in their finest armour, though the latter remained concealed behind the armour of the Kor’Kron elite. A dozen more Kor’kron accompanied Thrall, their worgs growling softly at the sight of the great Portal.

Jaina had been busy while the platform had been constructed, ferrying officers from Orgrimmar to Nethergarde Keep, and the elves who had chosen to swear loyalty to Theramore. A handful of officers from Nethergarde had chosen to accompany them, including Enohar Thunderbrew and Mahar Ba, though Vines, with great regret, did not join them, citing a need to keep the command structure roughly in place.

Cairne, Shandel'zare, and Vol'jin had come to see Thrall off, and Ak'Zeloth was anxiously passing on messages to Shandel'zare to explain to Sergra that he would be gone for some time. Gorgonna and Ariok were standing at attention, waiting until the Expedition had departed before making their way north. Kylian stood slightly apart from them, arms crossed over his chest, the slight smirk on his face not quite reaching his eyes as he watched the procession.
Jaina stood at the foot of the ramp leading up to the platform, her hands folded, her eyes bright as she watched him. The wind had picked up, tugging at Jaina's robes and the braids of Thrall's hair. Thrall found himself coated in a thin layer of red dust, while Jaina remained clean, the tainted cloud hovering around her, as though trying to determine how to strike.

Thrall approached her, offering his hand to her. Jaina smiled at him, and took it. Thrall went up the ramp and turned, looking over the assembled forces.

"People of the Expedition," Thrall began, his voice carrying on the wind. "We are venturing off to what remains of the world the orcs once came from. It is a world we believed destroyed, but thanks to chance and the will of the spirits, enough of it has survived that we might explore it."

"There are survivors. Orcs. Humans. Elves. Ogres. Our goal is to find those survivors. We go there with hopeful hearts and steady hands. There will be demons. We have seen but a sample of them over these past few weeks, but I make you, all of you, this promise." Thrall let his gaze move over the assembled warriors, but his eyes lingered on the human woman next to him, his next words as soft as they could be while still reaching all listeners. "We will return. We will find what we are looking for and return to Azeroth."

"I know that you will," Jaina murmured to him, and squeezed his hand. "I have no fear of that, though I--"

"Wait! Wait!"

Thrall and Jaina both turned, surprised and confused. A rumble came from the warriors as they shifted and moved as though a pebble had been thrown into a pond, creating ripples of movement. After a few moments, they saw a figure push its way out of the crowd. Thrall focused, and at first believed it was simply another elf, clad in a black, red, white, and gold breastplate and matching plated kilt. The elf tilted his face up towards them, and Jaina gasped softly.

"What is it?" Thrall murmured. "Someone else that you know?"

"Shano’dorei," was Jaina’s sole reply.

"Warchief… Thrall, is it?" the elf said, his voice youthful but powerful, reaching them easily, his long gold hair fluttering in the wind as it escaped its tail, the wisps creating a halo around his head. "I’m sorry I’m late, my uncle got me here as soon as he could. My name is Arator. Arator Windrunner, and I’d like to go with your Expedition to Draenor."

"That name sounds familiar," Thrall said quietly, and then addressed the elf directly. "You are welcome, of course. Why are you so interested in going?"

"My parents were with the last Expedition," Arator explains. "If they live… I want to find them."

"Then you are most welcome," Thrall said, and then realization hit him. Windrunner. He’s related to Sylvanas then, her… nephew? But, in that case, his parents are-- Thrall’s eyes widened, and he watched Arator step back into the crowd to be supplied with one of the spare mounts.

“Do you think he knows about his aunt?” Thrall asked, equally quiet. Jaina shook her head, uncertain, and her expression was pained. “I’ve completely forgotten what I was saying.”

“You told me that you’d come back, and I believe you,” Jaina replied. “I won’t say goodbye. I’ll say that I’ll see you again. You have the rune?”

“I do.” Thrall used his free hand to touch over it. “I’ll see you again, Jaina.” He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it, as he’d read about courtly folk doing in his books, before releasing her. She descended the ramp, and stood aside as Snowsong hurried up to join him.

_We’re going on a great adventure_, he thought as he stroked his frost wolf’s neck. _So I can return to my love_. Snowsong made a sharp noise and licked him. He wrinkled his nose. _My second love, because my first is obviously you_, he amended, and then straightened. “Kor’kron! We march!”

His warriors raised their weapons and roared their approval, and Thrall looked them over. None were afraid or angry, all were eager and bright. He gave Jaina one final nod before turning towards the Portal, though his gaze caught on Garona. She nodded to him once, and led her mount through the Dark Portal.

Her form, mount and all, was swallowed by it as though she had immersed herself in water, and there was no sound, no cry from the spirits, and Thrall felt himself relax. _Anti-climatic_, Thrall thought. _It’s just like being teleported by Jaina, but much bigger._

“Warchief,” Varok said, his voice quiet. “Do you want me to go next?”

“No, no,” Thrall replied. “Besides, if I take too long she’ll start to worry.”

“We can’t have that,” Varok agreed. “Go ahead.”

Thrall nodded and mounted up. Snowsong whined softly, but trotted towards the Portal. Thrall resisted the urge to touch its surface to test it. “Snowsong, go.”

Snowsong whined again, but walked into the Portal, and in twos and threes, the Second Expeditionary Force stepped across the Twisting Nether to Draenor.
“You’re certain?” Jaina asked for the third time in as many minutes. She sat on an examination table in Doctor Van Howzen’s clinic, hands folded over the thin cloth apron that covered her nude form.

Since the incident that had resulted in the doctor being assaulted and his office destroyed, Jaina had encouraged him to rebuild, bigger and better than what had been hastily thrown together in the earliest years after Hyjal, when it had been more important to have something than to have something grand. He had heeded her suggestion, and the clinic was as fine as anything one would find in one of the Silver Hand’s hospital suites, or Dalaran’s laboratories. Jaina had visited the clinic before, but never had it made her feel quite so uneasy.

Van Howzen gave her an affectionate, exasperated look and drew up a chair so that he might sit, and she could look down on him. It was a tactic he had taken many times before in her youth, and it inevitably meant bad news. A shiver prickled down Jaina’s spine, causing the mermaid tattoo on her back to seek shelter in the ink and flesh water where it resided.

“Considering what happened last time, I have checked the results over and over again,” the doctor said. “It’s consistent with your symptoms. Lady Proudmoore -- Jaina. You’re pregnant.”

“This shouldn’t be possible,” Jaina whispered, and her hands drifted to her stomach, resting there. “The mage fever… and the charm. If one wasn’t working, surely the other…”

“Without more invasive procedures, I couldn’t speculate as to the state of your internal organs,” Van Howzen replied, “but the charm should be working unless it was magically disjunctioned somehow.”

“No, I’m quite careful with it.” Jaina held out her left arm, showing off the long string of runed beads. Most were similar, but there were a handful of different ones. Jaina picked at a grey bead forlornly, and it sparked to life. She winced. “I’ll disable it. No point in it potentially interfering with anything.” She tapped it again, and it grew dull and dark. “I don’t understand…”

“No, I don’t like it, not one bit,” Van Howzen said. “I would want to apply your miraculous regeneration to others if I could, for any purpose. I… assume we both know who the father is.”

“Of course,” Jaina replied, her voice sharp. “There hasn’t been anyone else, not this time.”

“Then I must ask… what do you plan to do next?”

Jaina was silent for a long time, toying with the beads, tapping some of them, clicking others together. Van Howzen watched her expression, the way emotion flickered across it and her forehead furrowed with thought. He did not hurry her, and let the words come as they would.

“I’ve always wanted children. Not right away, not when I was still in school, or travelling, but when I had a home for them to live in, food for them, a place for them to learn and grow... and I
have that now, don’t I?” Jaina tapped the beads in turn, and each lit up, indicating the defenses were working perfectly. “I’ve said it to others, Theramore is a perfect place for children to learn and grow.”

“Ariana and Logrosh certainly believe it,” Van Howzen said, frowning at the beads. “Garrak is growing nicely, and the new baby is very likely to be the same. There’s no… weakness or illness inherent in halforcen.”

Jaina glanced at him sharply, and then sucked in a breath. “Halforcen, of course. That only makes sense. For some reason, I still had the idea of little blond babies in my head.”

“It was what you expected for many years, one way or the other,” Van Howzen said, keeping his voice as gentle as possible. “If you are intent on keeping the child—”

“I am,” Jaina said, her voice firmer and more sure. The doctor couldn’t help but smile at that, the determination in her tone more familiar than hesitation.

“When do you intend to tell Thrall?”

Jaina’s fingers moved from the beads around her wrist to the runestone hanging from the cord around her neck. It brightened briefly at her touch and then dulled as she resisted activating it. “Not right away. He’s only just gone to Draenor, and the first stages of the expedition are likely to be quite difficult. I don’t want to distract him.”

“Jaina…”

“I love him,” Jaina said, and the words came in a rush. “I love him and I need him in my life. This is a mess, a diplomatic crisis in the making. The confirmation of every rumour’s truth, throwing all the work we’ve ever done into question, and I can’t—”

“Lady Proudmoore.” The use of her title stopped her cold, and with familiarity born from the relationship between doctor and patient, Van Howzen put his hand over one of hers. “He loves you too. Everyone can see it. It’s in his eyes when he looks at you and his voice when he says your name. It’s in the smile he has whenever he sees you. I’m sure, if I were an orc, he’d probably smell like he loves you too. He will want to know. This won’t be a crisis to him.”

“I’m afraid,” Jaina admitted softly. “Kael loved me too, and Arthas… and Jonathan claimed it too.”

Van Howzen scowled. “He isn’t like any of them.”

“Kael adored me,” Jaina pushed on, relentless. “We were a wonderful team, perfect together in every way. Our teachers believed we would go far together. Uther believed that Arthas and I would compliment each other perfectly, bared sword and velvet-gloved fist. Jonathan… made me believe there was a way to convince my father’s men that we could mend what was broken.”

“He isn’t any of them,” Van Howzen insisted. “You trust him, don’t you?”

“With my life,” Jaina whispered. “I don’t trust myself, Gustav. After so many poor decisions, how can I know that I made the right one, finally? And it’s not just me, not just this child… it’s for Theramore too, and Durotar. For my friends and allies.”
“You always carry too much on your shoulders,” Van Howzen said, shaking his head. “Take the
time you need, but he will need to know, unless you plan to never see him again.”

“No, never that, I just… need time,” Jaina said. “When Varian arrives, if I can smooth things over,
his may accept the idea, in time. The first step is convincing him that the Hyjal Treaty is not simply
a thing of desperation, but a true and lasting peace. It’s been an awful four years at times, but
they’ve also been wonderful ones.”

“Alright then,” the doctor said, and rose. “I expect you to visit regularly, and we’ll discuss the
changes necessary for your diet. You’ll have to eat very regularly, no skipping meals.”

“I don’t skip meals,” Jaina protested, rising from the examination bed. “I just get distracted and--”

“No arguments!” he declared, and his gaze softened as he looked her over. “You’ve grown so
much since the first time I met you.”

“I was seven then, I certainly hope so,” Jaina said, and smiled back. “Thank you, Doctor.”

“You’re welcome, Lady Proudmoore.” Van Howzen retreated to his office, beginning the task of
writing down the details of this latest addition to Jaina’s medical file, and she slipped the apron off
and retrieved her robes, dressing with care.

I hope that time will bring a solution to all of the questions I have… how will we live? I can’t give
up living in Theramore, the whole city depends on me to keep them safe… but the Horde depends
on Thrall. Will constantly moving about be worthwhile? If I teleport from one place to the other, it
still means that I have custody, and it’s on my sufferance that Thrall might see his child… and do I
have the right to do that? Could I leave this baby with Thrall and--

The soft sound of fabric tearing broke Jaina from her thoughts, and she looked down at her robes.
Frowning, she tapped the rent and it repaired itself perfectly. Obviously not, so what can we do?
Whose traditions do we raise the child with? Both? Neither? I’m a Proudmoore, damnit, and we go
to Kezan. Will they recognize my child as being a heir to our traditions? Will they be able to follow
them?

Once dressed, Jaina made her way from the clinic on foot. Overhead, the grim clouds that had been
building up released their burden as soft rain fell. Jaina waved absently, and the water ran in
rivulets from her shield as she walked to her tower.

What about magic? I’m a mage, Thrall’s a shaman. Will our child follow one of our paths? Which
one? Is there any way to tell? What if it’s neither? What do either of us really know about, oh, the
priesthood or the druidic paths? Well, aside from all of my sources of study, of course, though I
have teachers that might be able to help. They might have no magic at all, and want to be a scout, a
farmer, a librarian. Jaina swallowed back a hysterical giggle. What if they want to be a pirate?

As Jaina ascended the staircase, each footfall feeling heavier than the last, her thoughts chased
each other around like unruly frost wolves -- will Drek’thar and the other Frostwolves accept our
child into the clan? Will they be chosen to have a spirit companion or will they shun a half-human
no matter their line? -- until she found herself quite naturally in her office. She let the door click
shut.

Do halfforcen children have specific dietary needs? Health risks? I can ask Ariana, surely she’ll
know. Gustav said there were no inherent issues, but it might be better to ask someone with
practical experience--

“Jaina.”

The voice was familiar, though hoarse and weary. It was laced with desperation and sadness, and the sound of it cut straight through her heart, and deep into her past. The thoughts ceased, and a single, new notion crystallized in her mind. She whirled towards the sound, raising her arms and bringing them down. A dozen icicles, the length of her forearm and far sharper formed around her and flew towards the source. There was a grunt of surprise as eleven of them pinned the figure to the wall where they’d been lurking, and the twelfth hovered at her shoulder.

With her other hand, she conjured light, bringing the figure into harsh relief. She remembered these robes, though they had seen better days, not so much dusty as worn, the gold, embroidered birds duller than the last time she’d seen them. The wide sleeves, once so perfect at hiding a notebook, were torn by Jaina’s icicles. Even the mantle they’d joked made him look like an extra half of an elf, were knocked askew and damaged instead of imposing.

In the light, a pair of tired green eyes glittered behind half-closed eyelids as one hand moved ineffectually to shield its owner’s face from the brightness that brought the smudges under his eyes into sharp relief. Jaina knew that face, despite the worn lines that pulled lips that had once smiled easily into a frown, just as she knew that hair, having run her fingers through it often enough, though rarely had it ever been just on this side of greasy. All and all, it was a sight that Jaina knew well, a sight that had been intimate and interconnected with hers for a very long time.

From the wall burst in a great, flaming bird, flapping its wings and crying out in alarm at the sight. “Ah! You must let my familiar go at once!” it cried. “How else will he feed me?”

“Al’ar…”

“How did you get in here?” Jaina demanded. “What are you doing here? What have you done?!”

“I followed you around, actually, and slipped past you when you opened the door.” The figure sighed as the bird, Al’ar, nudged at him. “You’d think you’d help me or something, you ridiculous obese bonfire.”

“I am not fat,” Al’ar insisted. “You’re starving me.”

“You are physically incapable of--”

“There were two more questions!” Jaina cried, her fingers tightening into fists, even as the realization struck her. “Answer them.”

Sighing, he closed his eyes briefly. “They’re tied together. I have completely screwed up in every way there is possible to screw up. I have been abandoned by every friend, every ally I have. I came to you because I don’t have anywhere else to go.” His eyes opened and fixed on her. “Jaina, I need your help.”

“Well,” Jaina began, and made a gesture in the air. The icicles melted one by one, and he sighed in relief as he stood on his own two feet. “You’re certainly right about that, Kael.”

Kael’thas Sunstrider, Crown Prince of the fallen kingdom of Quel’thalas, smiled thinly. Jaina let
the light dim as he approached her, though careful not to be closer than an arm’s length.
“Congratulations, by the way.”

Jaina gave him a hard look. “Tell me what you did, from the beginning.”

Kael inhaled sharply, nodded once, and began.

Chapter End Notes

Here it is, the absolutely last chapter of Unity. Wow, guys, it's been a journey. Thank you all so much for continuing to show so much enthusiasm for this fic. Your words have always been incredibly encouraging. Thrall and Jaina’s story isn't over yet, though, there's still a lot more story to tell, and that will continue in Legacy, coming At Some Point[tm].

Special mention goes to my beta reader, sodzilla for all of her hard work over the years. She has listened to me whine and worry endlessly, edited my work with skill and dedication, making sure that they are my words and not hers, but clear so that you can all get what I mean, and generally been my absolute number one fan. Through her, my work has been refined and improved, and I couldn't do this without her. Thank you, sweetie, you're the best.

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