Lion's Triumph
by wolfandwild

Summary

Bent but not broken by her torture in Blackrock Foundry, Auriana Fenwild returns to the front with new determination, new allies, and the unflinching support of High King Varian Wrynn. But the Iron Horde are not easily beaten, and more than just orcs await the heroes of the Alliance and the Horde in the untamed wilds of Tanaan Jungle…

Notes

This work has previously been published on Fanfiction.net, though I'm currently in the process of cross-posting the entire series to AO3.

I intend to do some fairly major revisions and expansions to the series in future (particularly to the first two/three volumes), but for now this will have to do!
Auriana

The bright golden light of dawn illuminated the familiar buildings of Lunarfall Garrison as Command Auriana Fenwild prepared to teleport to northern Gorgrond. It had been six long weeks since she had escaped the forbidding Blackrock Foundry, and she had decidedly mixed feelings about returning. On one hand, she never wanted to step foot in the Foundry again, while on the other she wanted nothing more than to remove Blackhand's head from his shoulders.

Ever since her return to Lunarfall a few short weeks ago, Auriana had pursued the orc warlord with a determination bordering on obsession. She had meticulously planned her assault, even going so far as to enlist the help of Azeroth's Horde to take the Foundry down. She had not had direct contact with the Horde, of course, but had instead used the Archmage Khadgar as an intermediary to slowly build an alliance. It had been slow going, given the years of suspicion and bloodshed between the Alliance and the Horde, but Auriana had finally been able to convince the Horde Commander to participate in a joint assault on Blackhand's fortress.

The attack had been scheduled for this morning, and Auriana was the last of the Alliance soldiers to depart Lunarfall for Gorgrond. Several of her troops, including Lieutenant Thorn, had tried to convince her to stay away from the fighting, but Auriana refused to listen. Admittedly, they were right to be concerned for her safety, given the physical and psychological trauma she had suffered. Auriana had been pushing herself hard, and strictly speaking, she probably wasn't fit enough to be leading the assault on the Foundry. She was still undergoing daily healing, and was somewhat sleep-deprived, having been tormented by horrific nightmares every evening. Her healers had repeatedly encouraged her to slow down, but Auriana refused to rest until Blackhand was dead. She had been working so hard since her return to Lunarfall that she hadn't even returned to Stormwind to visit Varian Wrynn, and she missed her kingly lover fiercely.

Just one more day, she told herself as she opened a portal to Gorgrond. I'll have Blackhand's head by sunset, and then I can go home to Varian... and maybe the dreams will stop...

Her magic split a bright hole in the air, and through it she could see the distinct red rock and luscious green jungle of Gorgrond. For a second, however, Auriana froze, quite literally unable to move her feet as she was gripped by sudden fear. Furious at herself for her weakness, she bit her lip hard and drew blood, before forcing herself to focus and take a shaky step forwards.

Her bodyguard Delvar Ironfist approached her almost as soon as she rematerialised, accompanied by a graceful draenei paladin. After Lieutenant Gale's unfortunate demise at the hands of the Blackrock orcs, Auriana had needed to find someone else to oversee operations in Gorgrond. Ever conscious of the fact that there was still a traitor at large in Lunarfall, she had finally decided on Lieutenant Hafela. The draenei woman was a strictly by the book soldier, in stark contrast to her predecessor, but she had an excellent service record, and more importantly, she had not been part of any of the missions that had been betrayed from within. Although Auriana knew this didn't rule her out as the traitor, it made it significantly less likely that she was involved, and therefore she considered the draenei paladin an acceptable risk.

"Ma'am," Hafela said warmly, offering Auriana a crisp salute. "Our troops are marshalling for the assault, as ordered, and it appears that the Horde have taken to the field about two miles to the north."

"Good," said Auriana, relieved that the Horde had actually appeared as planned. "How many have they bought?"
“I would estimate around two and a half thousand,” Hafela answered crisply.

“Very good,” Auriana mused. “Combined with our forces, that should be more than enough to take the Foundry.”

She looked out proudly over her troops, her courage strengthened by the magnificent might of the Alliance. Their armour gleamed in the early morning sun, and Auriana silently promised herself that the Foundry would fall.

"Keep our troops back here, out of the range of those siege engines, but have them ready to move out on my command," Auriana ordered, turning her face towards the north. "In the meantime, I'm going to head over to the Horde encampment to coordinate our joint assault."

Ironfist and Hafela both frowned in perfect unison, clearly unimpressed by her plan.

"Ma'am, you can't," Hafela protested. "I know we've arranged a truce for this assault, but... they're the Horde..."

"If we want trust, we must show trust," Auriana said firmly. "I'm going."

"Not alone," Ironfist growled, unhooking his axe from his belt.

"Delvar, I'll be fine," she assured him, with more confidence than she actually felt. "The Horde aren't going to kill an Alliance commander out of hand when we're supposed to be in alliance."

"Commander, with respect, last time I let ye out o' my sight, ye ended up Blackhand's prisoner," Ironfist said firmly. "I know I can't stop ye, but I will not let ye go alone."

Ironfist's undead eyes glittered with resolve, and something else that Auriana realised was shame. The dwarf death knight took his duty very seriously, and she only just realised that he considered her kidnapping his personal failure.

"Very well," she conceded, more to spare his feelings than anything else, "But let me do the talking. This alliance is tenuous as it is, and I'll not have it threatened by a belligerent dwarf."

Ironfist growled at her phrasing but didn't argue, coming to stand at her right hand side. Auriana gathered her power, her arms flaring with their now familiar white glow, and teleported herself and Ironfist to the outskirts of the Horde camp. The two orc bruisers guarding the southern end of the camp instantly drew arms, watching her with great concern as she slowly approached. Auriana didn't flinch, but she couldn't ignore the way her heart suddenly fluttered in her chest.

"I'm here to see your Commander," she called loudly; in clear, if accented, orcish.

Auriana wasn't an expert in the guttural language by any means, but over the years she had learned to make herself understood, and she hoped that her use of orcish would demonstrate her willingness to work with the Horde. The two orc guards exchanged a look as she spoke, evidently surprised to be addressed in their native tongue.

"You've got no business here, human," the taller of the two orcs said ominously, switching the conversation back to Common. "Leave quietly, and we'll do you no harm."

"I'm not leaving until I've spoken to the Commander of Frostwall," Auriana said, her voice calm but firm. "I'm here as an ally of the Horde. I mean you no harm"

Despite her assurances, both orcs stepped forwards with weapons raised, and Ironfist growled
angrily at her side. Auriana shook her head warningly, though she refused to yield ground to the much larger orcs. If this combined assault was to work, she could not afford to anger the Horde, but nor could she cower before them. That was easier said than done, however, Auriana suddenly found it hard to remember that these orcs were not the same orcs who had imprisoned and tortured her. She fought to resist the urge to summon her magic, and she began to wonder if she'd made a very serious mistake...

"Stand down!" came a sudden, booming voice, and Auriana sighed in relief as she saw her Horde counterpart striding forwards. "She's a friendly."

Somewhat surprisingly, the Commander of Frostwall smiled broadly as he approached, waving off his the two orc enforcers. Despite having met the troll twice now, Auriana had never really had the chance to study him up close. He was undeniably impressive in his heavy plate armour, with his lean muscle, curved tusks and impossibly long legs. He had two wicked looked blades strapped to his back, and he looked more than ready for a fight.

Against the Iron Horde, I hope... Auriana thought nervously, forcing herself to remain calm.

"Thank you, Commander," she said, trying not to let her gaze flick sideways to the crush of orcs, trolls, tauren, undead, goblins, blood elves and Horde pandaren that watched her passage with curious and watchful eyes.

"Little lion," the troll Commander said, nodding. "Welcome to da Horde."

He held out a hand and gestured down the makeshift path towards his command tent, indicating that she should follow.

"That's not... that's not my name..." Auriana growled under her breath, as she began to walk in the direction the troll had indicated.

"I know," the troll said lightly, grinning toothily down at her as he loped at her side.

His legs were so long that he could take one step to every two of hers, and she had to hurry to keep up. Auriana always felt very small amongst the soldiers of the Alliance, but here amongst the combined bulk of trolls and orcs and tauren, she felt even tinier. Nevertheless, she stood as tall and proud as she was able, trying to project an aura of unshaken authority as she followed the troll Commander through the Horde throng.

The command tent was small and rustic, with a large map table at the centre. Several Horde officers lined the makeshift room, deep in conversation, though each and every one of them stopped what they were doing and looked up at Auriana as she entered, their expressions ranging from mild curiously to open hostility. In particular, Auriana's attention was drawn to a slender troll shaman who moved protectively to the Horde Commander's side, her face set with clear displeasure.

"Dis be my second, Te'jaia," the big troll explained, giving the shaman a respectful nod.

Te'jaia was tall, even for a troll, with pale blue skin and an untamed white mohawk, and she watched Auriana with cool eyes. Evidently, the troll shaman was more suspicious of the Alliance than was her commander, and Auriana knew with certainty if she made one wrong move, she'd likely end up burned by fire or pulverised by an avalanche. Not for the first time, Auriana wished she'd paid more attention when others had tried to teach her diplomacy, though it was rather late to be thinking of such things now.
"Te'jaia, dis be Commander Auriana Fenwild," the troll Commander added, grinning slyly and looking very pleased with himself.

Her name sounded oddly lilting in the distinctive troll accent, and Auriana had to work hard to conceal her amusement at the triumph in the Commander's eyes as he revealed that he did, in fact, know who she was.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Te'jaia," she said smoothly, biting back an unexpected grin. "This is my bodyguard, Delvar Ironfist. Delvar, this is Commander Zala'din, of the Darkspear Tribe."

A brief flicker of surprise passed across Zala'din's face at her trick with his own name, and he barked out a harsh laugh. He looked thoroughly delighted by her reply, and Auriana couldn't help but relax slightly.

*Troll humour*, she thought. *I'll never understand…*

"Now that we all know each other..." she said drily. "I bought you this…"

She retrieved a map scroll from a pouch on her back and unfurled it on the table.

"This is the culmination of months of intelligence work - a map of the inside of Blackrock Foundry," she explained. "You can see we're missing some information, but there is enough here to go on."

"Ya give dis to us freely?" Te'jaia asked disbelievingly. "Dis be valuable intelligence. Are we suppose ta believe that ya just be givin' it away?"

"We're allies in this, are we not?" Auriana said sharply, shooting Zala'din a sideways glance. The room felt suddenly charged with nervous energy, and she felt, rather than heard, Ironfist move his hand to his axe. She pressed down on his foot with her heel, subtly reminding him that this was neither the time nor place for short tempers. Zala'din stilled his own officer with a firm shake of his head, and ran his long fingers over the painstakingly drawn map.

"Dis be far beyond what da Horde have been able ta gather," Zala'din said, clearly impressed.

"Well, we were able to obtain some inside information," Auriana admitted.

Zala'din looked up at her thoughtfully, his golden eyes suddenly sharp.

"Blackhand kidnapped ya," he said carefully. "And tortured ya for information…"

"Yes. He did," Auriana said shortly, only mildly surprised at the fact that the other Commander knew of her ordeal. "Which, I suppose, was rather fortuitous, given what we're about to do. During my escape, we were able to gather substantial intelligence about the layout of the Foundry, which I intend to put to good use."

"Dere were rumours… dat Varian Wrynn himself came ta rescue you," Zala'din said slowly, looking down at her inquisitively.

He was not the only one whose interest had been piqued. The entire command tent had gone silent as Zala'din spoke, and even Ironfist stopped glaring at the Horde in order to turn his gaze on Auriana. No one at Lunarfall was aware of the truth of what had happened in the Foundry, though of course there were rumours aplenty. The fact that the whispers of her rescue had reached the Horde was concerning, and Auriana knew she had to act to protect her secret.
"That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard," she scoffed, rolling her eyes in what she hoped was a convincing imitation of disdain. "You need to get better intelligence."

"Perhaps," Zala'din said lightly, though his face was unreadable. "Speakin' of Varian Wrynn… how'd ya get da King to agree to dis plan? He not be known for his… ah… faith… in da Horde."

Auriana regarded Zala'din seriously, her hands folded across her chest.

"Have care, Commander, that's my King you are speaking of," Auriana said slowly, wary of any slight against Varian's name. "His Majesty wants Blackhand dead, and he was simply able to see the value in a combined assault. He's no fool, Zala'din, whatever else the Horde may think of him."

Zala'din nodded, his expression thoughtful.

"We just wondered, given da message he sent to da Warchief," he said, exchanging a quick glance with Te'jaia.

"Oh, Light," Auriana muttered. "He promised he'd be polite."

"He was," Zala'din said, shrugging. "In places. He was mostly just insistent dat we keep ya alive. Why is dat?"

"Because I win wars for him, Commander," Auriana said simply, "And I can't do that if I'm dead."

She rapped her knuckles sharply on the map table, drawing Zala'din's attention back downwards.

"Now," she said firmly, "Would you like to keep gossiping about Varian Wrynn, or shall we take the Foundry?"

"As ya wish, Commander," Zala'din said, grinning once again. "What's da plan?"

Auriana smoothed out the map, pointing at various locations as she spoke.

"We have two possible entries to the Foundry," she explained. "Here, through the main gate into the Slagworks, and here, through the Dread Grotto. I propose a two pronged attack, with the Horde and Alliance each taking a separate entrance."

"Da Alliance have fielded da greater force today," Te'jaia said, her eyes narrowing. "Ya should be da ones to take da main gate."

"I agree," Auriana said, to Te'jaia's evident surprise. "Once inside, we can then rendezvous on the upper levels and take the fight to Blackhand directly. We'll have his head by the end of the day."

"Da Horde will do their part," Zala'din said proudly, thumping a hand on his chestplate.

"I am confident you will," Auriana said, and was surprised to find that she meant it.

Whatever else the Horde were, they were an undeniably powerful fighting force, and she was glad to have them on her side for a change.

"Ya haven't mentioned how ya intend ta get past the siege engines on da outer towers," Te'jaia said, stabbing a finger at several points on the map. "Da Alliance is gonna be crushed from above… and a course, we wouldn't want dat…"

Auriana didn't miss the slight hostility in the troll woman's tone, though she continued to speak as if she were oblivious.
"My casters can provide us with some cover while we advance," she said calmly, "Though I agree it places us at considerable risk. I had intended to have my gryphon riders bomb the gun emplacements while we break open the main gate."

"I will send ya a wing of wind riders ta assist," Zala'din offered. "Our path down ta da Dread Grotto be far safer, and we won't have much need of air support on dat side of da Foundry."

"Thank you," Auriana said sincerely. "Your aid is much appreciated."

"Da Horde will fight with honour," Zala'din said fiercely. "I promise ya dat, little lion."

Auriana was impressed by his vigour, but she ground her teeth at the troll's continued use of his particular nickname for her. She wondered where on earth he'd got the idea to call her that, but she didn't want to risk their burgeoning alliance by asking him to stop.

"I look forward to taking the Foundry together," she said instead, even managing to smile. "I will return to my troops now, and will marshal them for the assault. We should be ready to commence the attack within the hour."

"I will look for ya signal," Zala'din said, his eyes narrowing with savage glee, "And den we'll teach Blackhand a lesson he never gonna forget…"
After having returned to the Alliance staging grounds from her visit with the Horde commander, Auriana had quickly ordered her troops into motion, not wanting to delay the siege any longer. Lunarfall's men had complied like the well-oiled war machine that they were, organising themselves into practiced lines as they prepared to storm the Foundry on Auriana's command. As always, she couldn't help but be impressed by their skill and precision as she watched them form ranks, as well as their willingness to unquestioningly lay down their lives for the Alliance.

She also occasionally turned her attention to the north, where she could see the Horde soldiers forming their own lines under fluttering red banners, and she prayed to the Light that they would uphold the tenuous pact she had forged with Zala'din. The Horde of Azeroth were a fearsome fighting force, and Auriana knew her troops would not survive if they were forced to fight a war on two fronts.

Don't let me down, troll, she thought grimly, hoping that the Frostwall Commander was as honourable as he seemed.

She shifted irritably in her armour as she waited for the battle to begin, trying to ignore the itch beneath her left shoulderplate. Auriana's own beautiful armour had been destroyed by Blackhand when he had tortured her, and in all the rush of preparing a siege on the Foundry, she hadn't had time to have another set custom made. She had taken a standard set of mage armour from Lunarfall for this battle, and while well crafted, it lacked the comforting familiarity of her own armour.

One more thing Blackhand will pay for, Auriana thought bitterly, as she turned her gaze away from the Horde and back towards the Foundry entrance.

Blackhand's intimidating fortress was lined with heavy siege gun emplacements, and Auriana knew firsthand the kind of devastation they could bring to bear on a ground assault. Of course, at the moment the guns were quiet, though Auriana knew they would come to life the moment she ordered her troops to advance within range. Blackhand could hardly fail to have noticed the two armies camped on his doorstep, and Auriana knew that he would be making plans for the Foundry's defense, even as she plotted its fall.

She had decided to hold her mages back to provide the cover of a shield, while her other casters and soldiers engaged the Iron Horde on the ground. Between Auriana's gryphon riders and Zala'din's own aerial troops, she hoped to bring down the guns as soon as possible, at which point her men would have a clear path to the Foundry proper. It was not ideal, to approach the Foundry from such a vulnerable position, but given the clever strategic placement of the fortress, Auriana had recourse but to attempt a straight out attack. Quietly, she suspected that many of her men would pay the ultimate price by the time the Foundry was taken, though she resolved to do whatever she could to minimise the casualties.

Auriana's brooding thoughts were interrupted by the sudden arrival of her paladin lieutenant, resplendent in her shining white and gold armour. She nodded in approval at the other woman's presence, impressed by the draenei's calm, steady eyes. Hafela was a skilled and dangerous warrior, and Auriana was pleased to have such a paladin at her side.

"We're ready to move, ma'am," Hafela reported, "On your command."

"The Horde?" Auriana asked, her eyes flicking northwards.
"One of our scouts sighted the ready signal only moments ago," she said. "Both Horde and Alliance await your orders."

"Very well, then," Auriana said, taking a deep breath. "They're all yours, Lieutenant. Sound the attack."

Hafela nodded, lifting her slender hand in signal, and the air suddenly swelled with the rich clamour of Alliance war horns. The Alliance troops roared proudly, shaking their weapons and beating their shields as they prepared to march into battle. Seconds later, they were joined by a fierce cacophony from the north as the Horde took up the cry, their war drums beating a savage staccato into the wild blue Gorgrond sky. Not to be outdone, of course, the Alliance shouted even louder, crying out for Stormwind and Lunarfall as they began to charge.

As Auriana had predicted, Blackhand's guns roared into action the moment the first of the Alliance troops came into range. She was prepared, however, and with the aid of her fellow mages, she conjured a powerful arcane shield over her advancing troops. It wouldn't stop everything, she knew, but it would provide her troops with some kind of cover as they moved to engage the thousands of orcs that now streamed out of the Foundry like some kind of terrible plague.

The moment Auriana had signalled the attack, Hafela had disappeared from her side in order to join her fellow troops on the front lines. Delvar Ironfist, however, remained by Auriana's side, having declined to join the battle in favour of protecting his commander. Not, of course, that she really needed a bodyguard standing back this far. The real battle was being waged out there, while Auriana and her mages worked from the relative safety of the staging grounds. It was not where she would prefer to be, but holding the shield was of great importance to the battle plan, and Auriana was determined to ensure that her men were protected.

Certainly from what she could see, they needed all the help they could get. The fighting on the ground had rapidly devolved into a fierce and bloody brawl, and the Iron Horde guns rained endless blasts of shrapnel down upon the Alliance. The magical shield was holding, for now, but Auriana knew it would only be a matter of time before it failed, and her men were left vulnerable to Blackhand's artillery.

Her gryphon riders had lifted aloft the moment the first war horn had sounded, though both they and the Horde wind riders had to contend with the savage rylaks that Blackhand had unleashed to counter them. The vicious rylaks harried gryphons and wind riders alike, and Auriana could see that her troops were struggling to get close enough to any of the gun emplacements to release their deadly payloads.

"Commander…" one of mages said warily, having clearly noticed the same problem that she had.

"I know," Auriana barked, as she transferred control of the shield spell to his care, "I'm on it."

Unfortunately, at this distance, there was little that Auriana could do to protect her gryphon riders from the rylaks, and she realised that she would be forced to leave the staging grounds for the savagery of the main battle.

"Come on, Delvar," Auriana urged, grabbing the death knight's arm to gain his attention. "Let's get to it."

Ironfist looked as if he wished to protest, but evidently decided that he'd have an easier time of convincing Blackhand to surrender peacefully than he would of convincing Auriana to stay out of the fight. Silently, he unsheathed his axe, his pale, glowing eyes glittering with determination as he prepared to defend her life.
Gathering her power, Auriana teleported both herself and Ironfist into the heart of the raging battle, where she would be in the best position to help the gryphons. The crashing sound of steel on steel rang impossibly loud, even to Auriana's damaged ears, and she felt undeniably tiny against the crush of powerful bodies. The cloying scent of dirt, blood and sweat assailed her from all sides, and Auriana's adrenaline surged as she began to call powerful frost magic to her hands.

Auriana cast not at the orcs around her, however, but rather at the sky, picking off rylak after rylak and clearing a path for the bombers. She found it difficult to concentrate with the battle raging on every side, but Ironfist fought diligently to give her the necessary time and space to help the aerial assault. Her gryphon riders rained cheers down upon her as she fought to aid them, and even a number of Horde soldiers offered her respectful salutes when they realised she was defending them as fiercely as any of the Alliance riders.

Despite not being at her full strength, Auriana was still frighteningly efficient, and she had soon thinned the flock of rylaks sufficiently so as to provide a clear path for the gryphons to commence their bombing runs. A great cheer went up from the Alliance as the first Blackrock cannon exploded, reduced to nothing but rubble by the power of a gnome forged bomb. For her part, Auriana grinned with satisfaction at her success, redoubling her efforts and illuminating the sky with white-blue magic.

Unfortunately, the Iron Horde had quickly realised that she was a very big problem, and her position was soon overrun by orcs. Realising that she could not leave Ironfist alone to stand against the rapidly rising tide, Auriana reluctantly pulled her attention away from the sky and back to the more immediate problem of Blackhand's infantry.

A movement from her left caught her eye, and Auriana spun to see an orc warrior charging directly at her. Her eyes and hands glowed with fresh power as she prepared to bring him down, though shockingly she felt her breath hitch in sudden, dark terror as the Blackrock warrior bore down upon her. The orc was so big and so fast, and his scarred face reminded her disturbingly of the Blackrock torturer Throk'gar. Auriana threw out her hand, determined to slaughter the orc as she had slaughtered so many of his brethren before, but her magic simply refused to come. She froze, paralysed by her own fear, as the orc laughed in her face. He raised his cudgel high, ready to crush her skull, and Auriana realised that there was nothing she could do to protect herself.

Miraculously, however, the blow was intercepted by Delvar Ironfist, who caught the orc's mace with his vicious axe. The death knight growled, smashing the orc backwards with a fist to the face. The orc growled in fury, shaking his head as he came on once more, only to meet his demise as Ironfist gutted him without mercy. The dwarf then grabbed Auriana by the arm and pulled her sharply to the ground behind a large boulder, where she was somewhat protected from the chaos raging all around them.

Ironfist shook her shoulder bracingly, his dead eyes filled with unusual compassion.

"Commander?" he asked quietly. "Are ye alright?"

"I… I'm fine," Auriana insisted, breathing heavily.

She looked down at her hands, glowing brightly with the evidence of her great power. Despite what it may have looked like to Ironfist, it hadn't been her magic that had failed, but rather Auriana herself...

For the first time in her life, she had frozen in the heat of battle, and she hated herself for it. Auriana had never been afraid of a fight, not even in her very first campaign, and yet the sight of the charging orc had filled her with a paralysing terror. Her heart raced and her hands were shaking
wildly, and she knew very well that if not for her bodyguard, she would be dead.

"If ye are nay fit to fight, I can take ye back to the stagin' grounds…" Ironfist suggested tentatively.

"No," Auriana said roughly, pushing him away. "I'm fine."

"Then we need ter keep movin'," Ironfist said worriedly, looking over his shoulder at the raging battle behind him.

"I… just… give me a moment," Auriana choked, her chest constricting painfully.

She felt suddenly lightheaded, and was forced to put her head between her legs until the world stopped spinning. A hot rush of shame spread through her chest as she did so, horrified as she was by her own weakness.

_Damn you, Blackhand_, she thought, laying the blame for her newfound anxiety squarely at the warlord's feet.

Surprisingly, however, the rush of anger helped Auriana to focus, and slowed the frantic beating of her heart. She latched onto her fury like a lifeline, deciding that in this case the risk of a berserker episode was the lesser of two evils, when compared to remaining a quivering, terrified mess.

_You're the Commander of Lunarfall_, she growled inwardly. _Stop acting like a frightened little girl, and get back on your feet!_

Auriana lifted her chin, allowing her anger to spread through her veins like fire. She pushed herself perilously close to the edge of control, though avoided letting go entirely. The icy fear in her chest was replaced by a burning heat that threatened to consume her from the inside out, but at least she could move her legs again.

"Let's go," she panted, shakily rising to her feet. "We've got a battle to win."

Ironfist still looked extremely skeptical, but allowed himself to be drawn into the fight. He followed on Auriana's heels like a faithful, undead shadow, swearing murderously in Dwarvish as he crashed back into the orcish lines.

This time around, Auriana didn't hesitate to fight, ruthlessly dominating her terror with her surging fury and her iron will. She fought almost blindly, refusing allow herself time to fear as she devastated the orcs with frost and flame. The Blackrock dead soon piled around her in a gruesome wall, felled either by Auriana's powerful magic or the savage bite of Ironfist's axe. She threw spells skyward whenever she was able, but more often than not she was forced to concentrate on her immediate surroundings, and the brutal game of king of the hill that she now appeared to be playing.

It had been a long time since Auriana had really cut loose, and she had never needed to do so more than she did today. She channelled her fear and hatred of Blackhand into a great and powerful weapon that she now wielded with devastating effect against any orc that dared to stand against her. Auriana knew she couldn't keep up this kind of intensity forever, still recovering as she was from her ordeal in the Foundry, but there was something therapeutic about losing herself in the fight. For every dead orc that fell at her feet, Auriana felt as if she regained some small part of herself that had been lost to Blackhand and his torturer. It was a morbid, perhaps, that she was most at home on a killing field, but for the first time since she'd been kidnapped, Auriana began to feel like herself.

As usual, Auriana lost trace of time and place as she fought, and only paused at the sound of her
"Commander!" the voice called urgently, but Auriana would not be swayed.

She refused to stop, her magically damaged arms shining white-hot with her power as she continued her rampage through the orc lines. She had noticed that there seemed to be less orcs around her of late, however, and she vaguely wondered if the Alliance were winning.

"Commander!" someone called again, more urgently this time, and after dispatching one last orc, Auriana finally looked around for the speaker.

To her surprise, her immediate vicinity was now entirely clear of living orcs, and she was surrounded only by her own men. Hundreds of Blackrock soldiers lay dead at her feet, though Auriana couldn't really remember killing so many. As she gazed around in slight confusion, Lieutenant Hafela strode forwards through the carnage, her bloodied hammer slung lazily over her shoulder.

"The orcs are retreating, ma'am," the draenei lieutenant said crisply. "Their siege weaponry has all been destroyed, and they've fled back into the Foundry."

She nudged one of the fall orcs with her foot, her delicate features set in a look of supreme disdain.

"It seems as if you finished off the last of them," she added, a distinct note of satisfaction in her voice. "From what we can tell, the Horde have successfully breached the lower Foundry, though the Blackrock have closed the main gates against us."

Auriana turned her head to the north, where the forbidding metal gates of the Foundry barred her path to Blackhand.

"Have any wounded fall back to the staging area, while those who can still fight report to the Foundry entrance," Auriana ordered. "Have them hold at one hundred yards out, while I open the gates."

"How are ye goin' to do that, Commander?" Ironfist asked, following her line of sight.

"How do you think?" Auriana said savagely. "I'm going to knock."

She broke into a swift jog towards the Foundry entrance as the Alliance forces regrouped, weaving through the countless bodies that littered the dusty ground. Her still-worn muscles grumbled in protest, but Auriana was determined not to falter. Today was not a day for weakness, as she had learned earlier, and she would most certainly not appear fragile in front of her men. It was bad enough that Ironfist had witnessed her earlier moment of instability, and she flat out refused to show such vulnerability again.

Auriana soon arrived at the gates, which had been barred firmly shut against the Alliance incursion after the last of the orcs had fled the battle. Both Ironfist and Hafela had followed on her heels, and watched on curiously as she rapped several times on the thick metal. Auriana guessed that the gates were at least a foot thick of solid iron, but she was confident that she could break through.

"Get back," she said warningly.

Both the paladin and the death knight backed up swiftly as Auriana's arms began to glow, both well aware of the terrible devastation their Commander could unleash. She reached deep down into the wellspring of her magic as she worked, drawing on powers of breaking and burning. While she had improved under Jaina Proudmoore's tutelage, Auriana was still not as skilled with fire as she was
with frost, but she knew the iron gates would more readily yield to searing flame than freezing cold.

The spell required almost all the concentration she had, and Auriana began to tremble as the power rolled through her bones. Sweat beaded on her brow as she worked, and she began to wonder if she had overextended herself. Despite her uncertainty, however, Auriana managed to hold the spell together with sheer stubbornness, and a great and tempestuous fire built slowly between her hands as she prepared to tear the iron gates apart.

Auriana stumbled to her knees as she finally unleashed, bringing up a powerful shield to protect herself from debris as the gates exploded in a hail of iron. A great roar went up from the Alliance troops as the heart of the Foundry was exposed, and they began to flood towards the opening in an unstoppable tide of blue and gold. Auriana let them pass, knowing that she would need to regain her strength before she joined the fray once more.

Both Ironfist and Hafela rushed to her side, each grabbing a shoulder to help Auriana back to her feet.

"That was some spell, Commander," Hafela said, her tone at once impressed and reproachful. "Are you quite well?"

"I'll be fine… in a minute or so," Auriana said firmly, though admittedly she appreciated having Ironfist's strong arms to lean on as she regained her breath. "Hafela, you head inside with the rest of the troops. Blackhand will be somewhere near the top of the Foundry, but we need to secure the lower levels before we move against him."

"As you wish, ma'am," the paladin said swiftly, though she exchanged a meaningful glance with Ironfist.

"Don't worry, Lieutenant, Ironfist will stay here with me," Auriana said drily. "I'll be quite alright."

"Of course, Commander," Hafela said, flushing slightly. "We just… we don't want to lose you again."

"Get moving," Auriana ordered gruffly, though she was secretly quite touched by her Lieutenant's concern.

Hafela saluted sharply and moved off towards the Foundry, which now echoed with the sound of fierce fighting as the Alliance troops forced their way inside. For his part, Ironfist stared at Auriana curiously, his eyes narrowed in suspicion.

"I'm fine, Delvar," Auriana growled. "You worry too much."

"And ye take too many risks, Commander," he shot back. "With respect."

Auriana studied her bodyguard carefully, noting how his fierce vigilance mirrored Lieutenant Hafela's. Having always considered herself largely expendable in the grand scheme of things, so long as she managed to serve the Alliance with her death, Auriana found it quite strange to have her own subordinates show the same loyalty and protectiveness to her that she might have shown to Varian or one of the other leaders of the Alliance. She'd never admit such a thing to Ironfist, of course, but his unwavering fidelity was undeniably reassuring in light of her recent betrayal.

"Lucky I've got you, then," she said, shaking off the last vestiges of spell fatigue and clapping Ironfist on the back. "Come on. I've an orc warlord to kill."
In the bottom of Blackrock Foundry, Zala'din of the Darkspear was in a world of chaos. The moment the Horde had penetrated the lower entrance to the Foundry, Zala'din had ordered his men to split into three battalions, each charged with capturing a different part of Blackrock's fortress. The majority of his force had headed through the Dread Grotto and towards the inner workings of the Foundry, while Zala'din himself had stayed behind to fight the three fearsome she-orcs known as Blackhand's Iron Maidens.

The Maidens were all of them cunning warriors, and they were amply added by a seemingly never ending supply of bombs and turrets, as well as the cannons of their nearby Dreadnaught. As a result, Zala'din never stopped moving as he fought, knowing that a second's hesitation would likely result in his bloody and explosive demise. He was undeniably graceful after years of hard training, however, even with his too-long legs, and he maneuvered between the explosions as if he were performing an elaborately choreographed dance, instead of fighting for his life.

He had chosen to engage the leader of the Iron Maidens, a monstrously large woman whom the other she-orcs had named Gar'an. Zala'din was tall for a troll, but even then Gar'an came close, her size enhanced further by the massive bulk of her armour. He wasn't sure how she even managed to move with such a mighty weight on her shoulders, yet she was still surprisingly swift, and Zala'din had to work hard to stay alive.

"None will stand against the Iron Horde!" she screamed at Zala'din as they crashed together in a blur of steel, her grey lips contorting in a furious rictus.

"We'll see about dat," Zala'din challenged, grinning toothily as he eagerly threw himself into the fight.

Gar'an's weapon of choice was a rifle, and she spent much of the fight trying to force Zala'din back to the point where she could simply shoot him in the head. Of course, he refused to allow such a thing, sticking to the orc Admiral like a pesky fly and preventing her from gaining the distance she required. He harried her with blow after blow, his twin blades flashing red in the muted glow of the surrounding fires. Impressively, however, Gar'an was able to wield her gun like a staff when he came in close, deflecting his blows with more skill than Zala'din would have expected. She was also quite skilled at forcing him towards the deadly turrets arrayed around the Grotto docks, and more than once Zala'din felt the hair on his arms singe with the heat of a barely missed shot.

"Te'jaia!" he called to his second. "Turrets!"

Te'jaia had never let him down in battle before, and today was no exception. From the corner of his eye, Zala'din saw his shaman call great balls of lava to her hands, aiming them precisely at the turrets that were causing him so many problems. Against the raw heat of the lava, the turrets didn't stand a chance, and they were soon reduced to smoking heaps of metal.

Now free to move, Zala'din ducked under a wild swing from Gar'an's rifle, and punished her with a savage slash across her right thigh. She staggered, howling with rage and pain, though she still managed to deal Zala'din a cracking blow across the face in revenge as she fought to regain her balance. Zala'din tasted blood, and he growled as he was forced to twist down and away to avoid the rifle that was suddenly trained on his head. He felt his back muscles twist and howl in protest, though he paid little mind as he threw himself to the ground, tumbling past Gar'an to take to his feet behind her. She whirled with preternatural reflexes, though only just managed to catch Zala'din's sword on her rifle before he took her head. This time, however, Zala'din had the measure
of her strategy, and used one sword to lock against her rifle and hold it in place while he used his second sword to thrust into the weak point of her armour between her chest plate and her heavy belt.

Zala'din felt a surge of satisfaction as his blade bite flesh, and Gar'an moaned in pain and fury. At the very same moment, the air was ripped with the cries of the dying as Gar'an's two fellow officers fell, each slaughtered by the overwhelming tide of the Horde.

"Sisters!" Gar'an cried, her eyes murderous as she fell on Zala'din with renewed vigour. "No!"

It was suddenly all he could do to contain her, though with the demise of her sisters Gar'an was now forced to face the might of the Horde alone. It was a pity, Zala'din mused, she was a fine fighter, though she couldn't possibly hope to stand against such impossible odds. He could see Gar'an's eyes that she knew it too, but she continued to fight, defiant to the last.

"You are not fit to call yourselves Horde," she snarled, spitting blood at Zala'din's feet. "You will burn."

"We are da true Horde," Zala'din told her grimly, "And we will be ya doom."

He slashed high across her left arm, catching her in the shoulder, and she fumbled to hold her rifle upright. Zala'din's Horde took full advantage, slashing at her with swords and axes as they fought to avoid the storm of explosive devices still raining from all around. Gar'an managed to block a blow or two, and even caught a few on her armour, but in minutes she was ragged and bleeding, and struggling to stand upright against the relentless Horde.

In the end, it was Zala'din who delivered the killing blow, impaling her clear through the neck before letting her fall to the ground with a final, metallic crack. His Horde cheered at her demise, though Zala'din could see that the cost of the battle had been great. Gar'an's explosive trickery had been devastating, and it was clear that more than a few Horde would join her in the unyielding silence of death.

"Get da wounded out," Zala'din ordered, snapping his fingers at a squad of tauren druids. "The rest of us, we gonna push on."

"Should we help da others?" Te'jaia asked, looking worriedly across the Grotto to where the rest of the Horde had disappeared.

"No," he said quickly. "Dey are well trained, dey can handle demselves. We need ta find a way up ta da Alliance. Da Iron Horde are cowards. Da sooner we kill Blackhand, da sooner dis is all over."

Zala'din supposed that he could have followed Te'jaia's suggestion, but he had great faith in his warriors, and he was eager to catch up to the Alliance before they made the final attempt on Blackhand. He had as much of a score to settle with the warlord as anyone, save for perhaps his Alliance counterpart Auriana, and he didn't want to miss the opportunity to give Blackhand a taste of Horde steel.

Te'jaia complied with his orders, as always, though she very clearly wanted to join up with the main Horde force instead of finding the Alliance. Nevertheless, she followed close on Zala'din's heels as he began to move his men through the earthy Blackrock tunnels, searching for any way to access the upper Foundry. From the map Auriana had provided, Zala'din knew there were several elevators placed throughout the lower levels, and he was confident that it would only be a matter of time before he located one.
As the Horde moved swiftly through the maze of corridors, a massive explosion sounded from somewhere above, followed by what sounded like cheers from the Alliance. The Foundry tunnels acted as conductors for the sound, and to Zala'din it seemed as if the explosion had happened right behind him, rather than several levels above.

"Sounds like da little lion is hard at work," Zala'din mused, grinning with satisfaction as he increased his pace. "We need ta keep up, can't let da Alliance have all da fun."

Te'jaia ignored him as she ran, panting lightly from the exertion, and Zala'din took advantage of the brief lull in the battle to study her carefully. He hadn't met Te'jaia before Draenor, but she had proven to be as a good second as he could ask for, and a talented shaman at that. She was fiercely loyal to Zala'din and the Horde, almost fanatically so, and he had often had to temper her youthful zeal with his hard-won wisdom. She was also rather pretty, when she wasn't scowling, though it seemed to Zala'din as if she were always glowering at one thing or another. At the moment, for instance, she looked particularly displeased, despite the current success of the siege and their victory over the Iron Maidens.

"What's wrong, mon?" Zala'din asked. "We be winnin'!"

"It not be over yet," she reminded him drily, frowning as they climbed upwards through the Foundry's smoky, labyrinthine paths.

"Still," he said, grinning down at her, "Ya could show a little enthusiasm."

Te'jaia rolled her eyes and shook her head in exasperation. She was well used to his off-kilter sense of humour, though she didn't often give Zala'din the appreciation he felt he deserved.

"What'cha like about her so much, anyway?" Te'jaia blurted suddenly, finally asking the question that had obviously been weighing on her mind.

"Who?" Zala'din asked, nonplussed.

"Dat Alliance commander," Te'jaia said, pulling a face. "She be human, Zal, nothin' special."

"She's... funny," Zala'din said, shrugging. "Such a little bit of a ting, and yet so much power. I like her spirit."

Te'jaia looked at him incredulously, her inattention causing her to nearly trip over a rock. Zala'din reached out to steady her, holding her shoulder tightly until she had gathered her long legs beneath her once more.

"So much so dat ya be willing ta come running da moment she snaps her fingers?" she accused.

"Watch ya mouth, Jaia..." he growled warningly. "I do not answer ta da Alliance, or ta her. She's useful, nothin' more. We wanna beat da Iron Horde, we need all da help we can get. You seen da kinda damage she can do, and she seems ta be willin' ta work with us."

"She be Alliance, Zal," Te'jaia argued. "Dey not ta be trusted."

"She has honour," Zala'din countered. "She put her faith in da Horde at Grommashar, and she did it again today. She be putting her life in our hands just as much as we be putting ours in hers."

"Be dat as it may, she'd kill us all without a second though if she thought it best for da Alliance," Te'jaia huffed.
"What are ya tryin' to say, Jaia? You wanna retreat?" Zala'din asked, although he knew she wasn't entirely wrong about Auriana.

"No," Te'jaia said, shaking her head. "Blackhand gonna get what's comin' to him, and she is a powerful ally. Just… don't you forget dat she's Varian Wrynn's pet mage, not yours, and she'd grind ya to dust if he so much as asked."

"Den we best hope Varian Wrynn don't want me dead, hmm?" Zala'din retorted.

Te'jaia grumbled, though she declined to say more as they rounded yet another identical corner. This time, however, it appeared that Zala'din's men had located an elevator, and had begun to rapidly ascend the Foundry in groups of about twenty or so. It was inconvenient, having to move such a large group of soldiers in such a limiting way, but there was little the Horde could do save for to exercise patience. Of course, this was harder for some than others, and Zala'din noticed Te'jaia and a number of the other young soldiers twitching in frustration as they awaited their turn.

As it turned out, Zala'din and Te'jaia were two of the last to ride the elevator upwards, and the moment they reached the top, they were thrown into a heated battle once more. The Horde and Alliance were fighting in a dusty, open area at the heart of the Foundry, throwing themselves fearlessly against the soldiers of the Iron Horde. The fight itself was utter chaos, and the air was so thick with flying spells and iron projectiles that it was almost impossible to tell who was fighting whom. At the centre of the storm stood Auriana, recognisable only because of the white hot glow of her arms and eyes, and the pile of dead orcs at her feet. She was so small that Zala'din could only catch glimpses of her between the crush of bodies, her face set in a terrifying mask that was equal parts unbound rage and cold calculation. Zala'din didn't think she had been glowing the last time he'd seen her fight, and he darkly wondered what had happened to the Commander to have caused such extensive magical damage.

From the looks of the fight, however, it appeared that the Alliance had been winning, and with the additional support of Zala'din's arriving Horde, they were soon able to push the Blackrock orcs into a full retreat. The moment the last orc fell, Auriana blinked to Zala'din's side, wiping blood away from her mouth as she spoke.

"The lower levels?" she demanded, without preamble.

"Da Dread Grotto is secure, and my men are currently fightin' against whatever foul accomplices Blackhand keeps in da depths of his fortress," Zala'din said.

Auriana nodded, brushing a stray strand of hair from her eyes.

"Good," she said breathlessly, her blue eyes dangerously sharp. "That's good."

It was clear that she had been right in the thick of the fighting, from the blood on her hands and lips to the spectacular bruise blossoming below her right eye. She also had the wild, eager eyes of a woman on the edge of control, and Zala'din couldn't help but wonder if she was entirely safe to be around. He'd heard the stories of who and what she was, and the last thing he needed was to have to contain a berserk mage while he tried to fight Blackhand.

"Ya alright dere, little lion?" he asked her quietly, so that only she could hear.

"I'm fine," she muttered, her blue eyes wide. "Why do people keep asking me that?"

Zala'din opened his mouth to explain his concern, when he was interrupted by the arrival of an elegant draenei paladin. The new arrival eyed Zala'din skeptically as she approached, though she
saluted Auriana respectfully.

"We've got them on the run, Commander… er… Commanders," she reported. "A number of Blackhand's lieutenants have fallen, and his orcs are now barricading themselves in the rooms on the higher levels."

"Good," Auriana growled with savage satisfaction. "With this area secure, we can use it as a staging ground for the further assault. Have the wounded brought here, pending evacuation, and send some of your troops to aid the Horde below. I don't want to be surprised from behind while we move forward. I'll take the rest of our forces and close in on Blackhand… along with the Zala'din and his men, if they are amenable."

"It would be an honour ta fight at ya side," Zala'din said sincerely, earning him a reproachful glance from Te'jaia and a contemplative one from Auriana.

"Very well, then," the Alliance commander said. "Move out."

Wanting to gain a better understanding of the Auriana and her fighting style, Zala'din stuck to her side as they chased the Blackrock orcs through the tunnels. She accepted his presence with little more than a thoughtful grunt, far more focused on sowing chaos amongst the Iron Horde than whatever Zala'din was doing. Her actions showed surprising trust, and more than ever Zala'din was determined to be worthy of her confidence. To him, the Horde was about honour and courage, not whatever Garrosh Hellscream had turned it into, and he hoped that by fighting alongside the Alliance in good faith, he might regain something of what had been lost.

Fighting in the upper reaches of the Foundry was an interesting task, tactically speaking, given the tight constraints of the long corridors of metal and earth that snaked their way through the fortress' interior. Instead of fighting in orderly lines, the Horde and the Alliance fought a series of close quarters duels, instinctively forming into small squads to hunt down and eliminate the Blackrock orcs. It was a nasty, brutish way to fight a battle, and it reminded Zala'din of a childhood game of hide and seek, albeit with considerably more bloodshed.

At first, Zala'din stayed near Te'jaia, though as the battle wore on he astonishingly found himself fighting back to back with Auriana, falling into a natural rhythm beside her as if they had been working together all their lives. Zala'din had rarely fought alongside mages, though it was soon abundantly clear that Auriana had a very good understanding of warriors. She predicted Zala'din's moves flawlessly, nimbly manoeuvring around him so as to keep herself protected from the Iron Horde as she tirelessly cast spell after spell. It was a staggering display of power and cleverness, and Zala'din couldn't help but to be very grateful that they were on the same side.

A short but stocky orc charged him from the side, forcing Zala'din to duck in desperation as an axe blow flew over his head. Quick as lightning, Auriana hobbled the orc with a powerful blast of frost and forced him to his knees, where he met his demise at the end of one of Zala'din's swords. She then ducked herself, allowing Zala'din to whirl and strike out at a second orc as he lunged for her throat. Zala'din beheaded the orc with a single, brutal blow, only to spin on his heel a second later to catch the axe striking at his back. Auriana responded immediately, bracing herself against Zala'din's knee as she shot a frostbolt under Zala'din's raised arm with startling precision. The spell missed his skin by scant inches, and was so cold that he felt gooseflesh race along his arms. Of course, Auriana's orc target fared much worse, his heart freezing solid as he caught the full brunt of the spell on his chest.

"Ha!" she screamed, as the dead orc tumbled to the floor, and Zala'din realised that she was a good deal more bloodthirsty than he had realised.
She coulda been Horde, he mused, echoing her cry as he skewered a snarling orc of his own.

If nothing else, Zala'din respected great warriors, and he found that he rather enjoyed fighting with the fierce little Alliance mage. Te'jaia obviously didn't approve, judging from the frequent dirty glances she shot his way, but Zala'din found it hard not to grin as he and Auriana pressed onwards, slaughtering every foe unfortunate enough to stand in their way.

Eventually, most of the Blackrock orcs had fled from fighting in the main corridors, and had hidden themselves away in the numerous rooms that lined the way. The fight then became a process of breaking down doors and killing any orcs who tried to hide, before moving on to the next door and repeating the process. Zala'din had sent a furious Te'jaia on ahead with a group of bull tauren for protection, while he and Auriana investigated one of the side corridors for any remaining orcs.

The first few rooms they cleared were empty, though in the last room in the corridor they found a shaman crouched over the corpse of a much younger orc. It was obvious that the shaman had dragged the other orc away from the fighting in an attempt to save his life, but the massive axe wound in the warrior's chest was clearly beyond healing. Zala'din grimaced as he raised his swords, reluctant to kill the orc shaman in cold blood, but at the same time knowing he could leave no Blackrock alive. He moved to deal the shaman a killing blow, when he was suddenly stilled by Auriana's small, cool hand against his wrist.

"Wait," she said, squinting into the darkness.

The cornered shaman looked up as she spoke, and a shadow of horrified recognition crossed over his face.

"You," the orc breathed, staggering to his feet. "You survived…"

"Hello, Kelruk," Auriana said softly. "I gather that you didn't expect to see me again."

"But that's… that's impossible," the shaman protested. "You can't be alive. I saw what Throk'gar did to you… and what you did to those shackles…"

Zala'din shot the Alliance Commander a surreptitious look, and was surprised to see that she looked suddenly haunted. Some of the savage confidence had faded from her features, and she looked much smaller than she had in the heat of battle. Zala'din knew she had been taken and tortured by the Blackrock, though he hadn't until now really stopped to consider what she may have been through. From the expression on her face, and on that of the orc shaman, Zala'din gathered that terrible things had happened in this Foundry, and once again he found himself reluctantly impressed by Auriana's grim determination.

"Be that as it may, I am alive," she said darkly, "And I'm here to kill Blackhand."

"I know," Kelruk said, with a long, drawn out sigh. "Don't worry yourself, mage, I won't try to stop you."

He placed his hands behind his head as a sign of surrender, and began to turn away.

"Make it quick, Commander," the orc said wearily. "I have no desire to see any more of this bloodshed."

"Put your hands down, I'm not going to kill you," Auriana said firmly. "There's a group of wounded soldiers behind me that are due to be evacuated. If you go with them quietly, you have my word that you won't be harmed."
"What?" Kelruk asked, turning to face her with an expression of complete surprise.

"Er… little lion?" Zala'din echoed, as bewildered as the orc by her lenience.

From what he had seen of Auriana so far, she was not cruel, but nor was she especially merciful, and she seemed to hold a particular, if understandable, hatred of the Blackrock.

"You did me a kindness when I was last in the Foundry, Kelruk. A small one, perhaps, but a kindness nonetheless," she said, "And I always repay my debts. Go to Nagrand, or to Frostfire. Find your family, if you have any, and be a true shaman… not a lackey of torturers."

Kelruk hesitated, as if not sure she was speaking in earnest. He slowly walked towards her, his hands still half-raised in supplication.

"Er… Commander…" Zala'din repeated warningly, raising his twin swords in defense.

"I know what I'm doing, Zala'din. He's not a threat," she growled. "As for you, Kelruk, I suggest you leave before I change my mind."

"Th… thank you, Commander," the orc shaman stammered, shaking his head in disbelief. "But… why? Why save my life?"

"Because I'm not Blackhand," Auriana said fiercely. "Go."

She lead Kelruk back out into the corridor, and waved down a human priest healer who was leading the evacuation of wounded troops, indicating that he should take the shaman with them. The priest looked somewhat skeptical, but he followed her orders without question, hurrying the stunned orc away along with a group of wounded Alliance soldiers.

"Dat was a kind ting ya just did," Zala'din observed, taking advantage of the brief pause in battle to clean orc blood from his blades.

"I wasn't being kind," Auriana said frostily. "I was repaying a debt. I don't like owing people."

"Is that why ya came ta me? Cause I saved ya life?" Zala'din wondered.

"Partially," she admitted. "Though I also believe it's about time the Horde and the Alliance learned to work together."

She regarded him with cool eyes, her head cocked thoughtfully to the side.

"Besides, as far as I'm concerned, my debt to you is paid," she said.

"How do ya figure dat?" Zala'din asked.

"Well," she said slyly, her mouth quirking in an unexpected grin. "Since we started fighting together, you've killed fifty-six orcs. I've killed eighty-four. I'm winning."

Zala'din blinked, surprised by her wit, before barking out a loud, genuine laugh.

"Am I interrupting?" someone called suddenly, and Zala'din turned to see a very suspicious looking Te'jaia standing behind them.

"We were just catchin' our breath," he told her, exchanging a quick glance with Auriana. "What be happenin' further up?"
"We found Blackhand," Te'Jaia reported.

As she spoke, her gaze remained fixed on Auriana, as if she thought the Alliance Commander might try to kill them both at any second.

"What?" Auriana demanded. "Where?"

"He's barricaded himself up on da top level, in a place da orcs call da Crucible," Te'Jaia explained. "It's down da large corridor on da right."

The tunnel suddenly brightened as Auriana's arms and eyes surged with power, and Zala'din could see that her hands were trembling. The brief moment of levity that had passed between them was gone, and her face was harsh and cold once more.

"Easy, little lion," he told her, "Blackhand'll die, I promise ya."

"Not soon enough for my liking," Auriana snapped, clenching her fists. "This ends now."

She tore out of the room in the direction Te'Jaia had indicated, her robes swirling around her tiny, slender form as she hunted after the Blackrock warlord. Zala'din watched her go, rubbing a hand thoughtfully along one of his tusks. Te'Jaia looked distinctly unhappy, shaking her head.

"She's not stable, Zal," Te'jaia said harshly. "She gonna charge in there all reckless, and she gonna get herself killed…"

"Well, she's not going ta be alone," Zala'din said grimly, ignoring the flash of anger that crossed Te'jaia's features at his words. "She be right. Dis ends now."
Auriana

Auriana stood at the entrance to Blackhand's Crucible, her hands shaking as she contemplated the fight that lay ahead of her. Zala'din stood by her left side, while behind the two Commanders an assorted group of Alliance and Horde soldiers eagerly awaited the order to attack.

In her anger, Auriana had rushed headlong to the Crucible, but now that she stood outside the door, her fierce rage had been replaced by a dark, cold fear that seemed to be eating her heart from the inside out. Behind the doors of the Crucible awaited the orc who had caused her so much pain, who had taken so much from her, and she wondered if she actually had enough courage to step over the threshold and face her tormenter head on.

"Ya ready, little lion?" Zala'din asked quietly, his eyes all to knowing as he stared thoughtfully down upon her.

Auriana forced her hands to still, not wanting to appear weak before the Horde Commander. Zala'din seemed a trustworthy sort, and he had more than proven himself so far, but she could never allow herself to forget who and what he was.

"I'm fine," she said firmly, though she spoke more for her own benefit than his. "Blackhand... Blackhand will rue the day he ever thought to come after me."

"I don't doubt dat he will," Zala'din agreed, wedging one of his swords in the iron door of the Crucible and forcing it open.

Auriana stood back as the soldiers of the Alliance and Horde filed past her into Blackhand's exposed seat of power, her feet seemingly frozen to the ground. Her breath suddenly came on rapidly, and her chest felt oddly tight. It was the second time that day that she had lost control of her traitorous body, and she had to fight down a rising sense of panic as she contemplated fighting Blackhand directly.

Move. You can do this, she told herself firmly, taking a deep breath as she finally forced herself to enter the forbidding Crucible.

The warlord was waiting for them in the centre of the room, nonchalantly leaning against the haft of his hammer as he coldly inspected the assembled soldiers. He had clearly been waiting for this moment, and he looked largely unconcerned by the display of strength before him. From the expression on his face, he might have been about to fight off a group of annoying gnats, rather than some of the finest soldiers of the Alliance and Horde combined.

"You? You're the dogs who have been wreaking havoc throughout my foundry? Step forward! I will put you in your place," he rumbled, his voice grating painfully against Auriana's ears.

As Blackhand spoke, Auriana willed herself forward, stepping out from behind the protection of her soldiers and taking her place by Zala'din's side.

"You," Blackhand breathed as he caught sight of her, his gruesome visage splitting in an unsettling grin. "I was hoping you had survived your escape, so that I might have the satisfaction of killing you myself."

Auriana's heart beat out a thunderous staccato at the sight of him, and she felt as if they were the only two people in the room. Everything else in the world simply fell away, and for a terrifying second she felt as if she were back in Blackhand's torture chamber. Her breath hitched in her throat...
and her body suddenly ached as it recalled the torment inflicted upon her by the Blackrock orcs, but Auriana refused to allow herself to be cowed.

"Blackhand," she said coldly, fighting to control the tremor in her voice. "I... I offer you one chance. S... surrender the Foundry to me, and I will spare your life."

"Surrender?" he laughed gratingly. "The Blackrock do not surrender."

"Then you will die here," she said warningly. "You know the kind of power I can bring to bear. Do the smart thing, and lay down your weapon."

"Do you think to kill me, witch?" he snarled. "Do you intend to take revenge?"

"If you wish to fight, you should know that I do not stand against you alone," Auriana said quietly, ignoring Blackhand's taunt and forcibly holding back her rage. "All of Azeroth defies you."

"Ha! Do you really believe that your pitiful Alliance can defeat me?" Blackhand roared. "Do you think this pathetic band of rabble calling themselves the Horde will help? They aren't even worthy of the name."

"Careful, mon," Zala'din said calmly, lazily unsheathing his twin blades. "Dat be my Horde ya talkin' about. Trust me when I say we gonna show you da meanin' of pain."

The troll commander's cool, intractable confidence was oddly comforting, and Auriana suddenly felt far braver with him at her side.

"Choose your words carefully, Blackhand," she said, echoing Zala'din's sentiment. "My Alliance was not so pitiful when it destroyed the Iron Docks, nor when we took the Pit. I also can't help but notice that you are very much alone. Where is the might of the Blackrock now?"

Blackhand growled, shifting his grip on his mighty hammer.

"Still a bitch with a smart mouth, I see. Tell me, little girl, how are your nightmares?" Blackhand asked savagely. "You're afraid, I can see it in your eyes."

"Your concern is touching, Blackhand, but I assure you, you should be far more troubled by my rage than my fear," Auriana said roughly, summoning as much power as she was able.

She was gratified to see Blackhand's eyes widen in shock as she began to glow, the white fire of her magic consuming her arms and setting her eyes aflame. While somewhat impractical, Auriana knew her arcane inferno looked downright intimidating, and she was heartened by the slight flash of fear that crossed Blackhand's face.

"To arms!" she ordered the Alliance, though to her immense surprise the Horde also moved on her command.

As one, both the Alliance and the Horde lifted their weapons and shields, while the air crackled with sudden bursts of magical power. Blackhand raised his hammer defensively, his shadowed eyes burning with impossible hatred.

"I will hang your broken bodies from the gates of this Foundry!" he snarled, gnashing his teeth in fury.

"Not if I kill you first," Auriana retorted icily, ready to kill him and have done with the whole wretched Foundry. "Soldiers of Azeroth - attack!"
Both the Alliance and the Horde leapt at Blackhand without hesitation, and soon the Crucible was consumed by one of the most chaotic battles Auriana had ever seen. Blackhand may have been alone, but he was not unprepared, and it seemed as if he rigged the entire Crucible against them.

"I'll tear this place apart if I have to!" Blackhand screamed, using his considerable arsenal of weaponry to break the room around them.

Debris suddenly rained from the ceiling, and the soldiers of Azeroth were forced to scatter wildly to avoid being crushed. Explosions detonated at random around the room, and more than one soldier was caught in the crossfire. It was a masterful strategy, in that it allowed Blackhand to fight smaller duels against his opponents, while the others were forced to flee from his bombs and the collapsing ceiling of the Crucible.

Her body singing with adrenaline, Auriana danced amongst the debris, shooting spells at Blackhand as she wove in and out of the falling metal. Luckily, she was small and swift, and she had a significant advantage over some of the larger and bulkier members of the Alliance and Horde forces. More than one soldier had already been crushed by the debris, and it was only through sheer luck and a spectacular sense of timing that Auriana avoided her own demise.

As the fight wore on, one particularly large chunk of metal sheared off from the ceiling and came plummeting downwards, heading straight for Auriana. She managed to dodge neatly to the side, but as she whirled to face Blackhand once more she realised that Zala'din's second in command had not been so lucky. The troll shaman tumbled to the floor as a long piece of metal hit her from behind, and she was suddenly in very real danger of being crushed entirely.

Gritting her teeth, Auriana threw out a hand and teleported the shaman to her side, only managing to extract her at the very last second. The troll woman reappeared at Auriana's feet, covering her head with her hands before she realised that she was safe. She jerked her chin upwards in surprise, her expression hovering somewhere between disbelief and begrudging respect.

"You... you saved me," she muttered.

"Don't get too excited," Auriana said drily, hauling the shaman back to her feet. "I'm sure you'll have plenty more opportunities to die today."

Auriana thought she saw a small smile flicker across the shaman's face, but a second later she was all business once more. She acknowledged Auriana with a gruff nod, before turning her attention back to the fight against Blackhand. Auriana followed her lead, and together the two women renewed their assault on the master of Blackrock Foundry. Unfortunately, Blackhand was well protected from their magic by his heavy elemental armour, and the dark magic that ensorcelled his namesake arm. He was a mighty warrior, and Auriana couldn't help but to be impressed by the way he maneuvered himself about the room, forcing the Alliance and the Horde to into the flying debris and the chaotic explosions. There were more bodies lying motionless on the floor than Auriana would have liked at this stage of the fight, and her fiery anger burned brighter for each soldier that fell.

It was difficult to fight with so much debris crashing around the room, and Auriana had to work mightily to keep herself and her men protected. She alternated between throwing powerful frostbolts at Blackhand and shielding her soldiers, even resorting to teleporting some of her men to safety as she had done with Te'jaia. It was nigh on impossible to concentrate on so many things at once, and at one point she jumped backwards from an explosion, only to wander in to Blackhand's range.

The orc's cruel eyes widened as he saw her, and he pushed violently past his current opponents in
order to charge her down. He was frighteningly quick for such a large creature, and only Auriana's superb reflexes saved her from the mighty punch he threw in her direction. She blinked away instantly, but Blackhand was still able to draw blood across her cheek and nose before she vanished.

Unfortunately, Auriana was forced off balance as she landed and she tumbled over, landing heavily on her backside as Blackhand continued his terrifying advance. Auriana scrambled backwards on her elbows, only just managing to roll out of the way as Blackhand's hammer crashed to the floor only inches from where her feet had just been. Growling angrily, the orc came on again, swinging the hammer back to deal her a killing blow. Still dazed as she from the glancing strike across her face, Auriana had no other choice but to summon a wall of solid ice between her and Blackhand, praying that he wouldn't be able to get through.

His muscles straining with effort, Blackhand brought his hammer down against the ice wall, shattering it into a million pieces and raining chunks of ice down on Auriana's unprotected body. At that same moment, however, he was hit powerfully from behind, as Zala'din slammed his twin swords into a vulnerable part of Blackhand's armour. The warlord howled angrily as Zala'din's blades tasted flesh, and he was forced to turn his attention away from Auriana and back to the troll Commander.

Shaking her head to clear it, Auriana used a nearby piece of debris to clamber back to her feet, forcing herself to concentrate as she regathered her power. Blackhand had his attention occupied by Zala'din and a number of other brave Horde who had come to her rescue, and Auriana took advantage of his distraction to resume her assault. She sent frost flying from her fingers with renewed energy, and was gratified to see that Blackhand's furious defense had begun to slow.

Despite his unbelievable prowess, it was soon clear to Auriana that Blackhand would be unable to hold out forever. He was quite simply outnumbered, and even though many soldiers of the Alliance and the Horde had fallen, Blackhand would be unable to outlast them all. Evidently, it seemed Blackhand had come to the same conclusion, for he forced Zala'din and the other soldiers back with a mighty swing of his hammer, and raised the weapon high in the air over his head.

"We will rebuild this place… but no one will be able to put you back together!" Blackhand crowed, slamming his hammer into the floor with such power that it actually shattered, and together the Alliance and the Horde tumbled down into the darkness below.

The group of combatants plummeted only a single storey, but it was enough to jar Auriana's bones and set her teeth rattling in her skull as she landed heavily on her back. Of course, Blackhand was prepared for the fall, and was the only one who managed to remain on his feet. It was at that moment Auriana realised that the Alliance and Horde had wandered into something of a trap, as the room suddenly filled with unforeseen Blackrock orcs and mobile siege weaponry.

Falling in a fight was incredibly dangerous, especially for a mage, and Auriana only just managed to scramble to her feet before she was crushed beneath a demolisher.

"Spread out!" she hollered as she dived out of the way, her muscles burning painfully from the exertion and the pain of her fall.

Auriana crouched low behind a pile of debris, taking a second to catch her breath as she desperately tried to come up with a plan of attack. When the assault had begun, Blackhand had been outnumbered, though his stunt with the collapsing floor had more than evened the odds, and as it stood the Azeroth coalition was in serious trouble. The demolishers were fast moving and deadly, and the Blackrock orcs that ringed the upper balcony of the room were picking off soldiers with precise and deadly explosive shots.
Lost as she was in her thoughts, Auriana started in fright as someone else dropped down beside her, and she had a spell ready to unleash before she realised that it was a sweaty and panting Zala'din.

"Still alive, little lion?" he asked, wiping blood out of his eyes as he stared out at Blackhand.

"Mostly," Auriana said wryly, grinning up at her troll companion.

"Dem demolishers gonna be a problem," Zala'din observed.

"I know. I think we have the best chance if you have your Horde keep Blackhand occupied while we take them out," Auriana said quickly, lifting her hand to signal her intent to Hafela from across the room. "I'm going to head up top to deal with those snipers."

Without waiting for a reply, and trusting Zala'din to do his part, Auriana teleported herself to the upper balcony, where a dozen Iron Horde soldiers were taking pot shots at the Alliance and Horde forces. Those closest to Auriana looked over in stunned surprise as she suddenly appeared in their midst, and she knew she had very little time to execute her strategy.

Auriana forced her tired legs into motion and slammed into the nearest orc, her hands alive with destructive magic. The Iron soldier died instantly, surprise still written across his face as he crumpled to the floor. Auriana caught his rifle as he fell, gripping it like a staff as she whirled to catch a blow from the orc standing on her other side. She kicked out powerfully, sending the orc stumbling backwards, before nestling the gun into her shoulder and shooting him in the face at point blank range.

The other orcs on the balcony had now realised that they were under attack and began to turn their guns towards Auriana, but she refused to allow herself to be caught. She hurled her stolen rifle at a nearby orc to throw off the soldier's aim, and blinked forwards in the wake of the flying weapon. The orc died as quickly as her comrades, unable to recover her rifle in time and falling to the savage spike of ice that Auriana drove through her chest.

Auriana was on the move again even before the orc's corpse hit the ground, blinking around the upper balcony to find her next target. It was difficult, tiring work, but Auriana's determination to destroy Blackhand won out over her fatigue, and she lost herself in the frantic carnage. She wreaked havoc amongst the orc snipers, using her magic to successfully avoid being shot as she slaughtered orc after orc. At one point, she even managed to get an orc to shoot one of his comrades in the gut, having blinked out of the way just in time.

Finally, she allowed herself to stop as the last orc died at her feet, sagging back against the Foundry wall as she fought to catch her breath. She was feeling distinctly light headed from her exertions, and knew that she couldn't keep fighting for much longer. Fortunately, from her vantage point she could see that the Blackrock demolishers now lay in ruins, and that the Horde had managed to force Blackhand back into a corner.

Sensing that she had a chance to finish the fight, Auriana teleported back down into the heart of the battle, her arms shining with power as she confronted the orc warlord.

"Your Foundry lies in ruins, Blackhand," she growled. "You have no men, no weapons, and no hope. Surrender to me now, and I may yet be merciful."

"Never!" Blackhand screamed, raising his terrible hammer high in the air. "This Foundry's molten heart will devour you!"

There was absolutely no fear in Blackhand's voice, and Auriana realised a moment too late that she...
had underestimated the warlord once more, as he collapsed the floor for the second time. This was no single storey drop, however, but rather a plunge down into the very depths of the Blackrock citadel. Blackhand seemed unconcerned by the rapid descent, evidently protected by whatever dark elemental magics flowed through his body, but Auriana realised her men would not be so fortunate.

"Catch them!" she screamed to her fellow mages, the wind of their fall all but tearing the words from her mouth.

Auriana hurled spells almost faster than thought, targeting Alliance and Horde alike as she sought to slow their relentless plummet to the magma filled platform below. She caught as many as she was able, and prayed to the Light that those she had missed would be aided by someone else. Her forces had already been significantly thinned by the fighting so far, and she knew they couldn't afford to lose anyone else if they were to succeed.

At the very last second, Auriana realised that she had failed to cast a spell on **herself**, and she only just managed to slow her descent mere feet from the molten ground. Late as she was in casting the spell, Auriana was not able to slow herself by as much as she might have liked, and she slammed into the floor with a mighty crack, her left shoulder taking the brunt of the impact. She instantly felt pins and needles race down her arm as her shoulder throbbed painfully, though she had no time to dwell on the injury. Auriana was certain that the bone wasn't broken, however, nor dislocated, and that would be enough for now.

This has not been my year for shoulders, she thought drily, rolling to the side and springing back to her feet in one smooth movement.

She looked around quickly, and was relieved to see that everyone who had been alive at the time of the fall was still standing, reforming their lines as they prepared to engage Blackhand once more. The heat in the heart of the Foundry was blistering, and Auriana instantly felt sweat bead on her brow as she moved. Only Blackhand seemed unaffected, clearly in his element in the smouldering core of his Foundry. He seemed to draw power from the surrounding magma, and he threw himself against the Alliance and the Horde in a terrifying, unprecedented frenzy.

Auriana soon began to suspect that the heart of the Foundry was as close to hell as she ever wanted to get. Burning magma flowed all around, and Blackhand was setting off massive slag explosions at random. She was forced to keep moving in order to stay alive, which notably reduced her combat effectiveness. It was difficult to summon powerful or precise magic on the run, and Auriana was reduced to harrying Blackhand from afar with her weakened spells. From what she could see through the haze of heat and flying slag, most of the other casters were similarly affected, and Auriana began to seriously question whether her men would be able to outlast the seemingly tireless warlord.

This has to end soon, she thought grimly, sliding to the side as yet another slag bomb exploded close on her heels.

It was difficult to breathe the thick, sulfurous air, and Auriana found it damnably difficult to concentrate for long enough to think of a plan. It seemed as if she had been running forever, and her still recovering body had begun to ache with the effort. Her skin felt as if it were on fire, and she could barely see from all the smoke and flame in the air.

How can Blackhand possibly withstand this heat? she wondered. He must be attuned to the Foundry's... oh...

Auriana shook her head hard as the thought came to her, wondering how she could have possibly been so thick. The Foundry was Blackhand's home, and the great heart of flame that lay at its core
was more a part of him than anything else. The same elemental fury that powered the Foundry flowed through Blackhand's own armour, and Auriana finally realised that the Foundry itself held the key to the warlord's undoing.

*You like fire, Blackhand?* she snarled inwardly. *Let's see how you like this…*

Skidding to a halt and hoping desperately that she wouldn't be hit by a stray bomb, Auriana drew on the furious power of the flame all around her. The fiery heart of the Foundry and the fiery heart of Blackhand were indelibly intertwined, and Auriana intended to exploit that relationship to her full advantage. She even went so far as to ever so carefully tap into her fury, drawing on a thin thread of pure rage to bolster her magic as she formed a sympathetic link between the falling magma and Blackhand's armour. She flicked a hand, sending a powerful pulse of magic not towards Blackhand, but rather towards one of the falling curtains of magma that encircled the Foundry's heart. Somewhat to her surprise, the sympathetic link held, if tenuously, and as the magma bubbled and popped under Auriana's spell, so too did the magma flowing through Blackhand's armour. It wasn't enough to kill him, of course, but with the damage he had already sustained, it was enough for Auriana's purposes. Blackhand roared in shock and agony as his own armour turned against him, and as he stumbled to one knee in surprise, Auriana saw her chance.

"Zala'din!" she screamed, gathering her magic for a second devastating assault, "Get ready!"

Auriana drew on as much power as she was able, willing a potent spell into existence as she somehow managed to ignore the falling bombs and the magma and the pain in her body. Her attention was entirely consumed by Blackhand, and the entire world had been reduced to the sight of his hated face. She howled away her fear and anger as she finally unleashed, sending the most powerful frostbolt she had ever cast flying towards Blackhand. It took him hard in the chest, his molten powers cooling as icy fractals cracked his armour and rendered him completely vulnerable to attack.

"Now!" Auriana screamed to Zala'din, falling to one knee as her reckless use of magic finally took its toll.

The troll commander read her intent with uncanny understanding, launching himself into the air with both swords raised. He slammed into Blackhand with terrific strength, shattering the warlord's armour and sending him flying across the molten floor. Blackhand roared in agony as he fell, his hammer skidding away from his grasp. His breath came in ragged gasps, and blood poured from his chest where Zala'din had opened him from shoulder to shoulder. He struggled valiantly to reach his weapon, though it was clear to Auriana that the Blackrock warlord was on his last legs. Zala'din strode forwards ruthlessly, his face cold, and he neatly hamstrung Blackhand so that he couldn't move. Auriana pulled herself back to her feet and followed in his wake, trembling in anticipation of Blackhand's death.

Strangely, however, Zala'din didn't finish the warlord off. Instead, he wordlessly held out one of his swords to Auriana, and with a start she realised that he was offering her the chance to slay Blackhand personally. Auriana's heart surged with a complex and indescribable series of emotions as she considered the sword, though in her heart of hearts she knew she wanted nothing more than to slaughter Blackhand herself and claim her revenge.

Despite her fatigue, Auriana walked forwards on shaking legs and willingly accepted the shining, bloodstained weapon. Without hesitation, she crouched down over Blackhand, her small hand at his throat, and pressed the tip of Zala'din's blade to his chest. She supposed the scene might have looked comical from the outside, the tiny female mage crouched over the monstrous orc warlord, though there was nothing amusing about what she intended to do.
"You want to know how my nightmares are, Blackhand?" she snarled, gazing down at the orc with pitiless eyes.

Without waiting for a reply, she leant her entire weight against the sword hilt, grunting with the effort as she thrust the blade through Blackhand's chest with such force that the point hit the floor. The warlord's eyes widened in shock and pain as his flesh and sinew parted before the cold steel of Zala'din's sword, choking horrifically as blood bubbled up through the wound. Auriana held Blackhand's throat tightly as he died, shivering with a dark, sinister satisfaction as she felt the last desperate rattle of air leave his lungs.

"They're all better now," she whispered, pushing Blackhand's lifeless head roughly to the side as she withdrew the blade from his chest in a single, graceful stroke.

Not a single person spoke as Auriana rose to her feet, trying not to let her legs shake as she fought to rein in her surging emotions. Blackhand's death had lifted a great weight from her shoulders, but at the same time she wondered if his death would ever be enough to heal what he had broken within her. She felt slightly faint as the adrenaline of the fight faded from her body, and she once again felt the same strange hollowness in her chest that she had experienced after defeating Garrosh Hellscream.

Of course, there would be time enough to process her complex feelings later, and Auriana forced her spine straight as she turned back to face her soldiers. It took her awhile to realise that the core of the Foundry was eerily silent, given the number of Horde and Alliance currently ringing the space, and Auriana wondered what had so captured their attention. It took her a moment longer to then understand that everyone was staring at her, with expressions ranging from grim approval to outright fear. She also realised that they were all waiting for her to do something, and she wasn't quite sure how to meet their expectations.

"The Foundry is ours!" she cried, her tone belying her uncertainty as she lifted Zala'din's bloody sword aloft. "For the glory of the Alliance - and the Horde!"

Somewhat to Auriana's surprise, members of both factions roared their approval back to her, the oppressive air suddenly filled with fearsome cries of victory. Auriana smiled tightly, proud of her men - and the Horde - for having been able to work together to bring Blackhand down. The relationship between the Alliance and the Horde was still fraught with mistrust, of course, but as Auriana locked eyes with her Horde counterpart, she couldn't help but wonder if two victories had been achieved this day. The Alliance and Horde no longer stood apart, as they had at the start of the battle, and she noticed that some soldiers had even begun to work together as the cries of victory faded and they began to tally the wounded and the dead.

Auriana turned back to Blackhand's corpse, nodding respectfully to Zala'din as she did so. She did not return his sword immediately, however, instead using it to sever Blackhand's damaged right arm at the shoulder.

"Takin' a souvenir, little lion?" Zala'din asked, coming up behind her as she sawed through Blackhand's heavy muscle.

"Ah, it isn't for me," Auriana said, blanching as the arm finally came free. "Khadgar requested I retrieve the warlord's arm, if it was intact. I have no idea why, however."

"Don'tcha be a mage?" Zala'din asked, his tusks twitching. "How'd ya not know?"

"I'm not that kind of a mage," Auriana said, pulling a face. "I do the killing, Khadgar does the... tinkering."
Her grim task done, Auriana lifted Blackhand's arm over her shoulder for transport, and passed Zala'din his gore covered sword. She then looked over to where Blackhand's mighty hammer had fallen, still smouldering despite its master's demise.

"Do you want it?" she asked Zala'din thoughtfully. "The hammer, I mean."

"I have no need for a hammer," the troll said slowly. "My swords be just fine. I think da hammer be yours by right, Commander. After all, ya be the one who killed him."

"I suppose," Auriana said skeptically, "Though I couldn't have done it without my men— or yours, for that matter. You have just as much right to it as I do."

"No, mon," Zala'din said seriously, shaking his head as he retrieved the great weapon. "Some tings are just— right. All trolls know dis. Da hammer is yours."

He held it out to her with a solemn nod, his golden eyes sharp and sincere. Auriana, however, hesitated, biting her lip thoughtfully as she considered the mighty weapon. She had no need for a hammer almost as tall as she was, nor did she need to carry a permanent reminder of Blackhand, though the more she thought about it, the more she came to realise that she might have a purpose for the weapon after all. The hammer was so heavy that she needed both hands to lift it, carefully balancing Blackhand's severed arm over her left shoulder while she slung the hammer over her right. She grunted slightly as she took the weight, but it was easy enough to carry once its mass was spread out over her upper back. She wouldn't be able to hold it for long, of course, but she could bear up well enough to get the hammer back to Stormwind.

"Thank you, Commander," she said seriously. "Really."

Zala'din grinned, and looked as if he were about to say something, but Auriana dissuaded him with a shake of her head. Never one for maudlin displays of emotion, she turned her attention towards the assembled group of Alliance soldiers, eager to conclude the day's business so that she might never have to return to the Foundry again.

"Hafela!" she called to her lieutenant, who hurried over swiftly at the command. "Fall back to Lunarfall, wounded first, and have some of the gnome engineers leave explosive charges behind as you go. Reduce the Foundry to rubble, I don't want to take the chance that Hellscream - or anyone else for that matter - will salvage weapons from this place."

"I will see it done, Commander," Hafela said, appearing bloody but unwounded. "Do you intend to join us?"

"No," Auriana said quickly. "I need to get this arm to Khadgar while it's still— er— fresh, and then I will report back to Stormwind. The King should know what has happened here today."

Of course, Auriana didn't mention that she had more than one reason for wanting to return to Stormwind as soon as possible. With Blackhand dead, Auriana was finally free from the dark shadow he had cast over her existence, and right now all that she wanted in the world was to be back in Varian's arms. She was also bone tired, and she very much wanted to simply collapse in a bed and sleep for a week.

"As you wish, ma'am. I shall see to it right away," Hafela said crisply.

"Headin' home, Commander?" Zala'din asked, folding his arms across his lean chest and studying her thoughtfully.

Auriana sighed, rubbing a tired hand across her eyes. In front of any other member of the Horde,
she wouldn't have dared to show such vulnerability, but she found herself strangely comfortable around the troll Commander after having fought such a fine battle at his side.

"It's been too long," she admitted, her thoughts inevitably turning back to Varian.

"I know what ya mean," Zala'din agreed. "I'll be takin' da Horde back ta Frostfire as soon as I can… and den I think I'll reward myself with a very potent drink."

"You've certainly earned it. I'll make sure that we do not detonate the Foundry until your men are clear," Auriana promised, with a significant look at her Lieutenant.

"I'd appreciate dat," Zala'din said, grinning winningly at Hafela.

"I'll see to that now, Commander, if you don't mind," Hafela said, flushing slightly at Zala'din's smile as she turned to carry out Auriana's orders.

Zala'din chuckled slightly as the draenei departed, and Auriana sighed sadly as she realised that in another lifetime, they might have been friends.

"It's been an honour fighting with you, Zala'din," she said sincerely. "Til next time?"

He slapped her gently on the back in a comradely gesture, his face lighting up with what Auriana realised was genuine warmth. Apparently, he had enjoyed fighting with her as much as she had enjoyed fighting with him, and once again she felt a surge of regret at the fact that they stood on opposite sides.

"Til next time, little lion," the troll agreed, grinning earnestly down at her. "Til next time."
Khadgar

Khadgar sat alone in his study, trying to concentrate on the magical tome in front of him, though he inevitably found his thoughts turning to northern Gorgrond, and the battle that he knew raged there even now. Against Khadgar's better judgement, Auriana had lead an assault against Blackrock Foundry that morning, and he could only pray that the young mage and her troops would survive the attack. Despite her formidable abilities, Auriana was still recovering from her torture at the hands of the infamous warlord Blackhand, and Khadgar was greatly concerned for the safety of his friend.

He had just about given up on getting any work done when there came a soft knock at his chamber door. Khadgar looked up, closing the book and tenting his fingers on the cover as he wondered who was visiting this late in the afternoon.

"Enter," he said lightly, assuming it was his bodyguard, Cordana Felsong, wanting to discuss some matter of his safety.

Instead, he was pleasantly surprised to see Auriana herself, clearly fresh from her battle at the Foundry. Her armour was covered in sweat and grime, though she seemed largely unharmed, save for a fine red wound that split her face from cheek to cheek. She held a severed arm over one shoulder, and a mighty, molten hammer over the other, and with a sense of grim satisfaction, Khadgar realised that Blackhand must have been defeated.

"Auriana," Khadgar exclaimed, rising smoothly as she entered. "You're alive."

"Alive and victorious," she said, placing Blackhand's arm on the desk in front of Khadgar, and the hammer on the floor. "You shouldn't sound so surprised."

"I never doubted you for a second," Khadgar said honestly, bending down to inspect the magical wonder that was Blackhand's right arm more closely.

Always eager to play a with a new magical toy, Khadgar probed the arm in silence for several minutes, though he knew it would take significantly longer to unravel its true mysteries. Auriana perched herself on the edge of his desk as he worked, yawning as she unsuccessfully attempted to hide her tiredness behind her hand.

"I'm sorry, I'm boring you," Khadgar said, looking up at her with amused chagrin.

"Never," Auriana said, returning his smile, "Though I will admit I'm finding it hard to keep my eyes open. I'm not yet back to my full strength, and the fight today was exhausting."

"Are you alright?" Khadgar asked seriously, gazing down at her with concern.

"I'll be fine after I've had some sleep," she said softly. "My shoulder's a bit banged up, and this cut across my face stings... but for once it seems I've managed to survive a fight without any major injuries. I'd like to think of that as progress."

"I should think so, though I was asking on a more personal level," Khadgar said. "I know it can't have been easy facing down Blackhand after... well, after everything."

Auriana looked down at the floor, and she suddenly looked much older.

"It wasn't. I had a panic attack," she confessed. "Two, actually. I thought I was fine, until I actually
had to fight, but my courage simply… failed."

"You survived," Khadgar said encouragingly. "You won."

"I don't know how," she said quietly. "I've never really been afraid like that in a fight before. I can't say it's an experience I'm eager to repeat."

"You survived because you're strong," Khadgar said firmly. "Did you ever wonder why I gave you Lunarfall?"

Auriana shrugged and shook her head.

"There was quite literally no one else available?" she quipped.

"Well, there was that…" Khadgar said drily. "But in all seriousness… Varian gave me very strict instructions. Quite unusually, he told me not to select someone until we were already on Draenor. We both knew there was a very good chance we'd all die on the other side of the Portal, and that there would be no need for a command structure. Beyond that, he told me to choose someone who had proven themselves in the fight to take the Portal, someone who had the power and the savagery to meet the Iron Horde head on."

"So you chose an angry, suicidal young woman with limited experience?" Auriana snorted. "Superb decision-making there, Khadgar."

Khadgar shook his head at her own self-deprecating evaluation, even though the description was somewhat amusing.

"That's not quite accurate, Auriana. Your record was exemplary up to and including the Pandaria campaign, and you showed excellent command skills at the Siege of Orgrimmar," he countered.

"I'm kidding, Khadgar… well, mostly. Nothing I said was technically incorrect," she said, smiling tiredly. "I do know I wasn't the worst choice for command, even if I wasn't precisely the best."

"There were other choices," Khadgar admitted. "But you… even if you aren't the cleverest person in a fight, or the strongest, or the best, you always find a way to be the last one standing."

Auriana cocked her head to the side, her impossibly blue eyes sharp.

"Are you saying you chose me because I'm stubborn?" she asked, clearly torn between amusement and exasperation.

"That's one way of looking at it, I suppose," Khadgar said. "Though I believe my choice has paid off so far."

He stared her seriously, hoping to impress on her just how remarkable she truly was.

"What I'm trying to say, Auri, is that I'm proud of you," he said quietly, walking around his desk and gently taking her hands. "There are not many people who could have survived what you did, let alone return to face your tormenter a second time."

Auriana looked down, and Khadgar saw that her eyes were shining with unshed tears. To Khadgar's immense surprise, she reached out and pulled him into a rough embrace, tucking her head against his chest. There was nothing romantic in the gesture, of course, and strangely Khadgar felt a fatherly sense of protection come over him as he held the younger mage in his arms.
He allowed her as much time as she needed, noting that she was trembling slightly as she fought back tears. Khadgar wasn't used to such a physical display from Auriana, but he knew that right now she needed his unwavering support, and he was more than willing to give it to her.

*She's so small,* he thought, reaching out to tentatively stroke her hair while she wept quietly against his chest.

It was some time before she finally looked up, her eyes red rimmed but brighter than they had previously been.

"Thank you, Khadgar," she said, her voice shaky but warm.

"You are most welcome," he said. "Do you want to tell me what happened?"

Auriana hesitated briefly, though she was soon deeply embroiled in the thrilling tale of the Foundry's downfall. To Khadgar's surprised satisfaction, it seemed as if the temporary pact between the Alliance and Horde had held, and that Auriana had forged some kind of personal relationship with her opposite number in the Horde. Most fascinating, however, was the story of Blackhand's demise, not least because of the way Auriana had used the indelible magical link forged by Blackhand's continued proximity to the heart of his Foundry against him.

"Sympathy," Khadgar said, highly impressed. "I didn't know you were proficient in sympathetic magic."

"I'm not," Auriana said lightly. "But I know the theory, and I was running out of options at the time."

"You're impossible, Khadgar said, shaking his head. "In all my years, I've never come across someone so… instinctive… when it comes to magic. You aren't elegant, or precise, but somehow you just barrel on through and make things work."

"Was that supposed to be a compliment?" Auriana said, raising an eyebrow skeptically.

"Yes, and a sincere compliment at that. You're very talented," Khadgar said firmly. "Which does make me wonder… why have you never put your name forward for consideration as an Archmage?"

Auriana's eyes narrowed ever so slightly, and she fixed Khadgar with a penetrating stare.

"My knowledge of the arcane is not sufficient," she said slowly. "I've improved under Jaina's tutelage, but I've still got a long way to go."

"Oh, please, Auri, we both know you could pass the trials within six months if you really put your mind to it," Khadgar argued. "Perhaps a year, if you were lazy. What's the real reason?"

"I like what I do," Auriana said simply. "Despite the hardship, and the pain, and the fear, and everything else I have to deal with… my work is worthwhile. After being tortured in the Foundry, I wasn't sure if I'd be able to return to the front… but the battle today reminded me that serving the Alliance is what I was born to do, and I'm not ready to give it up."

"Do you really think becoming an Archmage will prevent you from standing with the Alliance?" Khadgar asked.

"You don't understand, Khadgar. I'm *happy* being a Commander," she said, frowning. "Being an Archmage means more responsibility... it means people hovering over me, *expecting* things from
me… it means I'd never get to fight at the front…"

"You're not going to be a commander forever, Auriana. When this war ends - and it will - you'll be
the woman who defeated the Iron Horde. Do you really think your service will go unrewarded?
You'll be promoted, and then you'll have exactly the same problem," Khadgar pointed out. "I
would suspect that being an Archmage would give you far more freedom than would becoming a
Marshal of the Alliance."

"I could refuse a promotion," Auriana protested weakly.

"It would be less than you deserve," Khadgar said frankly. "In much the same way that you
refusing to become an Archmage is less than you deserve. Come now, you must have
put some thought into what you will do after all is said and done on Draenor, and you return to
Azeroth."

"You sound like Varian," she grumbled, looking distinctly less than pleased. "Or my father."

"Varian wants you to become an Archmage?" Khadgar asked in surprise, pointedly ignoring the
second part of her comment.

"No. Or at least, not that I know of. He wants me to claim my family's inheritance and become a
duchess," Auriana muttered, staring down at her hands. "Which would be much worse."

Khadgar knew of Auriana's past, and knew that she had noble heritage, but the true consequences
of her parentage had never really occurred to him.

"Varian wants to marry you," he mused, wondering why he'd never seen it before, "And he can't
marry a woman who isn't of noble birth…"

He had, of course, seen how Varian had suffered after Auriana's recent torture and near death. The
King's fierce love for his Commander was plain to everyone who had been in the room while
Auriana had lain dying, but Khadgar hadn't really considered the future of such a relationship until
now.

"I am not going to be the Queen of Stormwind, Khadgar. It is not going to happen," Auriana said
firmly, though Khadgar could tell she was trying to convince herself as much as she was trying to
convince him.

"Still..." Khadgar said thoughtfully. "I've known Varian a long time. He is very serious about you,
and he can be very persuasive when he wants to be."

"He's not as persuasive as you might think," Auriana muttered sulkily, rising to her feet and pacing
slowly around Khadgar's study.

Khadgar studied her carefully, and from the slight wrinkle in her nose and the way she couldn't
meet his eyes, he realised that there was something she wasn't telling him.

"Oh… he's already asked you, hasn't he?"

Auriana picked up one of the magical curios on Khadgar's shelf, clearly reluctant to answer the
question.

"Not in so many words, but… yes… he has raised the question on occasion," she said finally.

"What did you say?" Khadgar asked, trying not to seem too curious.
"The same thing I'm going to say to you," she growled irritably. "Stop talking about it, you gossipy old goat."

"You called Varian a gossipy old goat?" Khadgar teased, even though he knew he was treading on dangerous ground.

"Khadgar, if you say one more word on this topic I will turn you into a goat," Auriana said witheringly. "Or a sheep, or anything else that might take my fancy at the time. Are we clear?"

"As crystal," Khadgar said, taking far too much enjoyment from ribbing her. "Though you still haven't really explained why you won't put your name forwards for Archmage."

Auriana sighed wearily, replacing the magical artifact on the shelf and crossing her arms across her chest.

"If I promised to consider it, would you stop haranguing me?" she asked drily.

"It depends," Khadgar said, retaking a seat behind his desk.

"On what?"

"On whether I thought you were lying to me," Khadgar said lightly.

"If I promised to think on it, I would. I always keep my word, Khadgar," she said seriously.

She frowned and sighed, running a hand through her already messy hair.

"You're probably right, you know," she conceded. "About my becoming an Archmage, I mean. I suppose that change is somewhat inevitable… though I had always thought that my rage would be something of a barrier to promotion… at least until today…"

"What changed?" Khadgar asked interestedly, sensing there was more she needed to get off her chest.

"When I was in the Foundry today, I… I tapped into my fury," Auriana said carefully. "Just… just the smallest bit, you understand… and I didn't lose control. I'm starting to think Jaina might be right, and that it might be possible to learn to control my… abilities…"

"You do?" Khadgar asked, sitting forwards. "Why didn't you say anything before?"

"Because I only just came around to the idea today, Khadgar, and I'm so tired I can barely remember my own name at this point," Auriana said.

"I see," he said. "Well, I've been doing some research, and I'm also inclined to agree with Jaina. If tamed, your fury could become a considerable weapon."

"You believe Jaina to be correct? Why didn't you say something?" Auriana said, frowning.

"Because you're the one who needs to believe it, not me," Khadgar explained. "Your willpower is key to unlocking your power, and there was little point in me raising the issue until you had come to the realisation yourself. If you don't believe you can control your rage, and I mean really believe it, then you've lost the fight before you've even started."

"I suppose that makes sense," Auriana said, rubbing her eyes.

"I propose a compromise," Khadgar said. "You continue training with Jaina, and with me, and
together we will work on mastering your rage. There will be no pressure and no expectations, but if
the time comes and I think you're ready to face the trials, you will consider the opportunity."

"What do the trials involve?" Auriana asked, her curiosity clearly getting the better of her.

"Well, in the very early days of the Kirin Tor, one achieved the rank of Archmage by achieving
some great magical deed - slaying a powerful creature, inventing a revolutionary new spell, that
sort of thing," Khadgar explained. "Nowadays, however, it's far more common simply to face the
trials, in which you must demonstrate proficiency with all basic spells, as well as your ability to
work with all schools of magic. You are assessed by the Council of Six, and they vote on whether
you should be admitted to the rank of Archmage. In the case of a tie vote, you may reattempt the
trials a month later. If you fail a second time, you must wait a full year before submitting your
name again."

"What happens if you fail a second time?"

"You cannot submit your name again," Khadgar said. "Not all mages will develop the skills and
the power necessary to attain the rank of Archmage."

"I see. Are the trials difficult?" Auriana wondered.

"For you? Doubtful, at least once your arcane skills are up to scratch," Khadgar said firmly. "I'd be
very surprised if you were admitted with anything less than a unanimous vote."

Auriana still looked somewhat doubtful, but Khadgar could see that she was slowly coming around
to his way of thinking.

"Very well, I accept your compromise," Auriana said slowly. "Not only because I'm very tired, and
I want to be back in Stormwind tonight."

"What are you going to do with that thing?" Khadgar said, pointing at Blackhand's hammer.

"I thought Varian might like it. After all, it was Blackhand who oversaw the fall of Stormwind in
our timeline," Auriana said, running her fingers lightly over the haft of the weapon.

"You know," Khadgar said slyly, "Most women would give a man a handkerchief or a posey as a
token of their affections. Not a half-tonne hammer."

"Come now, Khadgar, it doesn't weigh that much," she said, hefting it over her uninjured shoulder
with barely a grimace.

She settled the hammer into a more comfortable position, grinning despite her obvious tiredness.

"Besides, I wouldn't even know where to find a handkerchief, let alone a posey. Killing a warlord
and taking his hammer, on the other hand… well, that's just my idea of a good time," she added,
some of her old strength returning to her voice.

"I can see why Varian likes you," Khadgar observed wryly. "Birds of a bloody feather, you two…"

Auriana smiled and blushed prettily at the comment, clearly pleased that Khadgar felt she and
Varian were a good match.

"I really should be going," she said.

"Did you need me to open the portal for you?" Khadgar offered, noting the dark bags under her
eyes and her general lethargy.

"No," she said firmly, waving him off. "I'm fine."

Auriana reached out a hand to cast the spell, her arms glowing lightly, only to have the portal flicker twice before failing completely. Khadgar said nothing as she hung her head and sighed, clearly frustrated but also resigned to her current inability.

"Open a portal, please," she muttered. "Without commentary."

Khadgar held up his hands defensively, smirking.

"I wasn't going to say a word," he said lightly, as he opened a path to Stormwind with little effort.

Auriana moved towards the portal, the shining blue light casting dancing shadows on her face.

"Thank you," she said reluctantly.

"Anytime," Khadgar said sincerely. "And Auriana… I'm very glad you're safe."

"So am I," she said drily, though her eyes sparkled with genuine affection as she stepped through the portal and towards the safety of her beloved home.
Varian

Varian had tried to go about his day as normal, but it was rather difficult when he knew that Alliance soldiers, including Auriana, were right now fighting - and possibly dying - while he sat uselessly in the safety of his keep. He had spent much of his morning with Anduin, who had done his best to keep Varian distracted, though in the end his efforts had been to no avail. In fact, Varian's already poor attitude had worsened so much by early afternoon that Genn Greymane had finally stepped in, chastising him for terrorising the palace servants and thumping around the castle like an angry bear.

At Greymane's none too gentle insistence, Varian was now broodingly perched upon his throne with the worgen King at his side, idly drumming his fingers on the cool stone as he awaited any sort of news from Draenor. The throne room was largely empty, save for a few guards, Greymane, and Varian himself, word having quickly spread throughout the palace of the King's terrible temper. Somewhat unfortunately, Varian had a reputation amongst those who dwelt in Stormwind Keep, and they were all very adept at hiding from his displeasure when necessary.

Greymane had the good sense not to try to engage Varian in conversation, instead spending much of his time talking animatedly to the Captain of the Guard. Varian was only listening with half an ear, his mind quite literally worlds away as he focused his impatient attention on the stone archway that lead to his throne. Of course, Varian's agitation did nothing to speed up the waiting process, and it was around four in the afternoon by the time word of the assault arrived. Varian's attention was initially roused by a small commotion at the entrance to the throne room, and his heart instantly leapt to his throat as he recognised a small, pale woman that could only have been Auriana.

"Your Majesties," the herald announced, "Commander Auriana Fenwild of Lunarfall to see you."

"Send her in," Varian said urgently, wrestling mightily with the temptation to leap off his throne and simply run to Auriana as she approached.

He managed to control the powerful instinct by clamping down onto the arms of his throne with a white-knuckled grip, his breath quickening as Auriana walked slowly towards him with a monstrous, molten hammer carefully balanced across her shoulders. All the air seemed to have been forced from Varian's lungs as he took her in, so relieved was he to see that Auriana was still alive. She paused before the throne and placed the hammer on the ground, head first, using it for balance as she bowed respectfully low before the Kings of Stormwind and Gilneas. She had a rather impressive looking bruise under her right eye, and a thin cut across her cheekbones that oddly mirrored Varian's own facial scarring, but otherwise she looked unharmed. Which, given her impressive history of injury, was somewhat of a minor miracle in itself.

"The Foundry falls," she said formally. "Lunarfall stands."

Varian rose to his feet, forcibly reminding himself that right now he was a King and she was a Commander, and that he could scarcely afford to touch her, let alone kiss her or anything else.

"Blackhand is dead?" he asked seriously.

"I killed him myself, Your Majesty," Auriana said, her eyes glittering with fierce pride.

Varian let out the breath he didn't know he had been holding, immensely pleased that Auriana had not only managed to take the Foundry, but that she had slain the monstrous Blackhand herself. He
guessed that such a victory would be important for her continued recovery, and would go a long way towards healing the psychological trauma that she had suffered from her kidnapping and torture.

"I am very glad to hear it," Varian said sincerely. "You do yourself credit, Commander."

"I bring you Blackhand's hammer as the spoils of war," Auriana continued, tapping her hand against the great weapon. "To honour the valour of the Alliance and the unparalleled might of the King of Stormwind."

She bowed her head humbly before him once more, and more than anything Varian wanted to pull her onto the throne at his side, where she belonged.

"Stormwind is deeply honoured by this gift," Varian said formally instead, stepping off his throne to grasp the hammer.

It was an undoubtedly impressive weapon, heavy but well-balanced. Varian hefted it easily in one hand, fairly impressed that Auriana had managed to carry it herself. Of course, it was easy to forget that she was extremely fit and strong, despite her small stature. One couldn't do the sort of work she did without being objectively strong, and perhaps it wasn't so surprising that she was capable of lifting the weapon, even if she would have been unable to easily wield it in a fight.

Careful not to hit Auriana, Varian took a couple of practice swings with the hammer, getting the measure of the weapon and something of an impression of its former owner. For a second, he was taken back to his childhood, remembering his terror and his pain as he had watched his beloved city burn before the might of Blackhand's army. While he knew that this hammer represented another Blackhand and a different time, there was something immensely satisfying about holding the weapon of one of Stormwind's greatest enemies, in this reality or any other. Varian then realised that Auriana had bought the hammer specifically for him, and that it was intended as a gift from a woman to the man she loved, rather than spoils captured by a Commander for her King.

"Really," Varian said quietly, hoping she could appreciate the depths of his unspoken gratitude. "Thank you, Auriana."

"My life for my King," she replied, a tremulous note of fierce emotion hidden beneath her otherwise proper tone.

From the intense look on her face, she clearly meant every word, though Varian desperately hoped she'd never be forced to give her life on his account. He handed the weapon off to a guard to be stored in Stormwind's fabled treasure vaults, and resumed his seat on his throne.

"This is an impressive victory, Commander," Greymane said to Auriana, gazing down at her with an air of paternal pride. "Perhaps you would like to feast with Varian and I tonight, and you could regale us with stories of the battle?"

"No," Varian blurted forcefully, his mouth getting ahead of his mind.

It wasn't that he didn't want to dine with Auriana, far from it, but rather that he had hoped to spend time with her privately, rather than in the context of a formal event. A dinner would undoubtedly be pleasant, but it would be precious time spent with other people, and Varian wanted nothing more than to get Auriana alone. Of course, he couldn't say anything without further without arousing the suspicions of Greymane and his guards, who were already looking at him with confused curiosity.

"Varian, where are your manners?" Greymane growled. "This is a brave woman, she deserves your
"Of course," Varian said smoothly. "Forgive me, Commander, I misspoke. What I meant to say, is that I would be honoured if you joined us for dinner."

"The pleasure would be all mine, my Lords, though if you would permit me, I would appreciate the opportunity to rest and clean up before we dine," Auriana said, ruefully eyeing her robes. "I'm not really fit for the company of royalty."

"You are always welcome in my halls," Varian said firmly, "Whatever you may look like."

"Still, I'd rather not smell like blood and orc any longer than I have to, Your Majesty," Auriana said ruefully, "And unless you want me to pass out in the soup, I really \textit{will} need a light sleep before dinner."

"The Commander has a point, Varian," Greymane said warmly, crinkling his sensitive worgen nose.

"Very well then," Varian said, waving another one of his guards over to escort Auriana upstairs. "You can have your pick of the guest quarters, and I'll have some clean clothes bought up to you. We will dine at seven, in my personal dining chamber."

"I look forward to it, my Lords," Auriana said, bowing one last time as she was led away to her temporary quarters by the guard.

After a lengthy conversation with Greymane, Varian finally retired upstairs to his chambers to prepare for dinner. He would have preferred to spend the afternoon with Auriana, of course, but he knew she desperately needed to rest, and he certainly wouldn't be the one to deny her respite. Instead, he had taken a long bath of his own, and was now standing bare-chested in front of his wardrobe as he contemplated what to wear to the evening's feast.

Varian wasn't usually one to care about his appearance, favouring simple, practical clothing or armour over garb more fit for his station, but oddly enough he found that he wanted to impress Auriana that night at dinner. Of course, having never put any real effort into dressing, he had no idea what a woman might find attractive. When she had been alive, Tiffin had seen to it that he dressed well, but since her death Varian had usually just thrown on whatever was clean and available, without any real consideration for style or grandeur.

After several long minutes of fruitless brooding Varian had just about reached the point of peak frustration, when he was mercifully interrupted by a sudden knock at the door.

"Prince Anduin to see you, sir," one of the guards called.

"Send him in," Varian called back, turning away from his bothersome wardrobe to greet his son.

"Evening, Father," Anduin said casually, flopping down on Varian's bed and tucking his hands behind his head.

"Good evening, Anduin," Varian said warmly. "What brings you up here?"

"I ran into Genn in the library, he said that Auriana is home and that you're having dinner together later tonight," Anduin said. "He suggested I join you."

"You're most welcome," Varian said, smiling affectionately down at his son. "I had meant to come
"By your wardrobe?" Anduin asked curiously.

"Yes, as a matter of fact. Which one do you think I should wear?" Varian asked, putting the question to his son. "The blue tunic, or the black?"

"Er… does it matter?" Anduin asked, frowning in confusion. "It's just dinner."

Anduin's eyes suddenly narrowed

"Wait… are you nervous, Father?" Anduin said. "Auriana doesn't strike me as a woman who is overly concerned about appearance, if that's what's concerning you…"

"I'm not nervous," Varian protested gruffly. "It's just been some time since I've seen her, and… well, is it so wrong that I wish to look presentable?"

"No," Anduin said carefully. "It's just… odd. Are you alright?"

"I'm perfectly well, Anduin," Varian grumbled, now vehemently regretting having told his son of his concerns.

"For what it's worth, I don't believe that Auriana will have suddenly lost interest in you over the course of a few weeks," Anduin said gently, his bright blue eyes sharp.

As usual, Anduin had demonstrated an uncanny ability to see to the heart of the matter. In truth, Varian was somewhat apprehensive. So much had happened to Auriana over the course of the last couple of months, and part of him still doubted whether her confession of love for him had been genuine, or simply borne of the terrible fear and stress that she had suffered under of late. Of course, he wasn't about to say as much to Anduin, but from his wry expression it seemed as if the Prince had already puzzled out much of Varian's consternation for himself.

"Humph," Varian grunted testily, scratching his heavy chest muscles thoughtfully as he turned back to the wardrobe.

"Besides," Anduin said, rising to his feet once more. "Even if she had, I doubt her mind would be changed by your sartorial choices."

"You're probably right," Varian sighed, shaking a hand through his loosened hair. "Light, I'm acting like some love-struck adolescent."

"Oh, no, Father," Anduin said slyly, "Love-struck adolescents are far less pathetic."

Varian growled and half-heartedly swiped at Anduin's shoulder, his fingers closing on air as the Prince danced backwards out of reach. Laughing far more than Varian felt was strictly necessary, Anduin departed, shaking his head in amusement as he made his way to the door. Varian grumbled wordlessly to himself, only to swear out loud a second later as Anduin's too-cheeky voice came floating back down the corridor.

"Wear the black one, Father…"

Both Anduin and Greymane were already awaiting Varian as he arrived at his private dining room, along with several servants dressed in crisp Stormwind livery. Varian had a bigger banquet hall for larger events, but for smaller occasions that still required a sense of formality, Varian preferred the
rustic warmth of his private, oak-lined chambers. Anduin smirked slightly as Varian entered, quite clearly noting his father's choice of outfit. Fortunately, for his sake, the Prince said nothing, instead silently offering Varian a glass of whiskey. Unsurprisingly, Greymane had also helped himself to Varian's liquor, having poured a generous glass of fine Gilnean brandy. Most notably, to Varian at least, Auriana was not yet in attendance, and he found his eyes flicking towards the door more often than not as he eagerly awaited her arrival.

Most unusually, however, Auriana had still not arrived by the time it was a quarter after seven. She was normally very punctual, and Varian was just about to go and search for her when she finally arrived. She looked significantly cleaner and more alert, and if not for the cut across her face or the bruises blooming on her right cheekbone and left shoulder, it would have been impossible to tell that only hours earlier she had been fighting for her life against one of the most formidable orc warlords in history. She was wearing a sleeveless emerald green dress that was simply cut but very well made, and it hugged her curves gently before flaring out in a full skirt. Her hair was knotted loosely at the base of her neck and pinned with small white wildflowers, and to Varian's eyes she looked quite simply perfect.

No sooner had Auriana stepped into the room than Anduin dashed to her side, embracing her with a carefree enthusiasm that made Varian decidedly jealous. Not of Anduin himself, of course, but rather the fact that Anduin could embrace Auriana whenever he wanted, without fear of seeming overly familiar. Auriana returned the hug with a warm but weary smile, shifting slightly so that Anduin was on her right hand side.

"Welcome back," the Prince said warmly. "It's good to see you."

"Careful of my shoulder," Auriana said, wincing slightly, "Though I must say it's very good to see you too."

"What happened?" Anduin asked, his healer's instincts clearly roused. "Do you mind if I take a look?"

"Ah, I fell about a hundred and fifty feet, and sort of… forgot to catch myself until I had just about hit the ground…" Auriana said, her eyes flicking quickly to Varian as Anduin gently probed her injury.

"How does one forget to catch themselves, Auriana?" Varian said reproachfully.

"I was rather busy saving all the other people who were falling, my Lord," Auriana said drily. "The fight would have been over very quickly, and not in our favour, if I hadn't acted to save them."

"Still…" Varian admonished her. "You're far too reckless."

"As you keep telling me, Your Majesty," she shot back, her eyes sparkling as she graciously accepted a glass of elven wine from Greymane.

"Come, Commander," the Gilnean King said, looking curiously between Varian and Auriana. "Take a seat."

Greymane guided Auriana smoothly towards the dining table, his hand carefully placed on her lower back to help her balance. In spite of the dark, savage aspect of his nature, Greymane was an extremely sophisticated courtier, and he had a natural charisma and easy affability that Varian often envied. He was the very image of a genial and gracious Lord as he helped Auriana to her seat, and it was impossible to tell that he was capable of transforming into a rampaging wolf with merely a thought.
"Thank you, my Lord," Auriana said gratefully, sweeping her skirts beneath her legs as she sat down.

Much to Varian's disappointment, Greymane took the seat next to Auriana, leaving Varian and Anduin to sit together on the opposite side of the table. It was a petty thing, but Varian had wanted to sit at her side, and perhaps even tentatively reach for her hand beneath the table. Instead, he had to settle for sitting across from her, trying not to stare at her soft mouth as she gracefully sipped her wine.

"I do apologise for my lateness, Your Majesties," Auriana said, blushing slightly as the palace servants began to serve the first course. "I… ah… fell asleep for a bit longer than I had intended."

"Think nothing of it, Commander… and please, call me Genn. I'm not surprised you needed to rest," Greymane said. "Varian told me you've been through quite an ordeal in recent weeks."

"Did he now?" Auriana said, a slight hint of suspicion in her tone as she took a delicate sip of her soup.

"I haven't heard the details - and nor do I wish to," Greymane rumbled. "Only that you were taken prisoner in Blackrock Foundry and tortured."

"I try not to think about it too much," Auriana admitted, her eyes flicking downwards as if her soup were suddenly very interesting.

"Oh, of course not," Greymane said, shaking his head. "I apologise, my dear, I did not wish to cause you any distress."

"It's quite alright," Auriana said, smiling reassuringly. "If anything, it's a moot point now. Blackhand is dead, and his Foundry reduced to rubble."

"I'd love to hear the story," Greymane said, "If you were willing to tell it."

"Of course, Your Majesty," Auriana said politely, before launching into her gripping narrative.

Varian didn't really participate in the conversation, instead listening in silence as Auriana told the tale of the Foundry's downfall. She was a skilled storyteller, and both Anduin and Greymane were soon thoroughly swept up in the detailed account. To Varian's surprise and relief, it seemed the brief alliance she had brokered with the Horde had held, and that the soldiers of Frostwall had taken to the field in good faith.

"It's hard to believe that the Horde held up their end of the bargain," Greymane observed as Auriana finished her tale, giving voice to Varian's own thoughts.

"I'll admit, I was somewhat surprised as well," Auriana said slowly, "Though it seems my instincts were correct. The Horde Commander is a troll of honour, and a talented warrior."

"Better than me?" Varian asked, only half teasing.

It was something of a trivial point, but he didn't like the thought of Auriana praising another man's fighting skills, and especially not someone from the Horde.

"I wasn't aware that it was a competition… though of course you would win, Your Majesty," Auriana said quickly, a fetching smile playing about her lips.

The urge to touch her suddenly became overwhelming, and Varian finally gave up trying to resist.
He might not be able to take her hand, but she was still within reach of his other limbs, and he reached out to brush her leg with his own.

"Well, it all sounds terribly thrill… Varian, why are you rubbing my leg with your foot?"
Greymane growled suddenly, raising a bushy eyebrow.

It was at that point that Varian realised he had extended his foot not to touch Auriana, but rather Greymane, whose longer legs were apparently closer than Varian had anticipated. Beside him, he could feel Anduin practically shaking with suppressed laughter, while Greymane simply looked nonplussed. As for Auriana, she was quite pointedly avoiding meeting his eyes, instead occupying herself with her meal as if it were the most fascinating thing in the world.

"Er, my apologies, Genn," Varian said quickly. "I… um… I was just stretching my legs. I didn't realise I'd kicked you."

"It's quite alright," Greymane said slowly, though he still looked thoroughly confused. "Although I'd thank you to remember that I'm a married man…"

At that, both Auriana and Anduin burst out laughing, neither able to maintain a straight face at Greymane's gentle teasing. Even Varian was forced to smile, though he was grateful when the topic of conversation changed and moved on to other things. Auriana and Greymane got along famously, as Varian suspected they might, the gruff old worgen and the young mage soon ribbing one another as if they had been friends for years.

The pleasant conversation wore on late into the night, covering a wide variety of topics from the war on Draenor, to Anduin's magical education, to the most recent gossip from the Stormwind court. Auriana was animated and polite, though it was abundantly clear to everyone in the room that she was quite simply exhausted. She put up a valiant effort, but after her third attempt in as many minutes to conceal a yawn behind her hand, Varian finally decided to intervene.

"You really should go get more rest, Commander," he said finally. "Please don't keep yourself up on our account. You're more than welcome to stay in Stormwind for the night, too. It's a long way back to Draenor, and I'd rather you not push yourself unnecessarily."

"I agree," Anduin said firmly. "You need to recover your strength. You shouldn't really have been out fighting Blackhand in the first place, and I'd hate for your recovery to be set back by sheer stubbornness."

"Are you two combining forces against me then?" Auriana said drily, throwing up her hands in defeat. "I suppose I can't very well deny the edict of two generations of Wrynn men."

"We're very hard to resist," Varian quipped, his wisecrack amply rewarded by Auriana's gentle grin and the soft colour that rose in her cheeks at his words.

"I'd very grateful for the use of the guest quarters, my Lord," she said, leaning heavily on the table as she rose to her feet. "I'm not really up to opening a portal to Draenor."

All three men stood respectfully after her, each well trained in courtly manners.

"I'll have a guard escort you back," Varian added.

"Thank you," Auriana said quietly. "And thank you, Lord Greymane, for inviting me to dine. The meal was most pleasant, as was the conversation."

"Anytime, my dear," Greymane said warmly. "Your company is most welcome."
Auriana smiled broadly at the Gilnean, before turning her attention back to Varian and Anduin. "Goodnight, Anduin… and goodnight, Your Majesty. I hope to see you both again soon," she said formally, though her eyes were fixed on Varian with a look of heady promise that set his blood on fire.

"Goodnight," Varian and Anduin chorused in unison, each watching Auriana carefully as she slowly but gracefully bowed and made her way from the room.

After some final conversation, Anduin followed Auriana's lead and departed for his own quarters, and soon Varian was left alone with Greymane. The worgen regarded Varian thoughtfully, his dark grey eyes narrowed as if puzzling something out.

"She's a fine young woman, your Commander," he said finally.

"Yes, she is," Varian agreed, turning away to pour himself another glass of whiskey.

"And you two are close friends?"

"Yes, we are," Varian said carefully, suspecting that he knew all too well where this conversation was heading. "She saved my life in Tanaan, as you well know."

"I see," Greymane said, nodding. "She's clearly intelligent, and very witty… and rather pretty when she's not covered in blood and dead orc. Are you certain there's nothing more than friendship there?"

"Quite certain," Varian lied, though he could tell by the look on the worgen King's face that he was not convinced.

"Hmm," Greymane said, his deep voice pensive. "Well then, Varian, can I give you some advice?"

"If you'd like," Varian growled, not really wanting a lesson from the older King, and certainly not one that concerned Auriana.

"Next time you want to play with your friend's leg," Greymane said, his thick moustache twitching, "Take better notice of where she's sitting…"

Soon after his interesting, though not entirely surprising conversation with Greymane, Varian returned to his bedchambers. He didn't undress, however, instead pacing about the room with a restless energy as he waited to see if Auriana would come to him. They hadn't made any actual arrangements, of course, but he hoped that she had been able to see the need in his eyes, and that she wanted to see him alone as badly as he wanted to see her.

As it turned out, he didn't have to wait long. Perhaps only a quarter of an hour after Varian had returned to the solitude of his chambers, the room lit up with a blinding flash of light as Auriana materialised, still clad in her dark green dress. She stood just out of his reach, her expression unreadable as she studied him carefully with fathomless blue eyes. Much as he had every second since she had returned, Varian wanted very badly to kiss her, but some of his earlier trepidation still lingered and he resolved to let her make the first move.

"I was starting to think that you wouldn't come," he said softly.

"Are you kidding me?" Auriana said, arching a delicate brow. "I feel like I could sleep for a week, and you've got the most comfortable bed in Stormwind."
"So you're using me," Varian retorted. "And here I was thinking I'd finally found a woman who could see past my crown."

"I can see past your crown," Auriana countered, her mouth twitching. "Right past it, in fact, to your bed."

Something inside Varian released and he laughed at loud, overwhelmed with delight by the fact that Auriana seemed to have survived Blackrock Foundry with her sense of humour intact. She may have been pushed to her absolute limits over the last two months, but she was still herself, and Varian was indescribably thankful.

"If you wish to claim my bed, Commander," he said, enjoying their banter. "You'll have to go through me."

"Is that so?" she said archly. "Tell me, my Lord, how could I possibly fell the greatest warrior the Alliance has ever known?"

"Ah, but you have special powers," he told her, with mock seriousness. "You only have to say the word, and I would do whatever you asked. I am entirely within your thrall."

"Then take me to your bed," she intoned, waggling her fingers as if casting a spell.

Auriana held out a tentative hand and Varian accepted it gratefully, softly kissing her bruised knuckles. She shivered, her lips parting slightly, and Varian found himself unable to hold back any longer. He crushed her against his body, practically devouring her mouth as he unleashed weeks of desperate need upon her. Remarkably, she responded in kind, pressing every inch of her body against his chest as she was consumed by his burning kiss. To Varian, it felt as if there were no one else in the world but her, and he only let her go when they were both thoroughly out of breath.

"As you wish, Commander," Varian panted raggedly, gently sweeping her off her feet and lifting her into the air as if she weighed nothing.

She wrapped her arms around his neck, her face flushed with delight as Varian carried her to his chambers. He laid her carefully on the bed, where she rolled and lay face down, sighing in satisfaction as she snuggled into the soft furs.

"Do you want to undress?" Varian asked her, amused by her simple delight.

"In a minute," she murmured, her voice muffled by a face full of pillow. "It's just so nice to lie down."

"At least let me remove your shoes," he offered.

Auriana's dark head of hair moved ever so slightly as she nodded, though she didn't speak as Varian knelt down at the end of the bed and took one of her small feet in his hands. He unlaced her boots quickly and quietly, though he also took advantage of his position to gently stroke the sensitive skin of her ankles. She broke out in gooseflesh at his touch, making soft sounds of pleasure as her over-used muscles finally relaxed.

Smiling broadly to himself, Varian rose back to his feet and placed her boots in a corner, before moving to remove his own tunic and breeches. Given Auriana's exhaustion, he had no expectations about what might happen tonight, and he was perfectly content to simply hold her in his arms all night. Sitting three feet away from her at dinner had been killing him, and he wanted nothing more than to fell the softness of her skin beneath his hands.
Driven by impatience, Varian practically tore at his clothing to remove it, and within minutes he had stripped down to his underclothes. As he turned eagerly back around, he saw that Auriana had rolled onto her side, her small body curled around one of the plump pillows that lined his bed. Her eyes were closed, and her breath was deep and even, and Varian realised that in short time he had taken to change, she had somehow managed to fall asleep.

"Auri?" he asked quietly, placing a gentle hand on the curve of her hip.

She didn't stir even slightly at his touch, evidently having been defeated by nothing less than her own exhaustion. Varian chuckled, shaking his head at the exhausted mage. She was still fully clothed, but he supposed that a crumpled dress was a small price to pay for the sleep that she so desperately needed. He crawled into the bed behind her and looped a hand around her waist, not remotely tired himself, but more than willing to simply be near her as she slept. Varian smiled as she subconsciously pressed closer to him as he adjusted his weight, tucking his head into the soft skin of her neck and drinking in her wildflower scent as if for the first time.

"Goodnight, my Lady," he murmured softly, placing a gentle kiss against her ivory skin and thanking the Light that she had come back to him safely. "Sleep well."
After watching Auriana sleep for several hours, Varian finally drifted off into a deep, satisfied slumber of his own. He, too, had experienced difficulty sleeping of late, particularly when Auriana was offworld, but it seemed as if the issue had resolved itself now that he had her back in his arms. It was a rare pleasure to have her stay the night in his bed without argument, and Varian was not going to waste the opportunity.

Even in his sleep, he kept one hand protectively wrapped around her waist, holding her tightly as if afraid that she might disappear again. Laying as close as they were, Varian could feel each and every breath she drew into her lungs, though he was only roused from sleep when she began to shift and stir more dramatically.

It was soon apparent that she was in the grips of a terrible nightmare, and Varian shook himself awake in the hope that he might be able to comfort her. He was well aware that she had been suffering nightmares ever since her ordeal in the Foundry, but he had underestimated how distressing it was to witness Auriana's pain in person. Her muscles tensed and roiled as she tossed frantically, crying out unintelligibly as her flailing limbs tangled in the skirts of her dress.

"Easy," Varian murmured, stroking her hair in an attempt at comfort, even as he tightened his grip on her waist.

His efforts appeared to be in vain, however, as she thrashed about even more wildly, and Varian was eventually forced to hold her down bodily after one of her small fists slammed into his jaw with surprising force.

"Auri!" he grunted, stretching his bruised jaw painfully. "Wake up!"

"Varian!"

Auriana's eyes flew open as she threw herself bolt upright, and only Varian's phenomenal reflexes saved him from a headbutt to the face. She was clearly disoriented by the low light, and she struggled against him violently for several minutes before finally succumbing to his vastly superior strength.

"I'm here," Varian said soothingly. "You're safe now, I'm here…"

"Varian…" she panted, grabbing blindly for his chest as she slowly came to her senses. "What…?"

"You had a nightmare," he explained gently. "A bad one, from the looks of it…"

"I… I'm… I'm sorry…" she said quietly, rubbing the sleep out of her eyes.

"You're sorry?" Varian repeated in surprise, gently pulling her into his arms. "Why?"

"I woke you up…" she mumbled, her disquiet clearly evident as she bowed her head into the crook of his shoulder. "I'm sorry."

"I don't mind in the slightest," Varian assured her, rubbing gentle circles on her small back. "Really."

"I thought this would stop," she whispered painfully. "I don't understand… he's dead…"
She exhaled shakily, balling her hands into fists as she struggled to control her breathing.

"I escaped, I killed him..." she muttered, more to herself than Varian. "Is that not enough?"

"You went through a very great ordeal, Auriana," he told her softly. "It's going to take some time to heal."

"But it shouldn't!" she protested forcefully, pulling violently away from him. "Not for me. I'm not... I'm not weak."

She buried her face in her hands, her slender shoulders trembling with quiet sobs. Varian gave her the space to collect her thoughts, though he did leave a careful hand on her back to show her that she had his support. He longed to draw her back into his embrace, but at this point he wasn't sure how such a gesture would be received. Auriana was a fiercely independent woman, and Varian knew she wouldn't take kindly to being coddled, most especially when she already felt that her strength was already in question.

With a masterful display of self-discipline, Auriana managed to slow her frenetic breathing. She was well practiced in emotional control, but even Varian could see how hard she had to work to remain calm. Her experience in the Foundry had shaken her to the core, and he wondered how long it would take for her to fully recover from the ordeal.

Varian's dark thoughts were interrupted as Auriana suddenly sighed, and he felt her weight shift slightly as she lifted an arm. A second later, the nearest wall sconce ignited as she shot a quick burst of flame from her hand, the fire casting dancing shadows across her pale face and setting her eyes aglow.

"I'm still fully dressed," she mumbled, breaking the long silence. "I haven't fallen asleep in my clothes since I was a child."

"I thought it best to let you sleep," Varian explained, unsure if she was displeased. "You very much looked as if you needed the rest."

"I see," she said distantly. "Well, I suppose I should undress, while I'm awake. Do... do you mind helping me with the laces?"

"Of course not," Varian said, turn her shoulders gently so as to have better access to her back.

Auriana shivered slightly beneath his touch, but sat patiently still as Varian slipped the laces on her dress, and made no further comment. The laces came undone easily beneath his practiced fingers, and soon the dress was loosened sufficiently so that Varian could pull it up and over her head. She was wearing a pale, pearl coloured slip underneath, though declined to remove it as Varian discarded her dress off the side of the bed. Free of the entangling fabric, Auriana lay back down, sighing wistfully as she stared up at the ceiling. Varian mimicked her movements, folding his hands behind his head as he tried to get comfortable.

Auriana's breath still came too fast as they lay together, and Varian could smell the faint scent of sweat and fear lingering on her skin. An awkward silence hovered cloyingly between them, and Varian finally decided to ask her a question that had been weighing on his mind for far too long.

"Do... do you want to talk about it?" he asked tentatively, well aware that he was breaking his own carefully set rule about discussing the Foundry.

Varian only really remembered why he had such rules as the silence became suddenly deafening, but to his surprise Auriana rolled onto her side and looked at him without anger or alarm. Her
expression was composed but sharp, and some kind of indescribable emotion shifted behind her eyes.

"That's the first time you've asked me about what happened in the Foundry," she said quietly.

"I'm sorry," Varian said quickly. "I don't know what I was thinking. Forget I said anything."

"No..." Auriana said. "I... why did it take you so long to ask?"

Varian studied her carefully in the near darkness, noting the inky shadows beneath her eyes and the way the light reflected off her gaunt cheekbones.

"Anduin said that you suffered greatly," he said slowly. "I had no desire to make you relive that pain in the retelling. You didn't seem to be forthcoming, and I... I wanted to protect you. You know how I am."

Unexpectedly, Auriana laughed softly, rubbing a tired hand across her eyes.

"What's so funny?" Varian wondered, thoroughly nonplussed.

"You were trying to protect me," she repeated. "I never said anything because I was trying to protect you."

"What do you mean?" Varian asked, confused. "Why do I need to be protected?"

"Varian, you can barely control yourself when I get a papercut," Auriana said drily. "Light knows what would happen if I told you the truth about what happened in the Foundry."

"Do you really think me some boorish hothead, unable to control myself?" Varian asked bitterly.

"No. I think you would do anything for the people you love..." she said gently, reaching out to take his hand. "And I think you've lost... just... so much more than any one person should ever have to lose. I have no desire to add to your burdens."

Varian's breath caught in his throat, deeply affected by the strength of her concern for him.

"Auriana," he said seriously, brushing a long strand of hair away from her face, "You are the woman I love. You are no burden. I know you've become accustomed to walking alone, to needing nothing and no-one... but you aren't alone anymore."

She closed her eyes briefly and bowed her head at his words, clearly trying not to cry.

"Unfortunately, you chose some broken old king with a bad temper and a stubborn streak a mile wide," Varian added, trying to lighten her sombre mood. "So you'll have to make do."

Surprisingly, she actually laughed at his weak humour, her nose crinkling fetchingly as her pink lips split in a wide grin.

"I could have done worse," she said slyly, brushing the unshed tears from her eyes. "Not by much, mind you, but still..."

"Oh, I see how it is," Varian growled, reaching out to grab her playfully.

As his hands found her hips, he rolled, pulling her with him so she ended up sprawled on his chest. She came willingly, as light as a feather, and the tips of her toes barely grazed his knees as they lay face to face. Varian's hands slid down her petite frame, revelling in the feel of her strong muscles
beneath the soft silk of her slip.

"Varian… I've missed you," she said, her beautiful features softening and her face growing serious once more. "So much."

Auriana gently touched the side of his weathered face and kissed him slowly, the feel of her soft lips lingering tantalisingly even after she had pulled away. Varian groaned and tightened his grip on her waist, barely resisting the temptation to flip her onto her back and have his way with her. They had not been intimate since before she had been captured, and while Varian would never behave as anything less than a gentleman, it was getting harder and harder to deny the fact that he wanted her, and badly.

"Auri..." he muttered roughly. "I..."

"Do you really want to know what happened in the Foundry?" she said quickly, interrupting his libidinous thoughts before they truly got away from him. "I feel like if I don't say it now, I never will."

"It's your choice," Varian said, taking a deep breath. "You know I'm here for you, always, but please don't feel as though you must talk. I'd hate for you to feel pressured."

"No, I want to," she said gravely. "I need to."

She shifted her weight backwards so that she could rest her head against his chest, pressing herself as close to him as physically possible. Varian captured one of her small hands with his own and cradled her close, his heartbeat quickening involuntarily as she began to speak. The story began slowly, with Auriana describing her kidnapping and subsequent awakening in the Foundry. As she began to describe her torture, however, she spoke faster and faster, so much so that Varian found it hard to keep up.

Of course, his difficulty understanding her rapid speech was something of a blessing in disguise. Auriana left nothing out of the telling, describing each and every cut, burn, and bruise in excruciating detail, and Varian was soon practically vibrating with repressed anger. He had thought about Auriana's torture himself, many times, but the truth of it was beyond anything he had imagined. Black spots of rage suddenly danced across his vision, and if it weren't for the fact that Blackhand was already dead, he would have been rushing off to Draenor at this very moment to teach the orc warlord the true meaning of pain.

For Auriana's sake, and her sake alone, Varian managed to choke down his anger, forcing himself to remain still beneath her as she continued her tale. In fact, if it wasn't for the featherlight pressure of her body against his chest, Varian would have already put his fist through the wall, or perhaps shattered his bed frame in attempt to relieve his seething heart.

He was able to resist his dark hatred as long as he kept his attention firmly focused on the woman in his arms, though he reached his breaking point when she finally described how the orcish torturer Throk'gar had assaulted and attempted to rape her. For a second, Varian was unable to see anything but red, and he howled savagely as he fought to stay calm. He could scarcely recall being so angry in his life, and for a man with his quick and volatile temper, that was really saying something.

She's mine, he thought blindly, his heart racing as if he'd just fought a great battle. She's... she... how dare they...

Varian's anger spiralled nearly out of control, and it took him far too long to realise that Auriana
had stopped speaking, and was now staring down at him with a calm but serious frown.

"Varian..." she said quietly, her voice sounding slightly strained. "I can't breathe. You're crushing me."

"What?" Varian said thickly, trying to process her words through over the dull roaring in his ears.

"Let go," she repeated patiently. "You're hurting me."

The thought of causing Auriana harm cut through his rage like a knife and he returned to the real world, releasing his iron grip on her body as he did so. She moved but didn't pull away, instead sitting upright, and tucking her legs under so that she straddled his hips. She winced and carefully rubbed her back, and Varian's anger vanished in an instant, only to be replaced by hot shame and guilt. He dug his fingers into the bed in a futile attempt to stop his hands from shaking, and he felt Auriana's powerful thigh muscles tense as if holding him in place.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled raggedly, hating himself for having caused her further pain. "Auri... I'm so sorry. I was angry... I didn't realise..."

"Are you alright?" she asked softly.

"You're asking me?" Varian asked in disbelief. "You're the one who was... who was nearly... and then I..."

He grit his teeth and closed his eyes, unable to even say the words. He now finally understood why Anduin had warned him away from this particular conversation, and his heart twisted with fresh horror as he realised that his still-innocent son knew the truth of everything Auriana had suffered.

"I've had some time to come to terms with... all this," she said evenly. "You're hearing it for the first time, that can't be easy. I'm sorry, you must wish that I hadn't said anything."

Varian shook his head, marvelling at her ability to show compassion for his pain when she was the one who had endured such terrible torture.

"No," he said firmly, clenching and unclenching his fists. "I'm grateful that you were able to share this with me, I just... Light, Auri, no wonder you've been having nightmares."

"I killed him before things... got worse," she said. "If I hadn't, I don't know what I'd be like right now."

She breathed out shakily, and Varian could see that she was once again fighting back tears.

"I feel like I've let you down. You're right about me, you know... I do stupid things. If I hadn't been so reckless, or suspicious of my own men..." she continued brokenly, closing her eyes. "I never would have gone looking for Gale alone, I would never have been captured, and I never would have been violated like that... I... you're the only man I've ever been with, and if Throk'gar had... it would have been all my fault..."

She trailed off, and Varian's heart lurched with dismay at the realisation that Auriana might blame herself for everything that had happened. He quickly pulled himself upright so that they were now face to face with her sitting in his lap, carefully but firmly grasping her hands so that she might understand the seriousness of what he had to say.

"You owe me nothing, Auriana," he said urgently, "And I can't think of a single way in which you've let me down. Whatever happened in the Foundry... it is not your fault."
"Varian…" she protested weakly, her eyes downcast.

"No, you listen to me," he argued forcefully. "I don't care what happened in the Foundry, you are the woman I love and you could never, ever disappoint me... and nor are you in any way to blame for the actions of Blackhand and his orcs. If anything, this whole sorry business has made me realise just how remarkable you truly are."

"I'm not remarkable," she said, shaking her head.

"You are to me," Varian said flatly, accepting no argument. "Especially now that I know the truth of what happened... I'm not at all sure how you managed to face Blackhand the way you did..."

"I thought of you," Auriana replied, smiling ever so slightly. "You give me courage. You always do."

Varian had no words to express how her pure, unshakeable faith in him made him feel, and so he settled instead for pressing a desperate kiss against her forehead and wrapping his long arms around her slender body. She leaned into him willingly with a long, drawn out sigh, her body relaxing as if a great weight had been finally lifted from her shoulders.

He held her close for a long time, mulling over her tale, when he suddenly realised that there was something else she had said that he hadn't really processed in his immediate anger.

"Hold on... did... did you just say I was the first man you'd ever been with?" Varian asked, gently prising her off his chest so that he could look her in the eye.

"Yes," Auriana said nonchalantly, clearly confused by his interest.

"Really?"

"I was a virgin when we first made love," she said, shrugging. "Does it matter?"

"I... well, no... but... Light, Auri, why didn't you say anything?" Varian asked, running a hand through his hair.

"There wasn't much time for talking, if you recall," she said shyly. "To be honest, I didn't really think on it all that much. Why do you look so worried?"

"If you recall, I wasn't exactly... gentle. From memory, I pretty much threw you into my bed like a wild animal claiming his mate," Varian said, torn between his treasured memories of the evening and his concern that he'd hurt her somehow.

He had guessed that she was inexperienced, but it had certainly never occurred to him that he might have been her first. She was exceedingly practical, however, and he supposed he shouldn't really be surprised that she had failed to mention the significance of the occasion. It simply wasn't the sort of thing she cared about, and she had remarkable skill for all but dismissing anything she didn't consider to be of immediate importance.

"I don't remember complaining," she said. "I... I wanted you... and from what I could tell... you wanted me..."

"You have no idea," Varian said seriously. "Auriana, I wanted you ever since that night under the mistletoe on Winter's Veil. You have no idea how many nights I lay awake thinking about having you in my arms, or how many... um... dreams I had about you. I was at breaking point by the time you came to me that night, but I would have waited had you asked."
"I didn't want to wait," Auriana said firmly. "I've never understood why people make such a big deal over this. There are a lot of other firsts in life, why is this one any different, or more special?"

"Because it… is…," Varian said lamely, at the same moment another thought occurred to him. "Light, no wonder you looked surprised."

"Oh, please, Varian, I've been a soldier all my life," she said, rolling her eyes. "You aren't the first man I've seen naked. Though you are somewhat more… impressive… than other men, I'll give you that."

Varian felt his ears suddenly go hot, and he found it very hard to look Auriana in the eye.

"Er… thank you…" he murmured.

"Men," she muttered, rolling her eyes, though there was a hint of playfulness in her tone.

They sat in silence once more as Varian considered the new information, at a genuine loss for words.

"You really never…?" he asked curiously. "Not… not even with Darion?"

Auriana's expression froze slightly at the mention of her former best friend's name. She wasn't one to talk about her past, and certainly she had never mentioned specifics of her prior affairs.

"Our relationship wasn't really ever physical… and, well… you know what happened to him," she said slowly, a flicker of sadness crossing her face as she recalled her friend's demise. "Beyond that, I never really had the time. You know me, I tend to be consumed by my work… and I never found someone I trusted enough or cared enough about… until you."

"I didn't hurt you, did I?" Varian asked worriedly.

"A little," Auriana admitted, "Though it wasn't anything I couldn't handle. I anticipated some pain, though it wasn't as much as I had expected. As I said… I wanted you…"

Varian recalled how much she had wanted him far too well, and he had to take several deep breaths before he spoke again.

"That's not really the point. If I had known… I would have done things differently, I would have been... careful."

"I'm not made of glass, Varian," Auriana said drily.

"Still…" Varian said, feeling somewhat guilty.

"I'm terribly sorry, I didn't realise you had a particular method for deflowering virgins," she said sarcastically. "I feel like I've deprived you a prime opportunity to test your skills."

Varian shook his head ruefully, and found that there wasn't really anything he could do but to bark a laugh at her pointed comment. Auriana looked at him strangely for a moment before joining in, and soon she was entirely consumed by giggles. She tried rather unsuccessfully to hide her mirth behind her hand, but it was clear to Varian that she desperately needed the release. She laughed until she could barely breathe, clutching his arm with one hand as she pressed a hand to her aching ribs with the other. Varian let her enjoy her moment of catharsis, while he likewise savoured the warm, rich sound of a laugh he never though he would hear again.
"It feels good to laugh," she said finally, once her somewhat hysterical shaking had subsided. "Thank you."

"You're most welcome," Varian said, kissing her cheek. "Do you think... do you think you'll be able to get back to sleep now? Are you normally able to sleep after a nightmare like that?"

He guessed that it was an hour or so after midnight, and he wanted her to get as much rest as possible while she was still healing.

"I'm fine," she said quietly, her brilliant blue eyes darkening. "I don't want to sleep."

"Then what?"

"Varian... what... what would you have done?" Auriana said slowly, tentatively running her fingers across the hard planes of his bare chest.

Varian shivered involuntarily at her touch, wondering what she was thinking.

"What do you mean?" he asked, confused.

"You said that if you had known it was my first time, you would have done things differently. What... what would you have done?"

"Well... I wouldn't have thrown you around the room quite so much, for a start," Varian said apologetically.

"I'm sorry, that's not what I mean," Auriana said, shaking her head. "Don't tell me. Show me."

Varian froze at the unexpected request, and found himself all of a sudden very aware of her, from the sweet smell of her soft hair and the earthier scent of her skin to the inviting press of her weight in his lap.

"Auri... are you sure?" he asked, exhaling very slowly. "You needn't push yourself, certainly not on my account... and after everything you've told me tonight..."

"I miss you," she said simply. "I want you. It's been far too long."

"I... I shouldn't," Varian said firmly, though given her current position, he suspected Auriana knew precisely how much he regretted saying the words. "I couldn't forgive myself if I asked for too much too soon..."

"You're not the one asking," she interrupted roughly, "I am. Don't make me beg."

Her blue eyes suddenly looked as if they were on fire, and she stared up at Varian with unflinching certainty and desire. His hands slid to her waist without conscious thought, closing over her smooth curves with a desperate eagerness that belied the hesitation in his words. She leaned hungrily into his touch, arching her back so that her hips rolled far too temptingly against his thighs.

"I wouldn't dare," Varian breathed seriously, powerless to resist. "But if you need to stop... if this is too much... you just say the word, alright? You promise me."

"I promise," she murmured, sliding her hands into his long hair.

Needing no further encouragement, Varian pulled Auriana close, snaking his hands up the back of her neck and kissing her passionately. He explored her mouth tenderly, slowly, burning the taste of her into his memory, as he carefully slid her silk slip up and over her head to reveal the pale skin
beneath. Auriana shivered as the cool air touched her exposed flesh, nestling closer into Varian's body for warmth. He was more than willing to accommodate her desires, his hands playing over her body as if discovering it for the first time. She was a curious mix of hard and smooth, the impossible softness of her skin disguising the hard lines of her well-used muscles. She was leaner than the last time he had seen her undressed, her ribs sharper than he perhaps would have liked, but otherwise she was as exactly as perfect as he remembered.

His lips found her the curve of her shoulder, and he relished the sweet and slightly salty taste of her skin beneath his tongue. She sighed sensually and murmured his name, her fingers digging sharply into the bare skin of his back.

"Auriana..." he growled, lifting her off his lap and laying her gently on the bed beside him.

Varian propped himself up on his left elbow, leaving his right hand free to continue its exploration of her body. He could already smell raw, wet lust all over her, but as promised, he intended to take things slowly. He gently stroked the line of her collarbone, before slipping his free hand lower and quickly removing her remaining undergarments so that she lay naked before him. His large hand slid fervently over her breasts, drawing a soft gasp from her lips as he rolled a soft, pink nipple beneath his rough fingers.

"Varian… I…oh..." she stammered, her voice deepening with lust as she twisted in pleasure.

"Shh..." he murmured, pressing soft kisses against the elegant curve of her neck. "You asked a question, my love, and I intend to answer…"

Grinning roguishly, Varian played his hand eagerly across her body, teasing Auriana from the tips of her fingers to the sensitive, delicate skin of her inner thighs. As he had hoped, she responded to his clever touch with hungry enthusiasm, lifting her hips and writhing desirously each and every time his fingers brushed against her fevered skin.

Only when he was satisfied that she was sufficiently aroused, however, did Varian attempt to move his hand lower, pausing carefully over the juncture of her thighs as he silently asked for her permission. She had been through so much, and he refused to do anything without her express consent, fearful as he was of making things worse. Auriana nodded breathlessly in answer, her eyes bright with unshakeable trust, and she even went so far as to grasp his wrist as she guided his hand down between her thighs. She gasped softly as her slick flesh parted before the gentle press of his fingers, knotting her hands in the sheets as she arched beneath his hand.

Encouraged by her ardent response, Varian carefully and deliberately teased her into a state of uncontrolled delirium. She came for him quickly, helpless beneath his experienced hands, and her breathy sighs of pleasure sent a hot thirst shivering up Varian's spine. She snapped backwards like a taut bow, burying her face in his chest as she trembled uncontrollably. Smiling in satisfaction, Varian held her close, giving her a moment to recover before continuing his amorous ministrations. He wanted her desperately, but he had no intention of taking her just yet. Tonight was about her pleasure, not his, and he wondered how many times he could make her writhe in ecstasy and scream his name before she reached her breaking point.

"Do you intend to torment me forever?" she panted, knotting her hands in her own hair as Varian gently stroked her heaving breasts. "I need you..."

"Not yet," he said calmly, though he was secretly pleased that she wanted him so desperately.

"Please… Varian…"
"Patience, Auriana…" he murmured, kissing her shoulder as he made to remove his own underclothes.

Apparently, however, Auriana was unwilling to wait, and the very second Varian was naked she used a strategically placed knee to lever herself up and over so that she was straddling his hips once again.

"No. No patience," she growled, her eyes almost black with undisguised lust. "Now."

She pressed him back into the bed with a fierce determination, and before Varian could do anything at all, she had impaled herself on his manhood in a single, swift movement, throwing back her head as she took in the length of him.

"Light," Varian cried, surprised by her unexpected forcefulness. "Auri…"

Of course, he wasn't at all dissatisfied with this turn of events, and he was more than willing to surrender full command of the situation to Auriana. She felt incredible, all wild heat and tight, powerful muscle, and it was all Varian could do not to shatter beneath her. He reached desperately for her hips as she began to move, her eyes closed as she slowly tested the inherent power of her position. Varian could see that she needed that power, that tonight she needed to be the one who was in control, and he was more than willing to oblige her. Lying on his back afforded him a superb view of her eager, sinuous body, and his ravenous gaze drank her in as she impatiently took her fill. Every inch of her was breathtakingly beautiful, from the wild, dark hair tumbling across her shoulders, to the soft, silver curves of her breasts and the arc of her strong thighs. Her breath came out in quick, ragged gasps as she simply took what she wanted, grinding against him with an ever-increasing urgency.

"Varian…" she breathed, her cheeks flushing brilliant red as a thrill of pleasure rolled through her. "Oh, Light… Varian…"

As it always did, the sound of his name on her lips stirred Varian's lust like nothing else, and he dug his fingers into the willing flesh of her buttocks as he matched her now-frantic rhythm. There was something incredibly intoxicating about Auriana's uninhibited need for him that stoked the flames of his passion far beyond the physical sensations of their lovemaking, and he wanted nothing more than to tear the sound of his name from her lips over and over again. Fortunately, Auriana seemed more than willing accommodate his unspoken request, sighing his name sensually as she tightened herself around him and pressed her hands firmly against his abdomen. Varian groaned in answer, his muscles clenching uncontrollably as she rode him harder and faster. A primal, fiery pressure had been building deep within him for some time now, and between the feel of her body and the sound of his name, he knew it would not be long before she broke him completely.

As if she could read his hot, clouded thoughts, a great shudder suddenly rolled down her back and she screamed, obliterating what little remained of Varian's control. He held her fast, bucking his hips forcefully upwards as he desperately sought to bury his length as deep within her as humanly possible. Distantly, he heard his own rough voice call her name as one of his large hands found her neck and he pulled her mouth down to his for a bruising kiss. Auriana tasted almost as good as she felt, and in that moment Varian's entire world collapsed into the feeling of her warm and willing flesh all around him, his body shaking violently as he finally, desperately came undone.
Varian

Varian stirred slowly as the soft golden light of early dawn illuminated his chambers, and was somewhat surprised to find that Auriana still lay in his arms. She was sprawled carelessly facedown across his chest, her head tucked in below his shoulder with her right arm splayed across his belly. She was still stark naked from their lovemaking the night before, covered only where her dark, unkempt hair tumbled down her back. He didn't dare move, lest he wake the sleeping mage, though in truth he was quite content to watch her sleep. It was easy to forget, sometimes, that she was still quite young, though she seemed much more her age when she slept.

It was some time before she awoke, stretching invitingly against the side of his body before she rolled onto her back and slowly opened her eyes.

"Varian…" she murmured softly, blinking rapidly, "Good morning…"

"Good morning," he replied, kissing her soundly. "You're still here."

Auriana had previously shown something of an aversion to staying in Varian's quarters overnight, lest their affair be discovered, and he wondered if she had changed her mind, or whether she had been driven to stay with him simply because she'd been too tired to leave.

"I am," she said, smiling enigmatically. "Would you prefer that I leave?"

"No," Varian said roughly, placing a firm hand on her stomach as if she might run away. "It's just that usually I have to practically tie you up to keep you here…"

"Times change," she said, shrugging as she pulled herself into a sitting position. "I wanted to stay."

"I am glad to hear it," Varian said sincerely. "Speaking of which… when do you intend to return to Draenor?"

"Well… I was hoping to stay in Stormwind for a few more days. With Blackhand defeated, Lunarfall could use a rest - as could I," she said. "I was hoping that I might spend my downtime here."

"Really?" Varian asked, trying not to sound overly eager.

"If you'd like," she said, smiling slightly. "I'll need to return to Lunarfall to relay some orders first, but I should be able to return this afternoon. I was thinking I might ask Anduin if he'd like to train with me later, actually."

"I'm sure he'd take you up on the offer," Varian said, "And perhaps you would join us both for dinner afterwards?"

"I'd love to," she said, "Though with that in mind… I really should get going. Lunarfall isn't going to run itself."

Auriana kissed him lightly on the cheek, and made to roll sideways out of the bed so that she might dress, but Varian was not quite willing to relinquish her just yet. He reached for her wrist, his large hand engulfing her slender arm as he drew her irresistibly back down into his powerful embrace.

"In a minute…" he growled, looping his hands in the wild tangles of her hair and pulling her against him for a bruising kiss.
Varian worked through his morning tasks as quickly as possible, so that he might have the afternoon to himself. Anduin and Auriana had made plans to spar together just after lunch, and he was eager to observe the session. He had a great personal interest in ensuring that Anduin was trained in combat, of course, though he also enjoyed watching Auriana fight. The arena was one of the few places where she was truly herself, and there was something in her spirited ferocity that resonated deeply with the part of Varian that was still Lo'Gosh.

There were quite a few guards already sparring in the training yards as Varian arrived, many of whom saluted crisply as he choose a seat at the very edge of the amphitheatre, closest to the action. It was a beautiful afternoon, the sun warm and bright in the cloudless azure sky, and Varian could think of few places he'd rather be than the Stormwind arena.

Auriana and Anduin had arrived before him and now stood in the centre of the arena, where the guards already working had respectfully cleared a space for them to work. Auriana stripped off her loose outer tunic, exposing the taut muscles of her belly, and began to stretch her well-used muscles. Varian heard several of the guards in the arena audibly gasp as they saw her back, though Auriana appeared to give them no mind. Her attention was now entirely focused on Anduin, even to the exclusion of everyone else in the arena.

"Alright, my prince," she said, once she was sufficiently warm, "Let's see what you've got..."

She then proceeded to put Anduin through his paces for the next half hour, testing his abilities with the strict, no-nonsense attitude of a seasoned drillmaster. Varian could see that his son was working hard, his concentration tested to the limits by Auriana's relentless demands for perfection, though he seemed to have risen to the occasion with considerably more gusto than usual. Of course, while healing came naturally to Anduin, he was significantly less skilled when it came to the combat arts, and he was forced to push himself mightily in order to keep up with the seemingly tireless Auriana.

"You've improved," she observed finally, nodding at Anduin approvingly as she called for a break.

"I've been practicing," Anduin replied, wiping a thin sheen of sweat from his brow. "Though I doubt I'd ever be a match for you. I always feel like I'm a mouse being stalked by a dragon when we fight."

"You're a talented little mouse, at least," she said, grinning. "I'm all but certain that one day you'll be able to hold your own against the big bad dragon."

"Little?" Anduin huffed indignantly. "I'm taller than you."

"Everyone is taller than me," Auriana said drily. "But enough banter. I thought today we might work on your movement in combat."

She shifted her weight from foot to foot, staring thoughtfully at Anduin the way a wolf might look at a young deer.

"Thus far, we have practiced assuming that you will have the opportunity to stand still while you cast," she explained. "As a magic user, you're at your most powerful when you can stand your ground and cast freely, though of course in a real battle this isn't always possible."

"My spells will be weaker when I move... because of the split in my concentration," Anduin said thoughtfully.

"Precisely," Auriana said, nodding. "It's a trade-off - movement makes you weaker, but keeps you safer. You need to learn when it is best to move, and when it is best to stand your ground. Oh, and
don't stand in the fire."

"Fire?" Anduin asked, evidently confused. "What fire?"

In answer, Auriana shot a lazy fireball at his feet, forcing the Prince to stumble gracelessly backwards. Instinctively, Varian leant forward in alarm, though the more rational part of his mind knew that Auriana would never allow any harm to come to his son. This was a training drill, nothing more, and he would have to trust in Auriana's considerable skills to keep Anduin safe.

"I suggest you run," she said lightly, casually calling another ball of fire to her hand.

Anduin's bright blue eyes widened in shock, but it didn't take him long to realise that she was completely serious. He moved sluggishly at first, his surprise slowing him down considerably, but he was soon ducking and weaving throughout the arena as Auriana chased him down with bursts of flame.

"You can't run forever, Anduin," she called, enjoying making the Prince scamper about just a little too much. "Fight back!"

"I can't!" Anduin hollered. "It's… it's too hard!"

The brief lapse in his concentration required by his words causing him to trip over his own feet, and he only narrowly avoided falling face first into the dirt. Auriana detonated a fireball right behind him, forcing the prince to stagger to his feet and keep running.

"That's sort of the point," Auriana retorted. "Come now, Anduin, focus!"

She continued to chase Anduin around the arena, harrying him with fireballs each and every time he tried to pause or cast at her in retaliation. Varian could see that his son was growing frustrated, but Auriana was relentless, giving the prince no quarter as she barked out instructions and stern encouragement. After some time, Anduin was able to recover his balance well enough to cast a few weak spells in Auriana's direction, but even Varian could tell that he had a long way to go before he would be able to cast efficiently while on the run.

Auriana only gave up when Anduin well and truly spent, panting heavily as he stumbled to his knees in the dirt.

"Alright, that's enough," she said, the glow of her power fading from about her eyes.

She walked slowly over to where Anduin now sat, his head between his knees as he tried to catch his breath, and placed a sympathetic hand on his shoulder.

"Well… you're not the worst I've ever seen," she said drily.

"How do you do that?" Anduin gasped. "I could barely keep track of where I needed to stand, let alone summon the concentration necessary to defend myself."

"Spitting your focus is difficult," Auriana agreed. "There are some exercises that I think I could adapt to a priest's abilities, but first… I think a demonstration is in order."

She looked around the arena thoughtfully, and her gaze fell on a small group of new recruits training under the watchful eye of Guard Captain Garrick.

"Captain!" she called loudly, lifting a hand to get his attention. "Would you care to lend me a hand?"
The grizzled old soldier had been testing the young soldiers in much the same way as Auriana had been testing Anduin, and they looked grateful for the brief respite her interruption had provided.

"What did you have in mind, Commander?" he said, his eyes flicking briefly to Varian.

"I was hoping to demonstrate to Anduin here how to move in combat," she explained. "Would you like to test your recruits against me?"

"But there's six of us, ma'am, and only one of you," one of the recruits piped up, looking nervously between Garrick and Auriana.

"I assure you, I'm more than capable of defending myself," Auriana said, smiling slightly. "What say you, Captain?"

"They're all yours, Commander," Garrick said, spreading his arms wide accommodatingly. "They could always use the practice."

"Good!" Auriana said, clapping her hands. "Alright, spread out. Your task is relatively simple - get me, before I get you. You can use any means available to you, and I will concede to the first touch."

"Be careful," Garrick added. "Watch your aim. This is a training drill, you're not actually trying to harm the Commander."

"Er… quite right," Auriana said, grinning. "Thank you, Captain. Anduin - watch closely."

She made her way over to the rack of wooden training weapons and selected a long dagger, before moving to stand in the centre of a makeshift ring formed by the positions of the six guard recruits. Her arms rested nonchalantly at her sides, and to a casual observer, she wouldn't have looked at all prepared to fight off half a dozen soldiers. Of course, Varian knew better, and he leaned forward eagerly as the guardsmen raised their practice swords.

"Ready?" Garrick boomed, folding his arms across his chest. "Begin!"

Auriana's arms flared to life in an instant, and she hurled a quick blast of arcane energy at the soldier immediately to her left. He grunted in surprise and collapsed, immediately out of the fight. He wasn't actually injured, but he was no longer a part of the game, and Auriana had scored her first 'kill'.

-One down-, Varian thought, grinning savagely to himself.

Somewhat stunned by the speed with which she had moved, the remaining guards were slow to react, and Auriana took out a second recruit before she had even had a chance to step forwards. Her collapse bought the other recruits time, however, and one of the taller guards used the opportunity to rush at Auriana's unprotected back with his practice sword held high. For a second, Varian thought he might have her, only to be proven wrong a moment later as she whirled, catching the guard's blade on her wooden dagger at the very last second. Without pausing, she kicked out viciously at his knee, forcing him to stumble, before binding him in place with a wave of ice.

The next two recruits came on with a more measured approach, flanking her warily and clearly signalling their intent to take her together. Auriana watched them carefully, her fingers twitching as she prepared to face their assault. The recruit to her right was the first to move, but his attack turned out to be a feint, a distraction for the other guard moving in from the left. Auriana anticipated their attack cleverly, dancing quickly to the side and allowing the second guard to rush past her. She then took two swift steps backwards to give herself distance, before disabling him as
easily as she had his unfortunate comrades.

The other guard took advantage of her distraction to press the attack, forcing her to sidestep the powerful thrust of his sword. He spun for a second blow, only to pause in surprise as Auriana disappeared and reappeared behind him. She gave him no quarter, blasting him in the back with a bolt of arcane energy before he even had a chance to turn around. There was now only one recruit left, a young woman who nervously shifted her grip on her sword as she awaited the inevitable. Against Auriana one on one, she was hopelessly outmatched, and she had barely even taken a step forwards before Auriana polymorphed her into a sheep with a casual wave of her hand.

"Well, it would seem that I have won," Auriana observed, smiling wryly.

Garrick burst out laughing at her words, shaking his head at his defeated recruits. Auriana clicked her fingers once to release her magic, and the recruits were instantly freed from the lingering effects of her spells. Varian smothered a smile behind his hand at the identical, shell-shocked looks on each of the recruits' faces as they clambered to their feet, each staring at Auriana with a mix of fear and awe.

"So," Garrick said, "Would anyone care to tell me what just happened?"

"We got our butts kicked," the tall guard said bitterly. "Er… sir."

"How is she that fast?" one of the young female guards added, shaking the dirt from her tunic.

Garrick and Auriana exchanged a look, each seemingly amused by the consternation of the recruits.

"The most important thing to remember when fighting against magic users is distraction," Auriana explained. "Magic requires concentration, and if you can force your enemy to lose focus, you have a better chance of winning."

She looked pointedly between each recruit in term, her voice serious but warm.

"In that fight, you gave me too much room. You hesitated, and tried to fight me one on one like this was a sword fight. If you had been able to overwhelm me, you might have stood a chance. Take advantage of your superior numbers, and force me to fight on multiple fronts."

"Don't mess around when it comes to mages, warlocks or the like," Garrick added. "They can kill you a hell of a lot faster than you can kill them. If you see an opportunity, take it."

Auriana nodded her agreement, and pointed two the first two guards to have fallen to her power.

"You… you hesitated. You allowed me to dazzle you. Magic is impressive, but you can't allow yourself to be distracted," she instructed, before turning her attention to the third guard who had attacked her. "You assumed that I had no other weapons in my arsenal beside my magic. Most mages and other casters are proficient in the use of staves or daggers, even if we aren't precisely experts. Don't assume that I need magic to kill you."

She then turned to the two guards who had tried to work together, and nodded approvingly.

"You two had the right idea, but you were a bit slow. As I said before, don't hesitate," she said. "And you… well, to be perfectly honest, you were just unlucky. You were the last one standing, and it was unlikely you'd be able to take me alone. I apologise for turning you into a sheep."

"Thank you, Commander, for that excellent breakdown," Garrick said. "I trust you've all learned something, recruits?"
"Yes, sir!" they chorused obediently. "Thank you, ma'am."

"You're welcome," Auriana said warmly. "What about you, Anduin? What did you learn?"

"You took them out very quickly," Anduin said thoughtfully. "The whole fight barely lasted five minutes."

"Correct," Auriana said. "Long fights require too much energy - the sooner you can finish the battle, the better. Disable or kill as fast as you can, and move on. What else?"

"You moved less than I thought you might have," Anduin continued. "You moved deliberately and precisely, and certainly far less like a headless chicken than I did."

"Good," Auriana said, chuckling slightly. "Move as much as you have to, but no more. It's a waste of energy to do more, and it takes away from the focus of your casting."

She looked over at Varian and smiled, before her expression grew thoughtful once more.

"How about another demonstration?" she said, her eyes never leaving Varian's face.

To his surprise, she walked over to his seat in the stands, and bowed respectfully before him.

"Your Majesty," she said, her voice loud and clear. "Might you lend me the aid of your sword arm?"

"You can have all of me, Commander," Varian said warmly, only hearing the double entendre after a light blush spread across Auriana's cheeks.

He leapt eagerly into the arena, following Auriana's lead and stripping off his outer tunic and flexing his muscles in the sun. He walked over to the nearest weapon rack and selected two wooden swords, warming up the dual blades with a few quick practice passes.

"What would you have me do?"

"I want to show Anduin how to work with a defender," she said. "Moving well when you're alone is one thing, it's another to have to be wary of your allies as well as your enemies. I thought you could act as my protector."

"Very well… though let's make this interesting, shall we?" Varian said.

He beckoned to all other guards currently in the arena, encouraging them to join the young recruits for a second round. They agreed readily, eager as always for a chance to unseat Varian as the undisputed champion of the Stormwind arena.

"King of the hill?" Garrick asked.

"Well, king and queen," Auriana corrected him, grinning. "His Majesty and I will defend the inner ring. If your guards can defeat both of us by touch or forced out, you win… unless we take them all first, of course."

The guards looked around at one another, each quickly and silently calculating the odds. Varian and Auriana were only two against twenty, now, and he could see that the guards were quietly confident that they would win. Of course, they'd never seen Auriana really unleash before, and Varian knew they were in for a surprise. She smelled like sweat and bloodlust, the colour rising in her cheeks as she surveyed her opponents, and Varian couldn't help matching her arousal with his
own. He'd fought with her only once, during their unfortunate meeting in Tanaan Jungle, and from memory they'd been a formidable fighting team. He was eager to see what they could do together uninjured, and he relished the opportunity to fight with her a second time, even if it was only for practice.

He walked to the centre of the ring, Auriana at his side, and had only just adopted a fighting stance when he was charged by a pack of guardsmen. Howling savagely, Varian met the attack head on, tightening his grip on his blades as he entered the fray. It had been some time since he had fought with a dual wield strategy and initially he held back, worried that he might hit Auriana with his whirling blades, only to realise a second later that his concern was unfounded. Given the magnitude of her raw power, it was easy to see Auriana as a blunt instrument, rather than a highly instinctive and clever fighter. She read his every move flawlessly, however, darting around his quickly moving form to strike like lightning at the approaching guardsmen. Unusually for a mage, she seemed to be very used to fighting alongside warriors in the melee, and she positioned herself masterfully to take advantage of the protection offered by both Varian's blades and his heavy bulk.

Together, they created an impenetrable wall of whirling steel and ice, and Varian could scarcely remember having so much fun in a fight. He lost himself completely in the rhythm of the battle, blocking out everything apart from Auriana and whoever was unfortunate enough to be his immediate opponent at the time. In fact, he was so consumed by the fight that he barely even noticed when it was over, and only stopped when he felt the pressure of Auriana's gentle hand on his arm. She was breathing heavily as she looked up at him, her eyes bright with the thrill of battle, and it took everything Varian had not to pull her into his arms and kiss her fiercely to celebrate their triumph.

"Well fought, Your Majesty!" Garrick praised him. "And you, Commander."

Varian blinked and tore his gaze away from Auriana's all too inviting lips, focusing his attention on Garrick's far less appealing face. The Stormwind guardsmen were scattered all about, many of them still lying in the dirt where they had fallen, each looking up at him with undisguised admiration.

"Thank you, Captain," Auriana said smoothly, and quickly released her soothing grip on Varian's arm. "Anduin? What did you think?"

"You watched Father very carefully," he observed, "As he watched you."

"Very good!" she said. "In some ways it's a lot harder to work with another fighter. You have to watch your allies as closely as your enemies. You don't want to get in the way, or worse, hurt each other inadvertently. A misplaced frostbolt would have harmed His Majesty just as readily as any of the guards."

"You were also quite willing to move him, if necessary, and to use him for your own protection," Anduin said, smiling.

"Of course. If this were a real fight, your father would have been wearing plate, making him the less vulnerable of the two of us," she said. "He's also better able to defend himself in the melee than I am. His job is to keep me alive, and I'll use him as I see fit."

"I just can't really believe you didn't manage to hit one another," Anduin said, clearly impressed. "You move so fast, it's sometimes hard to see what's going on."

"It's like a dance," Auriana said. "There's a flow to it, a give and take. Of course, your father has many years of experience, as do I. You'll take time to learn how to work with others, and even then,
you'll always find you'll work better with some people than others."

"You two do make a particularly fine team," Garrick added. "If I didn't know any better, I'd say you'd been fighting together all your lives."

Auriana flushed at the compliment, and took a surreptitious step sideways so that she and Varian were no longer standing quite so close together.

"Ah… what did you learn, recruits?" she said, quickly changing the topic.

"That I never want to have to fight against you and the King in a real battle?" one of the bolder recruits said, prompting a wave of laughter.

"Ah, that's not quite the point…" Auriana said, shaking her head.

"To be fair, though, he's not wrong..." Varian said roguishly, grinning at Auriana with his eyebrows raised.

"Yes, well, I suppose you're right, my Lord," she said, returning his smile, "Though I was thinking of something else."

"Um… I'm not sure if this is correct," one of the female recruits said, "But I think we spent a bit too much time trying to disable his Majesty. You were able to fight us relatively unencumbered."

"Well picked. With all due respect to His Majesty and his considerable skills, it's important to remember that I'm the greater threat," Auriana said firmly. "At best, a melee fighter such as Varian can usually only dispatch two or three people at a time."

She stood back, and strangely began to sketch a quick figure in the dirt with her foot. Her arms and eyes flared bright with the now tell-tale evidence of her magic, and Varian wondered what she was going to do.

"On the other hand, if I'm allowed to cast freely… I can fell all of you in a single strike," she said.

She slammed her foot into the dirt rune as she spoke, and without warning each and every guard in the arena was hoisted ten feet into the air by powerful bonds of arcane magic. Several of the younger guards cried out in surprise, though Varian was confident they were in no danger. They were all simply floating in the air, suspended at the mercy of Auriana's will.

"Always target the most powerful magic users first… and that includes healers. We can make your life a living hell if you aren't careful," she said. "The two greatest weapons in a mage's arsenal are time and space to work. If you can deny your enemy those two things, then you might stand a chance of winning."

She waved a hand and the spell released, slowly lowering the guards back down to the ground. The glow faded from her eyes, and she sighed slightly as she released her magic. The guards each landed on their feet, unharmed, though they all stared at Auriana with a sense of newfound respect.

"Thank you for the use of your men, Captain," she said to Garrick. "And for your assistance as well, Your Majesty."

"You're most welcome, Commander," Varian said warmly. "I'm always happy to lend my aid… especially if it helps Anduin to improve."

"I still have an awful lot to learn," Anduin said ruefully, "Before I can fight like that."
"Well, there's no time like the present," Auriana said, slapping him encouragingly on the back. "Demonstration time is over. Let's get back to it, shall we?"

Auriana worked Anduin late into the afternoon, pushing him until he was utterly exhausted. She was a good, patient teacher, though she also demanded the best, and often refused to Anduin stop until he performed to her satisfaction. Varian knew she did it to build his stamina as well as his skills, but it was still somewhat disconcerting to see his normally refined son so sweaty, red-faced, and dirt-stained.

She finally relented as the sun began to dip below the horizon, the last rays of sunlight turning the arena floor a rich golden red.

"That's enough for today," she said. "We're running out of light."

"Do you mean to say that if it weren't sunset, we'd keep going?" Anduin panted incredulously. "I can't feel my legs."

Auriana laughed and shook her head reassuringly, gazing at the prince with amused pity.

"No, I think you've had quite enough for one day," she said. "Why don't you go get cleaned up for dinner?"

Anduin took her up on the offer without argument, moving from the arena as quickly as his tired legs would allow. Auriana watched him go, her expression contemplative.

"Well, he's going to sleep well tonight," Varian said, stepping back into the arena and walking over to her side.

"He did well today," she said, "But yes, he's going to need the rest."

"Do you still intend to join us for dinner?" Varian asked hopefully, absentmindedly brushing some dirt from her cheek before he'd really thought about the consequences of his actions.

Auriana jerk away as if stung, her eyes darting nervously around the arena. Fortunately, it seemed as if none of the remaining guards had noticed, though she still looked displeased.

"Er… yes…" she said, her hand flying to her face where his fingers had lingered. "Give me an hour to clean up, and then I'll meet you in your quarters?"

"Take as long as you need," Varian said softly, staring down at her with a smile. "You know where I'll be."

True to her word, Auriana reported to Varian's quarters exactly an hour after she had left him in the arena. Anduin arrived moments later, his hair still damp from his ablutions and his tunic neatly pressed. Both he and Auriana looked considerably cleaner and more refreshed than they had an hour earlier, though they both collapsed gratefully in the big wooden chairs that lined Varian's private dining table.

Varian called on his servants as soon as Auriana and Anduin were both settled, guessing that both the prince and the commander would be quite hungry after their lengthy sparring session. His assumption proved to be correct, and neither Varian, Anduin, nor Auriana spoke much as they feasted on succulent chicken pot pie and hearty pumpkin soup. Anduin, in particular, ate with the ravenous hunger that only adolescent boys possessed, wolfing down two full servings before he
was finally replete.

The prince waited patiently while Varian and Auriana finished their own meals with considerably more delicacy, before eagerly engaging Auriana in a conversation about the war in Draenor.

"What will you do next?" Anduin asked curiously. "Now that Blackhand is dead, I mean."

"Well, we're still fighting skirmishes against the Iron Horde in some of the outlying regions, but right now my primary concern is taking the fight to Tanaan Jungle," Auriana explained. "Unfortunately, it's unlikely that we'll be able to launch an overland assault, so I've ordered the construction of a shipyard using materials recovered from the sacking of Blackrock Foundry."

"You look concerned," Anduin observed shrewdly. "Do you not believe an assault from the sea will be successful?"

"I have the utmost confidence in my men, but I have no idea what kind of fresh hell I'll be marching them into. We've have no news of Hellscream in months, and no real intelligence on which to act. There have been countless rumours, of course - everything from Kilrogg taking over as Warchief to the Iron Horde being consumed by the Burning Legion - but mostly there has just been… silence," she said worriedly.

"How long will it take to get in there and find out for yourself?" Varian asked.

"At best, I'll be able to launch our first ships in a couple of months," Auriana said. "It will be a rare moment of quiet in the garrison, actually. Speaking of which…"

She turned to back Anduin, and thoughtfully tapped her spoon on the table.

"Anduin… how would you like to come and spend a few days out at Lunarfall?" she said slowly. "I thought you might like to see a working Alliance military base in action, and I could take you out to see the temple at Karabor. I had intended to stay in Stormwind for a few more days, but you could come with me when I leave."

Varian stiffened at the suggestion, unsure how to respond. On one hand, it would be good for Anduin to interact with the soldiers of the Alliance and learn command skills under Auriana's watchful eye. On the other hand, however, Draenor was still an incredibly savage and largely untamed place, and he hesitated to expose his son to such potential risk.

Anduin responded far more eagerly than his father, of course, his eyes lighting up as he looked at Varian expectantly.

"Karabor? I'd love to!" he eagerly exclaimed. "Er… with your permission, Father."

Varian rubbed his chin, fixing Auriana with an intense stare. She withered slightly under his gaze, and Varian realised that it had only just occurred to her that he might object.

"Is it safe?"

"With Blackhand's death, the Alliance and Horde expeditionary forces control the majority of territory in Draenor," she said firmly. "Shadowmoon Valley is well within our control, and my garrison is well defended. There's no way in hell I'd take him anywhere near Tanaan, of course, but Lunarfall and Karabor are as safe as Stormwind."

"So you say," Varian said, his voice clipped. "There's still the issue of a traitor within the garrison, not to mention that the Horde may seek to take advantage of Anduin's presence."
"I very much doubt Zala'din has designs on Anduin's life," Auriana said drily. "Even if he somehow found out Anduin was visiting. Furthermore, Shaw's SI:7 agents have been able to verify the loyalty of most of the permanent staff at Lunarfall. It seems our traitor is most likely stationed at one of the outposts in Gorgrond or Talador."

Varian harrumphed, still unconvinced.

"I'd be by his side the entire time, and the second I suspected anything was amiss, I could simply open a portal back to Stormwind and push him through," Auriana added, exchanging a quick look with Anduin.

"Please, Father," Anduin pleaded. "Karabor is sacred to the draenei, and the centre of the worship of the Light on Draenor. Think of the things I could learn! I'd give my right arm to see it."

"That's what I'm afraid of," Varian growled.

"Er… perhaps not the best choice of words, but my point still stands," Anduin said, flushing. "Besides, I'd be with Auriana. Is there anyone you trust more with my life than her?"

"No, of course not," Varian admitted, and a strange expression crossed Auriana's face. "But…"

"But nothing," Anduin said firmly. "I'm not a child, Father, you can't keep me locked up in this keep forever. If I'm to be King someday, I need experience in the field. What better opportunity to expand my education than to tour a secure base with one of the most powerful mages alive?"

"I'm fighting a losing battle here, aren't I?" Varian said, sighing.

"A good King knows when to surrender," Auriana said quietly, her mouth twitching.

"I don't like it when you two gang up on me," he muttered, though he could see the wisdom in Anduin's argument. "Very well, you have my permission."

"Excellent! I'll go pack!" Anduin said, flying to his feet barely a second after Varian had said the words.

"We won't be leaving for a couple of days," Auriana said, her eyebrows raising in alarm. "You needn't pack tonight."

"But I'll need to decide which books to take," Anduin said seriously. "And I want to read up on the history of the draenei and Karabor before we go."

"Oh, of course," Auriana said, her voice warming in response to Anduin's infectious enthusiasm. "Don't let me keep you then."

Anduin gave his father a quick, one armed hug, before practically running out of the room. Auriana followed his departing figure, a small smile playing about her lips. Her smile faded, however, as she turned back to Varian and saw the thunderous look on his face.

"I'm sorry," she said quickly. "I should have asked you before I put it to Anduin. I didn't think."

"It's… it's alright, Auriana. It will be good for him," Varian said distantly. "It's just… that's my son, you understand? My only son."

Auriana reached out a small hand and gripped his wrist, her skin stark silver against the bronze of Varian's arm.
"Varian, it would take Sargeras himself to get that boy away from me. And even then, I'm pretty sure I could give the big bastard a run for his money," she said softly.

Varian frowned, unmoved by her attempt at humour.

"Varian," she said, tightening her grip. "You know I would die before I let any harm come to Anduin. Nothing is going to happen, I promise you."

"I'd rather you didn't die, if you can avoid it," Varian said darkly. "I'm rather fond of you as well..."

"Fond?" Auriana repeated, rising to her feet and moving gracefully to his side. "I thought we'd progressed beyond fond."

Varian pulled her into his lap, his hand resting possessively on the generous curve of her hip. Smiling, she wrapped her arms around his neck and placed a gentle kiss on his cheek before resting her head against his shoulder and sighing contentedly. Varian kissed the top of her head, holding her close as he breathed in the faint wildflower scent of her hair.

"Fond doesn't even begin to cover it," he agreed. "I'm going to miss you, when you go back."

"I think you'll find that I'll be home in Stormwind sooner than you think," she said confidently. "With Blackhand dead, Grom Hellscream stands alone. It's only a matter of time before we take Tanaan."

"Don't get cocky," Varian said warningly. "You said it yourself - Hellscream could have just about anything hidden away in that jungle."

"I'm not overconfident, Varian," she said seriously, "But this is the first time I've really been able to see the light at the end of the tunnel. I went to Draenor expecting never to return. I didn't want to return..."

"And now?" Varian asked.

He knew very well that she had been practically suicidal when she had joined the expeditionary force to Draenor, and had intended to survive only long enough to send Garrosh Hellscream to his grave. As far as Varian knew, she no longer harboured such dark thoughts, but he wasn't sure if she had any particular hopes for the future, either.

"Now... well, I don't know where I'll end up after the war... but I hope wherever I am, I'm with you," she said shyly. "You... you gave me something to live for, something to fight for... something I never thought I'd have again."

Varian raised his eyebrows in genuine surprise. The statement was unexpected, given how strongly she had resisted Varian's suggestions of a future together in the past, and he wondered if she weren't finally coming around to his way of thinking. As if in answer to his unspoken question, Auriana entwined her fingers in Varian's own with a soft, knowing smile. Her eyes darkened as she looked at him through thick lashes, and Varian instantly felt his pulse begin to race.

"You know, I'm only going to be in Stormwind for a few more days..." she said throatily.

"Oh?" Varian said, willingly allowing her to pull him in her wake as she slowly rose to her feet and backed away towards his bed chambers.

"Why don't you show me exactly how much you're going to miss me...?"
The next three days Auriana spent in Stormwind were some of the happiest of her life, and it was with considerable reluctance that she eventually prepared for her return to Draenor. It had quite literally been *years* since she had last taken a brief hiatus from her work, and she was surprised to find that she had rather enjoyed the break. She'd actually had time to *sleep*, and had even had the chance to curl up by the fire with a book or two. Best of all, she had taken dinner with Varian each night, and afterwards they would inevitably do the kind of things that made Auriana blush just to remember.

This morning, however, she was due to return to Draenor with the excitable crown prince of Stormwind in tow. Auriana had awoken bright and early in preparation, quickly changing into a familiar set of sleek breeches and a tight leather tunic for the journey home. Somewhat unusually, she hadn't worn trousers at all for the past few days, having discovered Varian's passionate weakness for low cut silk dresses. She had also discovered that dressing like a lady wasn't as objectionable as she had imagined it might be, and she had even on one occasion experimented with her hair.

Of course, such things were irrelevant in Draenor, and Auriana had reverted to a more practical choice of garb for the trip back to Lunarfall. She paused in front of the mirror as she finished dressing, studying her small form carefully. It had been a long time since she had really *looked* at her own reflection, largely unconcerned as she usually was by aesthetic things.

*I look older,* she thought, turning her head slightly from side to side.

There were very faint lines at the corner of her eyes that hadn't been there before the Foundry, and she had added a number of new scars to her already impressive collection. Her expression was harder than she remembered, though at the same time more self-assured. She also looked a bit too thin, the lines of her jaw and collarbones even more sharply drawn than usual, and there was a slight asymmetry on her face where her cheek had been broken.

*It could have been a lot worse,* she reminded herself, her lips drawing into a thin line.

Her brief moment of contemplation was interrupted by a sudden rap at her chamber door and she turned away, hastily fastening her travel pack in preparation for departure.

"Come in," she called, assuming that it was Anduin who had knocked.

The prince had been talking nonstop about their trip to Draenor for the last three days, and Auriana was glad she had made him the offer. Varian was still less than thrilled, of course, but had clearly found it impossible to deny his son's rampant enthusiasm. She understood the King's concern, given the amount of times Anduin had disappeared or otherwise been in danger, but she was confident that she could protect the Prince from harm.

Auriana made her way over to the door, her pack slung loosely over her shoulder, and was surprised to find not only Anduin, but also Varian and a squad of Royal Guardsmen standing on her threshold.

"Good morning," Anduin said warmly, lifting a hand in greeting.

His face was split by a broad smile, and he was well dressed in a practical but expensive set of brand-new hunting leathers. He, too, carried a pack over his shoulders, and he practically bounced
on the balls of his feet with excitement.

"Good morning, Anduin," she replied, grinning. "And you, Your Majesty. Am I to assume that the guardsmen will be accompanying us to Draenor?"

"Yes," said Anduin sullenly, exchanging a quick look with his father.

"Just in case," Varian said gruffly, ignoring Anduin's obvious consternation. "It's not that I don't trust you, Commander…"

"I know," Auriana said, holding up a hand to cut him off. "But it's better safe than sorry, right?"

"Precisely," Varian said, clearly relieved that she had accepted the guards without question. "They're for your protection, as well."

Auriana nodded, quietly taking stock of the four royal guardsmen. It seemed as if Varian had chosen the four the biggest guards he could find, perhaps in an attempt to offset Auriana's own small size. She nodded to their leader, a hulk of a man whose impressive physique nearly rivaled Varian's own, and received a hard eyed nod in reply.

"Well then," she said, stepping back so that she might have space enough to open a portal. "Shall we away?"

Auriana now knew the portal between Stormwind and Lunarfall like the back of her hand, and she was quickly able to open the doorway between worlds. The four guardsmen went through first, hands against their weapons as if they expected to find enemies even in the centre of Lunarfall Garrison. Anduin went through next, pausing only to pull his father into a quick embrace before the glowing blue light of the portal. Varian initially balked, appearing somewhat surprised by Anduin's overt display of affection, but he soon responded in kind.

"Be safe, Anduin," the King said gruffly, though his eyes were fixed on Auriana.

"I'm not exactly going off to war, here, Father," Anduin said, rolling his eyes. "I'll see you in three days."

Extricating himself from Varian's iron grip, the prince stepped through the portal without any further hesitation, vanishing in a burst of white light. Auriana offered Varian what she hoped was a reassuring smile and made to follow him, though at the very last second she was stopped as the King reached out to catch her upper arm between firm fingers.

"Auri..." he started, his rugged face intense.

"He'll be well protected," she said quietly, taking the words out of Varian's mouth. "I promise you, I won't let him out of my sight."

The King harrumphed, shaking his head.

"Am I that predictable?" he asked.

"When it comes to Anduin?" she said, raising an eyebrow. "Yes."

"Hmm. Well... I suppose I'll see you in three days then, won't I?" the King mused.

"Yes," Auriana said firmly. "You will."

She made to step forwards once more, but Varian held her fast, staring down at her with a brooding
intensity that made her breath hitch in her chest. He held her steady for a long time, the touch of his rough fingers softening slightly as his grip on her arm became more of a caress, and it was only with great reluctance that he finally let her go.

Auriana blinked several times as she rematerialised, adjusting her eyes to the pale purple light that blanketed Shadowmoon Valley like perpetual twilight. The prince stood before her in the centre square, attracting quite a bit of attention from the inhabitants of Lunarfall as he peered around with wide-eyed curiosity. His guards had already spread out to form a protective perimeter, glaring suspiciously at anyone whose gaze lingered on the prince for a second too long. Auriana shook her head, realising that Varian must have put the fear of Sargeras into his poor men, and she hoped that their fervid intensity wouldn't interfere with her plans for Anduin overly much.

"Welcome to Lunarfall Garrison," Auriana said, clapping the prince on the back. "Let me show you around."

She lead Anduin on a quick tour of the inner garrison, indicating various points of interest and bringing Anduin up to speed on the current state of events in Draenor. Many people waved or called out to the prince as they passed, both surprised and heartened to have the crown prince of Stormwind visiting their home. Despite the interest raised by the prince's visit, however, Auriana kept the tour deliberately short. There would be time enough to show off Anduin later, but right now her main concern was getting the Prince to Karabor.

"So, what do you think of my garrison?" she asked, as she lead Anduin up the steps and into the town hall.

"It's certainly impressive," Anduin remarked. "You are to be commended for your excellent work, Commander."

"Why thank you, Highness," Auriana said lightly, responding to his formal statement in kind.

"Light, that sounded stuffy, didn't it?" Anduin realised, shaking a hand through his short blonde hair. "Sorry, I'm just a bit nervous… this is the first time I've been to another planet… another timeline… wherever it is that we are."

"I try not to think about it too much," she said, grinning. "If it helps, might I suggest that we're just Anduin and Auriana for the next few days, rather than prince and commander?"

"I'd like that," he said earnestly.

"Good. Come on, I'd like you to meet my second in command," she said, steering Anduin towards her war room.

As expected, Lieutenant Thorn was awaiting their arrival, and Auriana had to smother a smile when she realised that the worgen woman had dug up her best uniform in preparation for meeting the Prince.

"Morning," she said warmly. "Anduin, this is Lieutenant Thorn. Thorn, Anduin Wrynn."

"Your Highness," Thorn said, bowing low. "Welcome to Lunarfall."

"Er… thank you, Lieutenant," he said. "And please, call me Anduin."

"As you wish," Thorn said, though she briefly looked to Auriana for confirmation.
"Is everything prepared?" Auriana asked.

"Of course, Commander. I have readied quarters for his Highness, as requested, and I have two gryphons waiting for your trip to Karabor. I also sent word to the temple of your arrival. They are expecting you by midday," Thorn reported crisply.

"Gryphons?" Anduin interjected.

"Yes. Shadowmoon is quite beautiful at this time of year, and I thought we might fly to Karabor so that you can get the lay of the land," Auriana said. "I could always open a portal, if you'd prefer, but…"

"Gryphons will do just fine," Anduin said eagerly, favouring her with a broad grin.

"Then it's settled. Captain..." she said, waving over Anduin's chief guard, "I will open a portal to Karabor for you and your men, so that you might inspect the temple before our arrival. It should take us about three hours to fly the length of the Valley, so we will meet you there later today."

"With respect, ma'am, I'd prefer if we accompanied you directly," the guardsman said hesitantly, crossing his arms over his chest.

"We're perfectly safe in the air," Auriana said firmly. "Shadowmoon Valley is frequently patrolled by Lunarfall's gryphon riders, and we've haven't had the slightest hint of trouble in months. Isn't that right, Thorn?"

"Er, yes, Commander. Quite right," Thorn agreed, her eyes darting nervously between Auriana and the guardsmen.

"Besides, I've no gryphons to spare for your men," Auriana added, her tone leaving no room for argument. "I will take full responsibility for the decision with King Wrynn."

From the way the guardsmen frowned at the mention of Varian's name, Auriana surmised that she was correct in her assessment that the King had all but terrorised them before placing Anduin in their care. Nevertheless, the guard captain acquiesced to her request with a terse nod, looking over at Anduin briefly for reassurance as he did so.

"As you wish, ma'am," he said doubtfully.

"Good. We'll catch up to you shortly," Auriana said, opening a portal to Karabor and ushering the guardsmen through before they could protest further.

She turned back to Anduin and Thorn as the guardsmen disappeared, divesting herself of her travel pack as she did so.

"Anduin, leave your things with Thorn here, and she'll see to it that they are taken up to your room," she instructed. "Thorn, we'll leave for Karabor immediately. I expected we'll be home at around dinnertime."

"I'll have your meal ready and waiting, Commander," Thorn said. "Enjoy your flight."


She led the Prince of Stormwind back outside and down towards Lunarfall's sprawling stables. The morning air on Draenor was clear and crisp, and Auriana couldn't have asked for a nicer day for which to fly to Karabor. She very much wanted Anduin to enjoy himself, and she was pleased to
see that the weather, at least, had cooperated with her plans.

As they entered the light and airy gryphon roost, Anduin looked over at Auriana with sudden interest and raised a single golden eyebrow.

"There are plenty of gryphons here," he observed. "You lied to my guards."

"Did I?" Auriana said enigmatically, her face giving nothing away. "Curious..."

Anduin grinned broadly, evidently impressed by her little trick, and followed closely on her heels as she made her way over to where a slender young stable hand was waiting alongside two harnessed gryphons.

"This is one of our finest war gryphons, Brightfeather, and his mate, Sunwing," Auriana said, patting the male gryphon's beak affectionately. "I'm assuming you can ride?"

"Yes, I can," Anduin said eagerly, holding out his hand to Sunwing for inspection.

"Good. Shall we?" Auriana said invitingly, leading Brightfeather out into the open air before swinging into his saddle.

Gryphon harnesses were somewhat different to those used on horses or other beasts of the land, as they needed to hold a rider secure during complex aerial manoeuvres, and it took some time for Auriana to fasten herself in the saddle. Anduin did likewise, fixing his leg straps with practiced fingers as if he'd been riding gryphons all his life - which, she supposed, he probably had.

Brightfeather was apparently as eager as Anduin to fly to Karabor, tossing his big head restlessly and taking to the air the moment Auriana was secured on his back. He rose rapidly through the air, Sunwing following close behind as he cleared the deep purple canopy of the many trees that grew throughout Lunarfall.

The ground raced by beneath the gryphons as they stretched their wings and turned for Karabor, the grey stone walls of Lunarfall soon giving way to the endless, rolling green hills of Shadowmoon Valley. Brightfeather and Sunwing flew apace, their wings beating up and down in perfect unison as they settled into the flight. Auriana pointed out various landmarks to Anduin along the way; everything from the forbidding Anguish Fortress, former home of Ner'zhul and his Shadowmoon orcs, to the small draenei villages that dotted the countryside. Anduin seemed to have an endless supply of amazement, and much to Sunwing's annoyance, practically leapt from his saddle every time he saw something interesting below. Unfortunately, where Anduin saw a picturesque village or a beautiful valley bursting with life, Auriana saw only a defensible ridge or a perfect spot for an ambush, and she wondered if over the years she had lost some of her ability to see beauty and joy. Anduin, luckily, didn't seem to have the same problem, and Auriana began to suspect that this trip would be as good for her as it was for him.

"Enjoying yourself?" she called to the Prince, slowing Brightfeather so that her voice was audible above the wind.

"This is the best thing I've done in… oh, I don't know how long," Anduin replied eagerly. "Thank you very much for inviting me."

It was somewhat difficult to hear him with her bad ear, and Auriana maneuvered Brightfeather in closer so that they might talk properly.

"You're welcome," she said warmly, brushing back her loosened hair.

"Though I must ask - why go to all this effort? I know you have better things to do than escort me
all over Draenor," Anduin asked, once again demonstrating his uncanny skills of perception.

"I wanted to apologise," Auriana admitted. "After I was rescued from Blackrock Foundry, I know... well, I know I put you through a lot, to say the least. You should never have had to heal me as you did - hell, I even tried to kill you - and I thought this might go some ways towards making it up to you."

"You don't have anything to make up to me," Anduin said quickly, looking her with a powerful intensity that was distinctly reminiscent of his father. "If anything, I owe you."

"Really?" Auriana exclaimed. "What could you possibly owe me?"

"Well, I'm learning to be a healer, and you've given me more practice than anyone else," he said, grinning slyly.

"Oh, ha, ha," Auriana said drily, though she did find the Prince's argument amusing.

"Can we please call it even?" he suggested. "I've no need to keep score."

"Alright... though you know how I love to keep score," Auriana replied, reminding him of their many unsuccessful games of jihui.

"That you do," Anduin laughed. "I'll never understand how you and my father can see the competition in absolutely everything."

"It's fun," Auriana said simply, shrugging. "Speaking of which..."

She pointed ahead, where a massive curving shape rose out of the landscape like a sleeping giant.

"That's Karabor," she said, prompting Anduin to sit up straighter in the saddle. "I'll race you."

"A race?" Anduin repeated, a slow, adventurous smile spreading across his face. "You're on."

Before Auriana had a chance to respond, Anduin heeled Sunwing forwards with a daring cry. The female gryphon obeyed the command eagerly, beating her wings furiously in an attempt to outrun her mate.

"Oh, so that's how it is!" Auriana shouted at the Prince's back as Sunwing rapidly drew away. Perhaps the apple didn't fall as far from the tree as I might have thought...

Brightfeather gave chase without even being asked, and Auriana flattened herself along the line of the gryphon's neck as he gathered speed. The ground suddenly raced by in a blur, and Auriana lost herself in the thrill of the chase. Anduin was skilled in the saddle, and he pushed Sunwing with surprising enthusiasm, but Brightfeather was one of the finest Alliance war gryphons ever bred. Auriana was also so light as to barely be a hindrance to his movement, and he was soon hot on the heels of his mate.

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Auriana let out a wild war whoop as she closed in on Anduin, her eyes watering with the wind of their speed. Karabor was rapidly looming closer, and it was not long before both Brightfeather and Sunwing folded their wings and dived. Auriana heard Anduin shout with exhilaration as the ground raced up to meet them, finally losing his nerve and pulling Sunwing out of her dive well before he was in any danger. Auriana, however, held on for a second longer, fearlessly using the speed of Brightfeather's dive to overtake the Prince, before pulling the gryphon level and settling him into a long glide.
Laughing, both Auriana and Anduin landed the two gryphons in the wide, open courtyard at the very entrance of the temple grounds, where they were welcomed warmly by a young draenei anchorite. Anduin's cheeks were flushed with pleasure as he dismounted, running a hand through his dishevelled golden hair in a somewhat futile attempt to restore it to neatness.

"Archenon poros!" the anchorite called brightly, waving a large purple hand in greeting. "Welcome back to Karabor, Commander. I trust you had a safe journey. We could see your little race from here - it looked quite thrilling!"

"It was, thank you," Auriana said, stretching out her legs as she readjusted to being on solid ground. "It's a beautiful day for flying. I trust you received my message?"

"Yes, we received word from your Lieutenant three days ago, and your guards arrived earlier this morning to inspect our defenses. They have informed me that Karabor is perfectly safe," he informed her, his mouth twitching slightly.

"You'll have to forgive their zealously," Auriana said, smiling. "They are very devoted to their duty."

"I do not blame them, Commander. It appears they have their hands quite full with that young Prince of yours," he said, inclining his head to hide his smirk.

"What?" Auriana said, and it was only in that moment that she realised Anduin had already scampered off towards the temple's main building. "Ah…"

"I will see to your gryphons," the anchorite added kindly, "Go. Follow your wayward prince, and then head for the heart of the temple. Your guards will meet you there."

"Thank you," Auriana said swiftly, moving after Anduin even before the words had left her mouth. Fortunately, she caught up to him quickly, hastening to his side as he paused to inspect one of the imposing statues that lined Karabor's grand promenade.

"Oh, Auriana!" he exclaimed, as if only just remembering that she was there. "Look at this place… can you feel it? I've never known the Light to be so strong… it's everywhere."

Auriana smiled briefly at the prince's obvious joy, though she could not afford to get so swept up in his enthusiasm that she forgot to see to his safety.

"Don't run away on me like that," she admonished him gently. "Karabor may seem safe, but you never know what might happen. Your father will have my head if anything happens to you."

"He'd never hurt you," Anduin said absentmindedly, the majority of his attention still focused on the statue.

"If I lost his only son, he might," Auriana said grimly. "I know you're excited, but please… humour me. I told your father that I'd be by your side the entire time, and I intend to fulfil that promise."

"Very well," Anduin said, though there was a hint of rebellion behind his eyes. "What do you propose we do first?"

"Well, I've arranged for someone to meet us at the main entrance to the temple," Auriana said, gently prodding Anduin into motion. "A… tour guide, I suppose you might say."

"A tour guide?" Anduin repeated. "You just said you weren't going to let me out of your sight."
"Oh, I'm coming with you, of course, but given that I know precisely nothing about the Light, I thought your first visit to Karabor should be with someone who has considerably more knowledge than I," she explained.

"Who?" Anduin asked curiously.

"Ah - you'll just have to wait and see," Auriana said, grinning. "Come on."

Together, they made the long walk up to the heart of Karabor, a journey made even slower by the fact that Anduin had to stop every twenty feet or so to marvel at some relic or another. Auriana followed him with amused patience, though more than once she had to bite her tongue in order to avoid telling him to hurry up. She didn't have quite the same interest in draenic statuary as the Prince, and to her they more or less all looked identical.

By the time Auriana and Anduin finally reached Karabor proper, it had been over half an hour since they had landed, much to the consternation of Anduin's royal guard. They rushed over to Anduin as soon as they saw him, checking him over with practiced eyes and shooting disapproving glances in Auriana's direction. The prince cared little for their concern, however, his attention entirely consumed by the sight of magnificent structure that sat at the heart of Karabor. It was a breathtaking testament to the power and majesty of draenei civilisation at its height, and even Auriana allowed herself a few moments to be moved by its beauty before turning her attention elsewhere.

As Anduin marvelled at the draenei temple, Auriana cast her searching gaze over the small throng of draenei walking to and from Karabor's main entrance. She was looking for one draenei in particular, seeking the familiar heavy hammer and shining plate armour of the formidable Exarch Yrel. Of course, there were a great deal of draenei out and about in Karabor at this time of day, and it was some time before Auriana finally spotted Yrel's distinctive, silvery-white hair.

"There she is," Auriana said out loud, waving to catch the Exarch's attention.

Yrel was a powerful leader of the draenei people, and Auriana had nothing but respect for the other woman. They had fought together on several occasions, most notably during the Siege of Grommashar, and while they occasionally disagreed on strategy, Auriana considered her a true ally of Lunarfall. She was also incredibly strong with the Light, and had thankfully been willing to accommodate Anduin's visit to Karabor.

"Exarch Yrel," Auriana called, inclining her head politely as the draenei woman approached.

"Commander," Yrel replied, mimicking the gesture respectfully.

Her eyes swept briefly down the length of Auriana's body, the corners of her eyes crinkling in a very slight frown, as if displeased by what she saw.


"Welcome to Karabor, Prince of Stormwind," Yrel said warmly, smiling as she gently clasped Anduin's hands. "Light's blessings be upon you."

"Yrel? Maraad's protégé?" Anduin said excitedly, his blue eyes widening in delight. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Exarch, I've read so much about you in Auriana's garrison reports."

Yrel's face darkened almost imperceptibly at the mention of the fallen Vindicator, but she smiled serenely down at Anduin nonetheless.
"The Commander here has told me much about you as well, Highness," she said. "I look forward to showing you around Karabor."

"Has she now?" Anduin said, with a sly, sideways glance at Auriana.

"All good, I swear," Auriana said quickly, holding up her hands defensively and grinning broadly.

"Auriana said that you wish to learn more of the Light," Yrel said. "I understand that you were apprenticed to the Prophet Velen, in your own time and on your own world, much as I studied under him here on Draenor?"

As she spoke, a second flicker of sadness crossed her face, and Auriana was starkly reminded that the young paladin had lost both of her cherished mentors within a matter of months. It had taken great strength for Yrel to carry on and to take up the mantle of leadership among her people, though it was clear that the loss weighed heavily on her mind.

"Yes, I was," Anduin said quietly. "I... I was saddened to hear of the death of... of your Velen. I know that he and I never actually met, but I felt as if I knew him because I knew - know - our Velen... I'm sorry, I'm not explaining this very well. This alternate timeline business is rather complicated..."

"I understand you perfectly, Highness. Time and distance mean little to the Light," Yrel murmured, her shining eyes haunted. "He is sorely missed."

Anduin frowned slightly and reached for Yrel's arm with gentle fingers, unable to resist the call of another soul in pain. A bright flash of Light burst between them as they touched, and Yrel looked at the prince with great surprise and careful consideration. She looked at him so intently as to almost stare into him, and it was some time before she looked away.

"You are very strong in the Light, young prince," she said finally. "I think you will find we have much to discuss. Come."

Yrel strode off towards the Gardens of Eternity with Anduin at her side, Auriana and the royal guardsmen trailing in their wake. The Prince and Exarch quickly struck up a conversation, and Auriana was soon lost as they began to discuss the Light in complex detail. While there was much she could teach Anduin about combat strategy and magical theory, there was very little specific instruction she could give him in the way of the Light. Yrel, on the other hand, while a paladin, was connected to the Light in a way that Auriana could scarcely comprehend, and she hoped that Anduin would benefit from the Exarch's vast knowledge.

The draenei had prepared lunch for Anduin in the gardens, and Auriana settled herself in under a tree with some hearty bread and a glass of wine while he and Yrel talked. The Gardens were possibly one of the most beautiful places on Draenor to take lunch, and Auriana quite enjoyed the opportunity to sit silently at the edge of a small, sparkling pond with the gentle sun on her face.

She watched Anduin out of the corner of her eye as she ate, as did the royal guardsmen, and was pleased to see that he and Yrel were getting along as if they had been friends for years. In fact, it seemed that Anduin was so absorbed in the conversation that he had entirely forgotten that Auriana was there. Auriana didn't mind, of course, and was perfectly content to sit quietly in the gardens while the gentle breeze ruffled her hair. She wasn't the type of person who ever really stopped - always thinking, always planning, always fighting - and she rarely took the opportunity to simply sit. She found it very difficult to quiet her mind, particularly on Draenor, though here in the gardens of Karabor she felt a curious, unfamiliar sense of peace roll through her bones. It was a peace she sorely needed, still troubled as she was by her experience in the Foundry. She had
managed to put on a brave face for Varian, and she was doing much better, but she couldn't quite shake the feeling that a part of her heart was irreparably broken.

Auriana tried not to dwell on such thoughts overly much, however, and she sat in quiet contentment until Anduin and Yrel had finished lunch. Yrel then led the small group on a lengthy tour of Karabor, showing off everything from the magnificent Karabor Harbour to the impossibly peaceful worship chambers that made up the heart of the temple. Anduin stared at everything with a rapturous, childlike amazement, and once again Auriana was immensely glad that she had bought him along.

After several hours, Yrel lead them to the Coliseum of Light, a vast, open air amphitheatre that the draenei of Karabor used for everything from public meetings to religious ceremonies. Auriana had been here once before, after the incident with the Dark Star, in order to pay her respects to Velen's memory. It was strange to think that home on Azeroth there was a version of Velen alive and well, while he was simultaneously mourned her on Draenor, and after several minutes of thinking on the conundrum Auriana's head began to hurt.

Yrel did not seem overly interested in the Coliseum itself, however, and instead ushered Anduin into the small room beneath the amphitheatre where the draenei had erected a simple memorial to their fallen Prophet. Auriana felt a powerful sense of peace and harmony wash over her as she stepped across the threshold, and from the look on his face, Anduin had been similarly affected.

"This is all that remains of Velen," Yrel explained, her beautiful face tinged with sadness, "This place was built to remind the draenei of his great sacrifice in saving the naaru K'ara, but also of his hope for the future. If nothing else, Velen has always represented hope to our people - hope that one day, those who live in the Light will triumph over the darkness."

Anduin nodded reverentially as he beheld the simple monument, walking forwards and slowly running his hands over the stained glass.

"Life is the Light, and Light is life itself," he mumbled, the words sounding as if they had been spoken from very far away.

"What did you just say?" Yrel asked, her eyes widening.

"Um… nothing," Anduin said, blinking several times. "It was… just a thought. Though… can… can we stay here awhile? I feel as if we should."

"I feel it too, Highness. In fact… would you like to join us, Commander?" Yrel offered, addressing Auriana directly for the first time in hours.

"In prayer?" Auriana asked, startled by the offer. "Ah… I'm fairly sure I'm a bit too… chaotic… for the Light's taste. I'm not sure it would really want to… uh... talk to me."

"We are all touched by the Light, Commander," Yrel said firmly. "Even you… and I think you need the Light's healing more than most."

"Healing?" Auriana repeated, nonplussed. "I'm perfectly fine. My hearing's still a bit funny, admittedly, but otherwise I've been given a clean bill of health."

"Not healing of the body, but healing of the spirit," Yrel said gently. "A great wrong has been done to you, I felt it on you as you arrived."

"Please, Auri," Anduin added, his youthful face intense. "I think… yes… I think this could be important."
Without waiting for an answer, the draenei paladin gently looped her arm through Auriana's own with an expression of supreme serenity, while Anduin did the same on Auriana's other side. Together, the Prince and Exarch all but frogmarched her down into the room to stand before Velen's memorial, pulling her down so that she sat cross legged on the floor between them. Auriana sighed loudly in protest, but decided that she was willing to go along with it all for Anduin's sake.

Anduin and Yrel exchanged an enigmatic look, before they both closed their eyes and silently reached for the Light. Auriana, too, closed her eyes, but found it was hard to block out the part of her mind that loudly insisted that this was all rather unnecessary. While Auriana respected the power of the Light, and the power she now felt emanating from both Yrel and Anduin, she had never really put much stock in the more mystical aspects of the Light's worship. As far as she was concerned, power was power, and all the vague hand-waving and murmuring was largely a waste of time. She also felt similarly about many of the rituals inherent to the practice of arcane magic; which, she reflected, was probably why she'd often struggled to cast anything that required more than an instantaneous projection of sheer will.

Forcing herself to concentrate, Auriana shifted her hips as she tried to get comfortable. Her movement did not go unnoticed by Anduin, however, who reached out to still her with a gentle touch of his hand against her thigh.

"Stop fidgeting," he whispered. "Relax. Don't fight it."

"Easy for you to say," Auriana muttered, taking several deep breaths in an attempt to mimic Anduin's impossible stillness.

A moment later, she felt Anduin and Yrel channel the Light into her body as if casting a healing spell, though the effect was nothing like any healing spell Auriana had ever known. Time seemed to have slowed, if not stopped outright, and Auriana was faintly aware of a faint golden glow shimmering at the edges of her consciousness. She also felt curiously hollow, as if emptied of all emotion or desire, though the sensation was not unpleasant.

Auriana sat for what felt like hours in her hollow state, until a strange tingling sensation began to work its way up her body from her toes. Suddenly, everything happened very quickly, and Auriana trembled as her entire body came under assault from the Light. Her breath caught as a tremendous shiver of hope ran up her spine, only for the Light to stop just short of her heart. In a moment of stunning clarity, it felt to Auriana as if there was a deep, dark hole in the core of her being, a hole that not even the power of the Light could fill.

She then felt a great pressure, as if someone were squeezing her chest, and realised that Yrel and Anduin were attempting to do the impossible by patching the hole. The darkness resisted, as it always did, but Anduin and Yrel were both strong and determined, and they poured Light into Auriana until she felt like she was going to explode. Slowly, achingly, the Exarch and the Prince pushed back against Auriana's broken core, and something inside her finally snapped as the darkest reaches of her soul flooded with Light.

Startled, Auriana's eyes flew open, and she was surprised to realise that she was crying. Her tears were not tears of sadness, however, but rather represented a deep and abiding sense of relief. Auriana shook her head in confusion, and turned to find both Anduin and Yrel looking across at her with unnervingly similar smiles. Auriana knew enough to understand that something profound had occurred between all three of them, though she doubted whether she would ever truly be able to comprehend the significance of the moment.

"I… what?" she said hoarsely "What was that?"
"It was what was needed. Perhaps not what I intended to do today, but needed nonetheless," Yrel said quietly. "There is much darkness within you, Commander, but through the Light you may be made whole. You may not be a paladin, or a priest, but the Light cares not for such arbitrary distinctions."

She reached out to touch a hand to Auriana's shoulder, her fingers soft.

"Never forget," she said seriously. "In the Light… in the Light, we are one."
Zala'din

It was an unusually frigid day in Frostfire Ridge, though truly pleasant days were rare in the wild north of Draenor. Despite the fact that it was midday and the sun burned brightly overhead, Frostwall Garrison remained bitterly cold, courtesy of a powerful wind blowing in from off the Zangar Sea. The vast magma fields that ran beneath Frostfire also did very little to relieve the sting of the cold on a day like this, and Zala'din found himself wishing he was quite literally anywhere else. He hated the ice and cold with a fierce passion, and he wasn't looking forward to leaving the relative warmth of his hut to go outside. He was much more at home in the steamy, pressing heat of the Echo Isles or the dry dust of Orgrimmar, and not a day went by when he didn't wish the Horde had established their main base in tropical Gorgrond, or even in the pleasantly temperate Talador.

Bet da Alliance don't have dis problem, he mused jealously, pulling a heavy winter cloak over his armour as he stepped out into the snow.

His second, Te'jaia, was standing just outside the flap of his hut, her blue cheeks darkened from the persistent bite of the wind. She, too, was dressed for warmth, her long white mohawk hidden beneath a heavy woolen cowl. Despite the weather, Zala'din was not at all surprised to find the pretty shaman waiting for him, given how much she seemed to enjoy fussing over him like a mother raptor tending to her young. Fortunately, for her sake, Te'jaia had the potential to be a fine war leader, and Zala'din patiently tolerated her eccentricities in the hope that she might one day learn to temper her brashness with wisdom.

"Whatcha want, Jaia?" he asked as he strode for the centre of his garrison.

"Da Warchief gonna be here soon," she said, unable to keep the eagerness from her voice as she trotted after him like a faithful hound.

"I be well aware," Zala'din said drily, "Considering I be the one who invited him. Don'tcha go gettin' too excited, now, Vol'jin don't like ta be fawned over."

"I'm not fawning over anyone, Zal," she retorted, scowling, "But he be the Warchief of da Horde! The greatest troll alive!"

"Ya hopin' he be lookin' for a mate?" Zala'din teased, knowing full well that his comment would drive her crazy.

"No!" Te'jaia protested, blushing furiously. "I… he's not who I want…"

Zala'din frowned slightly at her curious phrasing, but decided it would be unwise to continue to provoke her.

"Ya met him before," he said instead, rolling his eyes. "What's different about today?"

"I haven't seen him since before we came through da Dark Portal to Draenor," Te'jaia said slowly. "I wasn't an officer of da Horde den."

"Ah. Ya wanna impress him," Zala'din realised.

"Dis war ain't gonna last forever," she said defensively. "It ain't wrong to be ambitious, Zal."

Zala'din considered the scowling shaman thoughtfully. Historically, troll women had been barred
from fighting as warriors or holding positions of power within a tribe, though Te'jaia was part of a younger generation who had not grown up with such limitations. She was well aware of the strength of her own nascent abilities, and it seemed that she was more than willing to use those abilities in the pursuit of greatness and glory.

"Ambition is just fine, Jaia, so long as it isn't blind ambition," Zala'din said warningly. "Ya don't wanna turn out like Garrosh."

She looked up sharply at the mention of Hellscream's name, frowning as she considered the implication of Zala'din's words.

"Hellscream had no honour," she said softly. "I ain't ever gonna be like him."

Zala'din nodded, but said nothing more as they continued to walk towards the centre of Frostwall. Te'jaia, surprisingly, also fell quiet, apparently engaged in an uncharacteristic spell of self-reflection. Zala'din smiled to himself approvingly, pleased that she had taken his advice to heart. She was opinionated, and headstrong, but she did listen, and Zala'din looked forward to the day when she would take her place as a powerful leader among the Darkspear.

The two trolls remained silent as they reached the heart of Frostwall, standing ankle deep in snow as they awaited the Horde Warchief. Fortunately, they didn't have to wait for very long; a portal flaring to life mere minutes after their arrival. The air shimmered and thrummed with the powerful spell, and through the widening hole Zala'din could distantly see the dusty red mesas of Orgrimmar. For a moment, nothing happened, then the portal rippled and Warchief Vol'jin emerged, accompanied by a squad of four steely-eyed Darkspear Guardians. His gaze found Zala'din almost immediately, his tusks spreading into a wide grin as he loped forwards.

"Zala'din!" he said. "How ya doin', mon?"

"Good, very good. It been a long time, old friend," Zala'din replied warmly, gripping the Warchief's forearm tightly in a gesture of greeting.

The two trolls had been friends for years, ever since the wide-eyed youth Zala'din had followed Vol'jin to Kalimdor after the older troll had taken over leadership of the Darkspear trolls from his father. In that time, Zala'din had seen his Warchief grow from a talented young shadow hunter to a brave and worthy champion of the Horde, and there wasn't a person alive for whom he had more respect. In many ways, he saw Vol'jin as the older brother he had never had, and he would gladly follow the Warchief into hell. He had been greatly honoured to accept the position of garrison commander when Vol'jin had offered, and he was eager to show his old friend what the Horde had accomplished in Draenor.

"Far too long, Commander," Vol'jin agreed, lifting his head to peer curiously around Frostwall.

It was the first time the Warchief had visited Draenor since the Horde and Alliance had stormed the Dark Portal, and he seemed visibly excited by the prospect of inspecting Frostwall and the other Horde outposts.

"Ya know my second, Te'jaia," Zala'din added, realising that if he didn't introduce the young troll she might just burst.

"Warchief," she said, saluting formally. "Welcome to Frostwall."

"Thank ya for havin' me, shaman," Vol'jin replied, his grin making Te'jaia flush. "I hear ya been takin' good care of my garrison."
"I do my best," Te'jaia said proudly, lifting her chin. "For da glory of da Horde, of course."

"Frostwall continues to press da attack against the Iron Horde," Zala'din said, his tone more measured than Te'jaia's, "Though I tink we have much to discuss. Dis way, Warchief."

He gestured back the way he had come, keen to return to the relative warmth of his personal hut. Vol'jin took off down the path with considerable enthusiasm, evidently sharing Zala'din's dislike of the cold weather. Te'jaia then attempted to join them, but Zala'din waved her off with a stern look. As his second, she probably had a right to attend a meeting between her Warchief and her Commander, but Zala'din wanted to speak to Vol'jin alone. Te'jaia frowned thunderously, but he knew she wasn't going to make a scene in front of Vol'jin, and she accepted the dismissal with a good deal more grace than he had expected.

"It be good ta see ya in Draenor," Zala'din said sincerely, as he and Vol'jin fell into step. "How long ya goin' ta stay?"

"Only til tomorrow," Vol'jin said. "I gonna leave for Beastwatch tonight, den make my way south to… ah... Vol'jin's Pride in the mornin'. Speakin' of which… who gave it dat ridiculous name?"

"Wasn't me," Zala'din grinned. "Zog, probably."

Vol'jin growled irritably, shaking a hand through his dark red hair. Unlike Garrosh Hellscream, the new Warchief of the Horde did not seek notoriety or exaltation, and he was clearly uncomfortable with having the outpost so named. Zala'din had always known Vol'jin to be a humble and self-sacrificing leader, and he was quietly pleased to see that taking on the mantle of Warchief had not changed his old friend for the worse.

"Suppose it's too late to rename it?" Vol'jin suggested hopefully.

"People'd get confused," Zala'din said lightly, grinning.

"Yeah, well, we can't have dat, can we?" Vol'jin growled sarcastically, shaking his head.

Zala'din laughed loudly as they reached his hut, and quickly ushered Vol'jin inside. The four Darkspear Guardian's took up posts just outside the hut's entrance, but otherwise left Zala'din and the Warchief to converse alone. Vol'jin shed his travelling cloak the moment he stepped across the threshold, and settled himself beside Zala'din's roaring fire with a satisfied sigh. Zala'din followed his lead, pausing only to pour two cups of dark amber rum before taking a seat of his own.

"You really gonna leave Frostwall so soon?" Zala'din asked, handing Vol'jin the second cup. "I had hoped you'd stay for longer."

"I gotta get back to Orgrimmar," Vol'jin said seriously. "Ya know how it's been, Zal. Garrosh Hellscream tore da Horde apart. It gonna take a long time to rebuild."

"I don't envy ya," Zala'din said truthfully. "I feel it here, too. Da Horde be restless."

"Hmph," Vol'jin grunted, swilling his drink thoughtfully. "Ya know, Zal, next time someone offers me leadership of da Horde… remind me to say no."

For a second, Zala'din wasn't entirely sure if Vol'jin was serious, until he saw the familiar wry sparkle in the Warchief's eyes.

"It can't be all bad, surely?" he said.
"It isn't," Vol'jin conceded, grinning. "Sometimes I even get to do somethin' fun, like comin' out ta Frostwall. At least here, tings seem ta be goin' alright."

"Dey are," Zala'din agreed. "Much ta my very great surprise."

"Tell me ya story, then," Vol'jin chuckled, stretching out his long legs and shifting into a more comfortable position. "I wanna hear about da death of Blackhand."

"Ya know what happened," Zala'din said. "Ya read the report."

"I wanna hear it from you," Vol'jin said. "A report's a report… it isn't a story."

Shrugging, Zala'din began his tale, starting from when the human Archmage Khadgar had unexpectedly asked for an audience in order to facilitate battlefield relations between the Horde and the Alliance. Storytelling was an important part of troll culture, and Zala'din found that he quite enjoyed the opportunity to tell his tale. A garrison report, no matter how well written, could never really capture the feel of a battle; from the acrid scent of blood in the air to the clash of steel on steel. Vol'jin listened with rapt attention as Zala'din told of Blackhand's fall, his sharp golden eyes never leaving the younger troll's face.

It took Zala'din nearly half an hour to tell the full story, and by the time he finished, his voice was slightly hoarse from talking. Vol'jin hadn't said a word while Zala'din spoke, choosing instead to listen in considered silence until Zala'din had finished.

"Gotta say," the Warchief said finally, "I did not expect ta see Frostwall and Lunarfall workin' together on dis one. I was mighty surprised when I received dat letter from Varian Wrynn. An armistice is one ting, but a working relationship is another. I didn't tink da Alliance be quite so… forgivin'."

"Whatever else dey may be, da Alliance are not stupid," Zala'din said seriously. "Dey know they couldn'ta taken da Foundry without us. Their commander is certainly not stupid. Dangerous, perhaps, but clever. From what I understand, it was her idea."

"Clever's not always a good ting," the Warchief said warily.

"Well, luckily she seems ta be more interested in killin' da Iron Horde, den us," Zala'din said lightly, though Vol'jin looked unconvinced.

"Why'd ya convince me ta trust her? What do ya know of her, really?" he asked, his expression thoughtful.

"Not much," Zala'din admitted. "I know she was trained by da Kirin Tor, and she's fought for da Alliance for the last decade. She's a berserk, allegedly, but I never seen her really cut loose. She had family in Theramore… da first time I met her, she was just about ready to tear Garrosh's head from his shoulders with her bare hands."

Vol'jin shook his head and scratched his tusks.

"Da Horde is gonna bear da dishonour of Theramore for a long while," he said darkly. "She not da only one who wanted da pleasure of killin' Hellscream personally."

"He be dead," Zala'din said, shrugging. "Don't matter how."

"As usual, you see to da heart of da matter, old friend," Vol'jin said, chuckling. "Dead be dead."
The Warchief then took a long draw of his drink, staring into the dark amber liquid with a slightly pensive expression.

"Anything else I should know about dis Alliance Commander?" he asked.

"Dat's about all I know for sure," Zala'din admitted. "Our spies in Stormshield have heard whispers dat she's very... close... to da human King, but I wouldn't put much stock in most of what I've heard."

"Whatcha mean, close?" Vol'jin repeated.

"Dere be a persistent rumour dat she and Wrynn are lovers, which seems... unlikely," Zala'din explained.

"Lovers?" Vol'jin repeated, surprise openly written across his face. "Can't say I would have guessed dat... didn't tink Wrynn still had it in him."

"I very much doubt it be something ta take seriously. Ya know how rumours be spread through da Horde - I can't imagine it be much different in da Alliance," Zala'din said, shaking his head.

"Ya not wrong," Vol'jin said sagely. "Put a group of da most battle hardened soldiers in da Horde together and all dey'll do is gossip like old women."

Zala'din laughed loudly at the truth in Vol'jin's words. He was a career warrior, having fought his first battle for the Horde scant months after completing his initiation ritual, but he had never encountered a soldier who didn't enjoy a good bit of gossip. Of course, Zala'din didn't begrudge the tendency in the slightest. When stationed on some Light-forsaken front thousands of miles away from home, sometimes a good story was all you had.

"Rumours aside, however, I tink it be safe ta assume dat Wrynn trusts her," he said, returning to the topic at hand.

"An' what about you, Zal? Do you trust her?" Vol'jin asked, leaning forward interestedly and propping his elbows on his knees.

"Yes," Zala'din said confidently. "She might be all magic an' fancy spells on da outside, but at her heart she be a warrior. She knows blood, and honour. She might not like us, but she'll work with us."

Vol'jin frowned, and Zala'din wondered if he was displeased. Zala'din had never hated humans as vehemently as some others of his race, and he would not dismiss the aid of a brave warrior like Auriana out of hand, simply because of her race. Of course, he would likely always view the Alliance with some measure of suspicion, but in general he believed the only thing that mattered was the present, rather than the past or the future. As far as he was concerned, there was no point dwelling on what could have been, or who did what, so long as there was still a battle to be fought. What mattered was right now, and right now, he knew in his heart the best way to defeat the Iron Horde was to continue to work with the Alliance.

"She won't betray da Horde," he added firmly.

"Well, unless she thought dat betrayin' da Horde was da only way ta save da Alliance," Vol'jin pointed out, his expression unreadable.

"Ya speak true," Zala'din agreed, albeit somewhat reluctantly. "She'd send us all ta hell with a smile if she thought it be necessary to protect her people. I wouldn't want ta go up against her,
given da choice."

"Dat strong, huh?"

"Ya know me, Vol'jin, I'm a simple troll," Zala'din said. "I don't know much about magic an' all dat, but I know strength when I see it. Dat little lion got power ta burn."

"'Little lion'?" Vol'jin said, his lips quirking in amusement.

"What of it? She's Alliance... and... little... it makes sense, doesn't it?" Zala'din said, spreading his hands wide. "She be little even for a human... I didn't know dey made 'em dat small."

"Ya really gave her a nickname?" Vol'jin asked skeptically.

"If it be any consolation, she hates it," Zala'din said, wondering if he had once again crossed a line in Vol'jin's eyes.

"You like her," the Warchief observed, his clever eyes narrowing.

"I respect her," Zala'din admitted. "She's... fierce. Ya should see da faces on da Iron Horde orcs when she shows up and starts throwin' magic around. It be a pity she be Alliance, she'd be a fine asset to da Horde."

"It's more den dat," Vol'jin said softly.

Zala'din paused, wondering if Vol'jin wasn't correct. He was hardly about to rush off and pledge lifelong friendship to Auriana, but he couldn't deny that she intrigued him, and that he was honoured to have fought at her side.

"We fought together..." he said slowly, trying to find the right words. "We've tasted blood together. You know what that be like... dere's... a bond. She trusted me twice now - she trusted da Horde - when she had no reason to do so. I... I owe her, Vol'jin."

Surprisingly, Vol'jin nodded in understanding, but his eyes remained sharp.

"Don'tcha go gettin' attached, Zal," the Warchief said warningly. "She ain't ever gonna put you ahead of da Alliance, or her King."

"I know," Zala'din said quickly. "Don'tcha worry bout that. I just tink the best course of action right now is to continue to work with da Alliance to bring down Grom Hellscream."

Vol'jin nodded once more, downing the last sip of his rum with a satisfied sigh.

"I agree," he said firmly, somewhat to Zala'din's surprise. "So before I leave for Beastwatch, why don'tcha tell me how ya plan to take Tanaan..."
Anduin

Anduin and Auriana didn't leave Karabor until late in the afternoon, finally departing the great draenei temple as the sun began to dip below the horizon. Anduin couldn't remember a time when he'd felt more connected to the Light, and it was only with great reluctance that he mounted his gryphon for the journey home. Auriana had sent the royal guardsman on ahead via portal, once again assuring them that Anduin would be perfectly safe in her care. Surprisingly, however, she didn't say a word as they made their way back to Lunarfall, her eyes fixed straight ahead over the head of her gryphon.

The longer they flew, the more Anduin became concerned, and he began to seriously worry if he'd somehow managed to offend or otherwise frustrate Auriana. She had obviously been affected by her unusual healing at Karabor, though it seemed as if Anduin would never know how she really felt about what had happened. She was a difficult person to read, and he hadn't the slightest clue if she was currently tired, sad, angry or indifferent.

Shadowmoon Valley was completely dark by the time they landed in Lunarfall, and Anduin was admittedly glad to return to the bright, warm lights of the garrison. He dismounted swiftly, patting Sunwing in grateful thanks before handing the tired gryphon over to a stablehand. Auriana did the same, pausing briefly to murmur quietly to Brightfeather before she relinquished his reins and lead Anduin out of the stables.

"Er… Auri… are you well?" Anduin asked, unable to bear the silence for any longer as he followed her towards the town hall.

"Hmm?" she said, starting as if only just remembering that he was there. "Oh, Anduin, I'm sorry… I suppose I've been ignoring you, haven't I?"

"A little," he agreed. "I don't mind, really, I just wanted to make sure that you weren't upset with me."

"Of course not," she said quickly. "Why would I be upset with you? I was just a bit lost in my own thoughts, is all."

"What are you thinking about?" Anduin asked, curious to see if she'd actually answer.

"Oh, just... whatever it was that happened at Karabor," Auriana said, waving her hand noncommittally.

"Are you feeling alright?" he asked. "I know that was somewhat… intense."

"I feel good… great, actually," she said, her eyebrows lifting as if surprised by her own words. "I feel better than I have in months. I don't know what you and Yrel did, but I feel… like myself again. Only more... centred, I suppose you'd say."

"In fairness, I'm not really sure what Yrel and I did, only that it felt… right," Anduin admitted. "I'm glad you feel better, though. I've been worried about you, Auriana."

"You sound like your father," she said thoughtfully, pausing to look up at him with an affectionate smile.

Her eyes were very beautiful up close, Anduin thought, as clear and sharp as cut sapphires. There was a calm certainty behind her gaze that he hadn't ever seen before, however, and he realised that...
the short ceremony at Karabor had affected her more profoundly than he had initially believed.

"Come on, I bet you're hungry," she said. "It's must be past eight; we left Karabor later than I had expected. I'll have the kitchens send something up, and in the meantime, there's something else I'd like to show you. I'd be interested in your opinion."

Anduin followed her eagerly, his curiosity roused by her enigmatic statement. He craved knowledge above all things, and he wondered what further surprises Auriana had in store. She lead Anduin quickly through the garrison, pausing only to check in with his anxious royal guardsmen and to send instructions to the kitchen before leading him upstairs to her bedchamber.

As Anduin crossed the threshold into her room, he peered about curiously, unable to think of a single reason why Auriana might bring him into her personal space. The room was simply furnished, with only a bed, desk, and dresser, and as far as Anduin could tell, there was nothing at all of interest to see.

"Um, Auriana?" he asked. "What are we doing here?"

"I wanted to show you this," she said enigmatically.

Auriana walked over to the long, blank wall that ran along the left hand side of the room. She closed her eyes and called on her power, and to Anduin's surprise the wall suddenly came to life with bright purple lines of arcane light. He stepped closer, raising his eyebrows in amazement as the lines resolved into a perfectly formed map of Draenor. He could see the location of Lunarfall Garrison, as well as perfectly rendered points of light that represented Karabor, Blackrock Foundry, and other points of interest. There was also a collection of smaller dots scattered across the entire expanse of the map, though Anduin didn't know what they meant.

"It's incredible," Anduin said sincerely. "Er, whatever it is…"

"As I'm sure you're aware, there's a traitor in Lunarfall. SI:7 haven't been having much luck tracking him or her down," Auriana explained. "I realised that I know more about what goes on in Lunarfall than anyone else, so I thought I'd try my hand at figuring it out."

"These… dots," Anduin said slowly, pointing. "They represent… what, incidents in which your intelligence was bad?"

"Yes. I've been working on this for awhile now, ever since I returned from the Foundry. I've included any event, however minor it may have been… and it seems the problem is more extensive than I had thought. I started by cataloging all possible missions over the last year that may have been betrayed from within Lunarfall, then I started looking for commonalities. People or units who were at the scene of each incident. The problem is… there's no pattern. In fact, the only person who was directly involved at each point in time was… me," she said, frustration clearly evident in her voice.

"Is there something you'd like to tell me?" Anduin said jokingly, though he didn't believe for a second that Auriana could be a traitor.

"I assure you, I didn't have myself kidnapped and tortured…" Auriana quipped drily. "If I wanted get myself killed, there are far easier ways to go about it."

Anduin knew the statement had been in jest, but he couldn't help to wonder how she could possibly joke about what had happened in the Foundry so soon - if ever.

"In any case," Auriana added quickly, noticing the look on Anduin's face, "What do you think? I've
been staring at this for weeks now with no luck, and I thought it might be useful to have a fresh set of eyes."

"I think it's brilliant," he said. "Although… I might be looking at this all wrong, but… what makes you assume these events are connected?"

"What?" she said. "What do you mean?"

"Well, you're looking for a pattern, right? What if these incidents aren't connected in the way that you expect…" he reasoned. "Would it help to look at them as discrete events?"

Auriana looked back to the map contemplatively, and her eyes suddenly widened in surprise. Anduin distinctly heard her breath quicken, and she began to mutter excitedly to herself as her slender fingers raced over the dotted points of light.

"Oh, Anduin Wrynn, I could kiss you," she breathed.

"Er… what?" he asked, blushing furiously.

It wasn't every day that a woman threatened to kiss him, much less one who was currently involved with his father.

"Don't get excited, Anduin, it's just an expression," she said distractedly, somehow reading his discomfort even though her eyes never left the map.

She waved her hands over the map and it shifted, the arcane energy rearranging at her silent command.

"There are two traitors in Lunarfall," she added quickly.

"What?"

"Look here… if we assume that there is a single traitor, nothing makes sense. There's no pattern to the intelligence leaks, no relationship between events… but if we assume that there are two traitors working independently from one another, it suddenly makes sense," she said.

She pointed quickly to a series of dots on the map, centred mostly around Nagrand, Gorgrond, and Talador.

"These events share a number of similarities - they were small incidents, involving less critical intelligence, and seem to have all occurred in places where we crossed paths with the Azerothian Horde," she explained, before lighting up a different series of dots. "These events, on the other hand, appear to have started more recently, and have all involved the Iron Horde. These breaches were far more critical, and resulted in significantly more casualties."

"So… someone is trying to stir up trouble between the Alliance and the Horde… and someone else is selling you out to the Iron Horde?" Anduin surmised.

"That appears to be the case," Auriana agreed, nodding.

"Why would anyone try to restart the war between the Alliance and the Horde?" Anduin asked incredulously.

"Well, there were quite a few people in the Alliance who thought your father chose poorly when he refused to raze Orgrimmar to the ground," Auriana explained. "And I don't doubt that there are
elements within the Horde who would also like to see the Draenor armistice fail."

"But you're fighting a war against the Iron Horde! That's… idiotic," Anduin protested.

"I don't disagree with you," Auriana said, "But the hatred between the Alliance and the Horde runs very deep, and there are a great many who underestimate the threat of the Iron Horde. Working together for the sake of this campaign was an unpopular decision in for a lot of people... the kind of people who might like to take advantage of the Horde being so otherwise occupied. The Alliance are undoubtedly in the stronger position, militarily speaking, after the events of Orgrimmar, and if forced to fight a war on two fronts, we would likely fare better than the Horde."

"I don't understand people at all, sometimes," Anduin said, shaking his head ruefully.

"You and me both..." Auriana said, turning her attention back to the map. "Hmm... it appears that whoever is trying to start a war between us and the Horde seem to have less access to Lunarfall's intelligence than those trying to have us destroyed by the Iron Horde. Which suggests that they might be of lower rank, or stationed at one of our outposts..."

She tapped her chin thoughtfully, muttering quietly to herself as her eyes darted across the map.

"When did this all start?" Anduin asked.

"Well, the smaller attacks seemed to have started... ah... just after Winter's Veil last year... and the other ones look like they started soon after our major push into Talador," Auriana said, quickly calculating the dates.

"What's so special about Talador? Are there any particular encounters where prisoners were taken, or where someone could have defected to the Iron Horde?" Anduin prompted.

"I don't know..." Auriana mused. "Talador was one of our more successful campaigns, actually. We were able to push the Iron Horde out of Shattrath, we retook Auchindoun, and fought a number of successful skirmishes against the Burning Legion... though there's nothing that really jumps out at me."

"I'm sure you'll think of something," Anduin said encouragingly.

"Yes, well, at least this explains why SI:7 has been having so much trouble," she said, nodding. "I'll have to get this information to Shaw as soon as possible."

Their conversation was interrupted by a sudden knock on the door, and Auriana quickly re-hid the map with a casual wave of her hand.

"Enough of that for tonight, however," she said, smiling warmly. "Dinner's ready."

She lead him back into her small antechamber, where two liveried servants were busy laying out the evening meal. Anduin's stomach rumbled eagerly as he took his seat, only just realising how hungry he truly was. He tucked into the rich clefthoof sausages and buttery mash with great gusto, barely pausing for breath as he took his fill.

Auriana ate with considerably more grace and aplomb, and she was still eating for sometime after Anduin was done. He watched her closely as she dined, silently reflecting on their experience at Karabor and the unusual circumstances in which she had entered his life.

"Didn't anyone tell you it's rude to stare?" she said wryly, not looking up from her plate.
"Sorry," Anduin said, flushing. "I was just thinking… I don't really know all that much about you. You're rather… mysterious."

Auriana looked up then, slowly setting her cutlery down on the table and cocking her head to the side.

"I'm really not," she said, chuckling. "But I take your point. Is... is there anything in particular you would like to know?"

"What?" Anduin said, surprised that she was willing to talk openly about herself.

"Well, the best way to find out something new is to ask," she said, grinning. "What would you like to know?"

"I can ask you anything, and you'll answer honestly?" Anduin said skeptically. "Really?"

"Sure, why not?" she said, spreading her arms wide in invitation. "I should warn you, though, I'm not exactly the most complex person in the world. This might not be all that interesting for you."

"Not complex?" Anduin guffawed. "You're one of the youngest commanders in the Alliance, a berserker mage with an unrivaled talent for destruction, and you're currently engaged in a secret affair with the King of Stormwind. I'm sure most people would find that mildly interesting."

Auriana frowned thoughtfully, as if she'd never really considered herself in that light; which, Anduin guessed, she probably hadn't. She wasn't nearly as introspective as someone like Anduin himself, and she had a rather remarkable ability to ignore anything and anyone that wasn't immediately related to her work in Draenor.

"You know… you might be onto something there," she conceded, shrugging. "In any case… ask away."

Anduin hesitated, still disbelieving, and resolved to start with an easy question.

"Alright... how old are you?" he said slowly.

"Twenty seven," she said easily. "Twenty eight, soon, actually."

"Does my father know it's nearly your birthday?" he asked curiously.

"No - and I'd thank you to keep that particular piece of information quiet. He'd try to give me presents," Auriana said, blanching as if she'd smelled something particularly unpleasant.

"How awful of him," Anduin quipped, deadpan.

"I don't like people making a fuss," she said, shrugging.

"You really don't, do you?" Anduin said.

"Next question," she said drily, though her eyes sparkled with good humour.

"Ah… do you have any brothers or sisters? Or… did you?" he asked, knowing that her immediate family had perished in the horrific bombing of Theramore.

"No, I'm an only child, like you," she said. "My mother liked to say that if you get things right the first time, why keep trying?"
"A wise woman," Anduin said, smiling slightly.

It hadn't really occurred to him before, but he realised that he and Auriana both had suffered from the loss of their mothers in tragic circumstances. Of course, Auriana had been a grown adult when her mother had died, though now that Anduin thought on it he wasn't sure which was worse. He had been just a babe when Tiffin had died and had no really memory of her, save for a handful of stories told to him by Varian, Bolvar Fordragon, and a few others. Auriana, on the other hand, had remembered and lost a complete person, someone with whom she had laughed and talked and cried.

"What… what was she like, your mother?" he asked tentatively.

"She was very kind," Auriana said wistfully, her face falling ever so slightly. "Your remind me of her, a little, you know. She always managed to see the good in people, no matter what."

"Do you look like her?" Anduin wondered. "I… I obviously take after my mother, far more than my father."

"You could have done a lot worse. Tiffin was a beautiful woman," Auriana remarked.

"Are you saying that I'm beautiful?" Anduin teased, hoping to make her smile.

"Um… that... that's not even close to what I meant," Auriana said, flushing.

"Careful, Auri," he admonished her playfully, "You've already tried to kiss me tonight, and now you're calling me beautiful. What would my father say?"

"He'd tell you to stop being a sassy brat, I'd imagine," Auriana shot back, quick as a whip.

Anduin couldn't help himself, and burst out laughing at the impressive look of mock seriousness on her face. Auriana managed to hold the haughty expression for a few short moments, before her face relaxed and she, too, began to giggle. She had a surprisingly deep and raucous laugh for such a tiny woman, and it sounded quite incongruous coming from her mouth.

"I thought we were talking about my mother," she said drily.

"Of course… do go on," Anduin said, taking a sip of his drink.

"She was probably the most beautiful woman I've ever seen up close, though admittedly I'm somewhat... biased," Auriana explained, her voice growing serious once more. "Luck being the way it is, I don't look like her at all. I take after my grandfather's side of the family, though I have her eyes. My father used to say that if not for our eyes, no one would have believed we were related."

"I feel the same way, sometimes," Anduin admitted. "It's hard to see the similarities between me and my father."

"He's in there somewhere," Auriana said, studying Anduin's face carefully. "You two are more alike that you think, it just comes out in different ways."

"You think so?" Anduin said.

He loved his father, and while they didn't always see eye to eye, Anduin knew Varian had many admirable traits. The King of Stormwind was clever and brave, with a fierce love of his people, and Anduin only hoped he could be half the king that Varian was when the day finally came.
"Hopefully many, many years from now, Anduin added silently.

"I do," she said sincerely. "I think you'll see it more as you get older."

"I'll never be a great warrior, though," he mused. "I think I'll leave the fighting to people like you."

"That's probably a good idea," Auriana agreed. "Your talents definitely lie elsewhere - which isn't necessarily a bad thing."

"How did you become a soldier, anyway?" Anduin asked. "How old were you when you first when to war? When you first… when you first killed someone?"

Anduin knew Auriana was a hard person, and not at all afraid of getting her hands dirty in the service of the Alliance, but he wondered if she had always been that way. Having never gone to war himself, he wondered what it took to turn a bright young woman into a seasoned warrior, only belatedly realising that it was perhaps more intimate a question than he had really intended to ask.

"That's a lot of questions," Auriana said slowly.

Her eyes flicked downwards, and for a moment Anduin wondered if she would refuse to answer.

"I first killed someone was about as old as you are now," she said seriously. "I threw up afterwards. I know I come across as somewhat… bloodthirsty… but it's the fight I love, not the killing."

"Who was he? Or she?"

"She was a mage hunter, a Kirin Tor traitor who had sided with Malygos during the Nexus War," Auriana explained. "I had only just completed my basic apprenticeship with the Kirin Tor, and at that point I was assigned to supportive duties - opening portals, conjuring shields, making wards, that sort of thing. I was escorting a supply caravan down to Star's Rest when we were suddenly attacked. It was supposed to be a quiet, simple mission - not a bloodbath."

She shivered almost imperceptibly, and she suddenly seemed very focused on the wall behind Anduin's head.

"Four members of the caravan were slaughtered instantly, and the rest of us scattered. I don't remember much of it, actually, just stumbling through the snow and throwing magic around at random. Somehow, I got lucky. I don't think she was expecting me to fight back. I was the only one who walked out alive," she said darkly. "It was a massacre."

Auriana shook her head ruefully, and idly fiddled with her hair.

"Sometimes I think that's the only reason I've survived this long. Not because I'm smarter, or stronger, or better than anyone else… but because of sheer dumb luck," she admitted.

"You weren't given Lunarfall because you were lucky," Anduin pointed out. "I may not know much about the inner workings of Alliance Command, but from all accounts you're an excellent officer."

"Am I now? As far as I'm aware, I was given Lunarfall because I'm stubborn. At least according to Khadgar, anyway," she said drolly.

"Well… you are that…" Anduin agreed, nodding seriously.

"I still see her face sometimes, when I close my eyes. The mage hunter, I mean. She didn't look
"You still remember her? After all these years?" Anduin asked, unable to hide his surprise.

"I remember everyone I've ever killed," Auriana said sharply, finally meeting his eyes. "I know you believe otherwise, but the deaths of my enemies are not meaningless to me. I'm not a monster."

"I… I don't think that…" Anduin stammered quickly. "Not at all. I know I often disagree with the need to go to war, but I don't think less of you for fighting. I certainly… I certainly don't think you're a monster…"

Auriana frowned darkly, her gaze boring into Anduin as if she were trying to read his thoughts. He flushed under the power of her stare, unsure of what he should say.

"What happened afterwards?" he tried tentatively. "After the incident at Star's Rest, I mean?"

Auriana considered him seriously for a moment more, when her posture abruptly relaxed and her eyes softened.

"The Nexus War was costly, and at that point the Kirin Tor were practically haemorrhaging mages. I had proven that I could fight, and so they promoted me to combat duties," she continued quietly. "It was something of a trial by fire, but for the first time in my life I felt like I was somewhere I belonged. After Malygos was defeated, I petitioned Archmage Rhonin for permission to enlist and fight for the Alliance directly. I struggled with the Kirin Tor's neutrality at the best of times, and the war in Northrend didn't help matters much."

She sighed thoughtfully, drumming her fingers on the table as she spoke.

"I saw combat against the Scourge in Dragonblight and Zul'drak. I was at the Wrathgate, and I saw the fall of the gates at Ulduar," she said. "Of course, they didn't let any of the youngest soldiers anywhere near the heart of Ulduar. It was too risky, given the power of that thing the Titans had imprisoned deep in the earth. More than a few good soldiers lost their minds in that campaign."

Her eyes darkened and she shook her head, as if trying to clear the lingering memory of a bad dream.

"What then?" Anduin asked. "Did you fight at Icecrown Citadel?"

"Yes, I did, though mostly in a supportive capacity. You've got to remember, I was still very inexperienced at the time," she said. "After Arthas was killed, I returned to Dalaran, but kept my commission with the Alliance. I took on some mercenary work from time to time to develop my skills, and when the Cataclysm hit I found myself back in the thick of it as a Lieutenant in Stormwind's army."

"My father said you fought against Deathwing directly?"

"I had good relationships with many of the red dragonflight after my service in the Nexus War, and so I was chosen to aid in the defense of Wyrmrest Temple when Deathwing and the Twilight's Hammer attacked," she explained. "I was on board the Skyfire when we chased Deathwing into Maelstrom, helped to kill him, and got a lovely scar on my back for my troubles."

Anduin remembered all too well the ragged scar that split her entire back, having seen glimpses of it when he'd healed her in the past. He had always wondered what had happened, though his father had refused to answer the question every time Anduin had asked.
"It… it took me some time to heal," Auriana continued. "I stayed in Theramore for months, and for awhile I could barely bring myself to the leave the house. By sheer chance, I had only just returned to my post in Stormwind when Theramore was attacked. I went to Pandaria to take the fight to Garrosh Hellscream, and later followed him to Draenor after the Siege of Orgrimmar and his trial."

"And now you're the commander of Lunarfall," Anduin finished. "It really is impressive for someone your age."

"Not so much impressive as unavoidable. You've got to remember, we lost a great number of our senior officers when Northwatch Hold fell and Theramore was attacked, and none of them came through the Dark Portal," she reminded him. "There was a good chance that this was a suicide mission. We had no idea what we'd find in Draenor, and we all knew there was a very good chance we'd never be able to return home. I think I got the job largely because I was… there."

"Well, you've done admirably," Anduin said sincerely.

"In your esteemed military opinion, my prince," she teased lightly, some of her earlier good humour returning.

"Of course," Anduin said, trying his best to look as regal as possible and making Auriana laugh. "Though I do wonder - what do you think you'd be doing if you weren't a commander, or a mage?"

Auriana blinked twice, and Anduin realised that the question had genuinely stumped her.

"Is there anything else?" she asked, grinning. "I've never really thought about it… I don't exactly have any other talents."

"That's not true," Anduin protested. "I'm sure you'd excel at plenty of other things… you're clever, and wise…"

"I'm wise?" she repeated incredulously, her eyes wide. "That's the first time anyone's ever said that about me. Come on, Anduin, would you ever seriously come to me for advice?"

"I might," Anduin said firmly. "I'm sure you'd give perfectly sage advice."

"Then you obviously haven't been paying attention," she said, folding her arms over her chest with a broad smile. "Alright then, put your money where your mouth is. Ask me something, and I will give you the benefit of my years of wisdom."

Anduin smiled uncertainly, unsure if she was being serious.

"Er… um… how do I talk to girls?" he said, unable to think of anything better.

It was an entirely random question, but he realised the second he asked it that Auriana probably didn't see it as such.

"Stop calling them 'girls' and talk to them like they're people," she said, her lips parting in a slow grin. "Why? Is there someone in particular you're having trouble talking to?"

"Er… I'm the one asking the questions here," Anduin said roughly, his ears suddenly burning hot.

"That you are," Auriana said, her eyes sparkling with amusement.

"It was the first thing that popped into my mind, alright?" he said defensively.

"Oh, of course," Auriana said lightly, holding up her hands in wry supplication. "My apologies,
"You take far too much delight in teasing me. Although... speaking of relationships, however..." Anduin said quickly, "Why are you and my father so determined to keep yours such a great secret?"

He was partially trying to throw her off, but the question was nonetheless an important one that he had considered for some time. Although the King had not expressed as much out loud, Anduin had come to suspect that his father very much intended to marry the young mage, and he wanted to know if Auriana felt the same. It seemed as if she was not as secure in the relationship as Varian, however, looking away as a rare flicker of nervousness crossed her face. For the briefest second, she looked like an actual young woman, rather than a battle hardened commander, and Anduin was struck by the realisation that she was not really all that much older than he.

"It's complicated," she said finally, biting her lip.

"You promised to answer honestly," Anduin reminded her.

"I did," she said, smiling slightly. "It's honestly complicated."

"I don't see how. You know he loves you," Anduin argued. "Wait... you do know that, right? Don't tell me the stubborn fool never told you..."

"He did," Auriana said quickly, cutting him off. "Your father isn't quite so romantically challenged as you might think."

"And... and you love him?" Anduin pressed.

"Yes," Auriana said quietly. "More than he knows."

"Then why?"

"As I said... it's complicated, Anduin," she sighed.

"Stop saying that word," Anduin grumbled good-naturedly, when a rather concerning thought occurred to him. "Wait... it isn't because of me, is it?"

"What do you mean?"

"You weren't trying to keep it a secret from me, were you? Because you thought I might not approve?" he asked worriedly.

"No... not at all," she said. "Unless... um... do you? Approve of us, I mean?"

"Does it matter if I do? You and my father are both adults - perhaps you more so than he - you can do what you like," Anduin said seriously.

"It matters to me," Auriana said firmly. "I told you once before, I'd never do anything to come between you and your father. You come first, Anduin, always."

"You'd sacrifice your own happiness for me?" he said disbelievingly.

"If... if it came right down to it, yes, I would," she said seriously. "The bond you and your father have... it's powerful... and important... and I'd never do anything to put it in jeopardy."

"That's... well, I'm touched, Auri," Anduin said sincerely, "But you needn't worry, I think you're
good for him. He's been so lonely for so long, it's been a rare pleasure to see him genuinely happy."

Her eyes suddenly lit up and she smiled brightly, and Anduin realised the subject of his approval must have been weighing heavily on her mind. He didn't really understand why, though he was genuinely affected by her consideration of his feelings.

"Thank you. That means a lot," she said softly. "Really. I…"

She abruptly trailed off and her head snapped around, her eyes narrowing wolfishly as she turned her head to the north.

"Auriana? Are you alright?" Anduin asked, startled by her sudden change in demeanor.

"Something just tripped one of the outer wards. North-west perimeter," she said quietly. "My wards, I mean, the ones I placed in secret after I found out we had a traitor in the garrison."

She rose to her feet with a predatory swiftness, her features hardening fiercely.

"I'm sorry to cut this short, but I have to investigate," she said apologetically. "It's probably nothing, but… I should have a look, just in case. You stay here, where it's safe."

"Take me with you," Anduin urged her eagerly, mimicking her movements. "Please."

"Oh, there's not a chance of that happening," she said seriously, shaking her head.

Anduin ground his teeth in frustration at her refusal, well and truly tired of being cooped up in the safety of one keep or another. He was braver and more venturesome than most people gave him credit for, and he detested being treated as if he were made from glass. Auriana seemed far less overprotective than his father, and he had hoped she might let him have the smallest taste of adventure whilst he was in Draenor.

"I could order you to bring me along," he said boldly, trying to sound more confident than he felt.

"Your father's orders supersede your own, my Prince," she said warningly. "And he ordered me to keep you safe."

"If… if you don't take me with you, I'll tell my father you did," Anduin said quickly. "If you actually take me with you, I'll keep quiet."

He was well aware that he was backing her into a corner, but surprisingly he only felt slightly guilty. He had come to Draenor seeking a challenge and an escape from his life in Stormwind, and he was prepared to push Auriana on the point if necessary.

"That's extortion," she said flatly, fixing him with flinty-eyed glare.

The air between them crackled with sudden energy and Anduin swallowed nervously, strongly reminded of the fact that she was very, very powerful.

"I… well, I figured you'd prefer extortion to mind control," he said shakily, nonetheless unwilling to be swayed from his desires.

"Don't you dare," Auriana said sternly, thrusting a finger in his face. "Prince or no, you try that little trick of yours on me and I'll send you home to your father in a block of ice that won't thaw until you're thirty."

"Could… could you really do that?" Anduin gulped.
"Push me and you'll find out," she growled, pulling a face that was uncannily similar to Varian's.

"Please, Auriana," he said, trying a different tack. "What's the point of you teaching me anything at all if I never get a chance to actually use my skills?"

She sighed and closed her eyes, squeezing them tightly as if by doing so Anduin might simply disappear.

"Besides," he added quickly, sensing that she was wavering, "You promised my father you wouldn't let me out of your sight, remember?"

Auriana considered the question in silence for a long while, staring at Anduin with an unreadable expression.

"Very well," she said finally. "But if I give you any order, if I tell you to run, or hide, or leave me to die, you comply immediately, do you understand?"

"Yes, of course," Anduin said quickly, his heart already beating faster with excitement. "Anything you say."

"Oh, now you're all cooperative," she growled, rolling her eyes as she grasped his arm and prepared to open a portal. "Light save me from Wrynn men…"

Anduin and Auriana rematerialised in the darkened woods that surrounded Lunarfall. The air out here was cool and eerily still, and Anduin had to squint to see ahead. If he looked to the south, he could just make out the dim glow of lights that marked the position of Lunarfall, and he guessed they were about two miles out.

"This way," Auriana said quietly, stepping forwards on feet so soft that she barely made a sound. "Stay close."

Anduin followed right on Auriana's heels as she moved swiftly through the trees, though he was considerably noisier than she. He had been trained in the hunt, but he rarely had the chance to practice his skills, and Auriana had the distinct advantage of being a great deal lighter.

"Are we getting close?" he whispered. "Where's the ward?"

Auriana didn't reply, instead holding a single finger to her lips. She paused, her arms flaring briefly white as she cast some sort of spell. Anduin shivered as a tingle of electricity ran up his arms, his skin breaking out in gooseflesh.

"What was that?" he asked curiously.

"I cast a glamour… we'll be invisible for a short period of time, but we will not be inaudible, so I need you to be quiet," she murmured. "We're about a hundred yards to the east of the ward."

"Oh, right," he said. "Sorry, I'm not really used to being stealthy…"

"Anduin," she hissed, rolling her eyes. "Quiet!"

Anduin flushed with embarrassment, but remained silent as he continued to follow Auriana's footsteps through the forest. She was moving more slowly and cautiously now, her hands raised in preparation to defend them both, should such a thing be necessary. Anduin, too, readied a spell of his own, eager to contribute should things go awry, and even more so to prove that he was not a
liability.

He was so focused on his task that he entirely failed to notice when Auriana came to an abrupt stop, and was unable to prevent himself from bumping roughly into her back. She gave him a withering glare, her displeasure visible even in the near darkness, before turning her attention to the path ahead.

"There's someone, or something, just up there," Auriana whispered, pointing.

Anduin followed the line of her gesture, and could just about make out a dark shape sprawled motionless on the floor of the forest. He peered closer, and realised that he was looking at something vaguely humanoid, with long, thick hair and wicked bone tusks that glinted faintly in the dim light.

"It's… it's a troll, from the looks of it," she added. "What on earth is a troll doing this far into Alliance territory?"

"It's injured," Anduin said. "Maybe dead. I can smell the blood."

"Me too," she agreed. "Alright, let's see if we can get closer. Quietly, now. There may be others."

Auriana walked forward tentatively, her eyes darting warily about the forest for any sign of trouble. It seemed to Anduin as if the troll were entirely alone, though he conceded that he had little expertise on which to base that judgement. Auriana, however, seemed to agree, and she continued to walk forwards until she was standing only about fifteen feet from the wounded troll.

"Son of a bitch," she sighed, her mouth falling open in astonishment. "I… I don't believe it."

Anduin was confused by the genuine shock in her voice for only a moment, when he squinted his eyes and realised exactly what it was that had bought her to a halt.

"Ah… Auriana," Anduin whispered edgily, "Is it just me, or does that look an awful lot like…"

"Yes, it does," she said, cutting him off abruptly. "It's impossible, but I think you're right…"

"Um… I can't be right," Anduin said, slightly disturbed that she agreed with his assessment of the troll's identity. "I can't be. Because I was going to say that that's…"

Auriana ordered Anduin to stay well back as she approached the fallen Warchief, crouching over his body and ever so cautiously pressing her fingers against his neck. She cringed at the feel of his slippery, viscous blood beneath her fingers, but she was relieved to find that he still had a pulse. She didn't want to think about the consequences of having the Warchief of the Horde dead on her very doorstep, though even alive his presence was problematic.

"Well, he's alive," she called back to Anduin, "And it doesn't seem like there's anyone else around. You can come on over."

"What on earth is he doing out here?" Anduin breathed, falling to his knees beside Auriana and immediately beginning his own inspection of Vol'jin's still form.

"I have no idea," she said grimly, "Though whatever it is, it can't be good."

Auriana cautiously summoned a pale witch light so that she might better assess the Warchief's injuries, only to immediately wish that she hadn't.

"He's been whipped," she said, wincing in sympathy as she ran her fingers gently down one of the many ragged slashes that marred the Warchief's back.

For a moment, she was back in Blackrock Foundry, hearing the deceptively soft swish of a whip being drawn back before it bit into on her skin with an agonising crack, and she shivered involuntarily.

"He's been stabbed, too," Anduin added, bringing her back to the present. "Here… and here…"

The prince looked up at Auriana with a grave expression, the faint light in her hands casting strange, eerie shadows across his pale face.

"What are we going to do with him?" he said. "He needs healing."

"I… I don't know," Auriana muttered, rubbing a hand across her eyes.

"You're not going to just leave him here, are you?" Anduin asked, his voice rising urgently. "Auriana?"

"Anduin… I can't just bring the Warchief of the Horde into Lunarfall…" she said quietly. "Do you know what kind of problems that would cause?"

"If we don't move him, he'll die. Wouldn't that be worse?" Anduin argued.

His face was barely visible, but Auriana could still make out the glint of intractable determination in his eyes.

"Better here than in my custody," she said darkly, though she knew his argument had merit.

Unfortunately, Vol'jin's sudden appearance outside Lunarfall put her in a nearly impossible position. Either she took him inside Lunarfall, where the Horde would mostly likely hold her responsible for functionally capturing their Warchief and holding him prisoner, or she left him alone in the dark, where the blame for his eventual death would most likely fall on the Alliance anyway.
"Varian's going to kill me," she muttered under her breath. "He's going to hang me from the walls of Stormwind Keep for the birds to pick at..."

"What was that?" Anduin asked, raising an eyebrow curiously.

"Nothing," she said, louder this time. "Alright, we'll take him into Lunarfall, but we'll do it *quietly*. No one but you and I can know that we have him"

"Why?"

"I'll explain once we're safely back in my quarters," she said, looking around nervously. "There are patrols in these woods, we can't take the chance that we'll be discovered."

"You can't trust your own men?" Anduin asked suspiciously.

"It isn't a matter of trust," she snapped. "Must you argue with everything I do?"

The prince looked quite taken aback by her tone, and Auriana instantly regretted the harsh words.

"Look, Anduin... I'm sorry, but I don't think you really appreciate how much trouble we're in," she said quickly. "We have to keep this quiet. *Please.*"

"Alright," he said softly, though he sounded rather hurt. "What do you need?"

"Here," she said, reaching out to grasp his hand. "I'll teleport us all into my chambers directly."

With her spare hand, Auriana reached out and gripped Vol'jin's upper arm, ensuring that she had a decent hold before she gathered her power and relocated all three of them back to her quarters. They landed in a heap of tangled limbs on the floor, and Auriana winced at the loud thud that accompanied their arrival. Two of the royal guard had been stationed just outside the door while she and Anduin had taken dinner, and she didn't want to arouse their attention.

"Help me get him up on the bed," Auriana ordered Anduin, springing to her feet and pulling the prince with her. "Grab his legs."

Anduin did as he was asked, crouching at Vol'jin's feet and grabbing his ankles. Fortunately, the Warchief was still unconscious, and Auriana prayed that he would stay that way until she could get him secured.

"Ready?" she asked, sliding her hands under Vol'jin's arms. "On the count of three... one, two, three, lift!"

It was immediately apparent that the prince had little experience in lifting heavy objects, and Vol'jin's dead weight swung precariously as Auriana tried to keep him steady.

"Oof," Anduin grunted, as if all the air had been forced from his lungs. "He weighs a bloody tonne!"

"Come on, Anduin, I'm doing all the work here," Auriana growled. "Are you really going to let a woman half your size out lift you? Put your back into it!"

Anduin's eyes narrowed, but he did as he was asked, heaving the Warchief upwards with surprising vigour. Auriana matched the prince's strength with her own, and somehow they managed to lay Vol'jin face down on the bed. Anduin moved to heal the Warchief the moment he was settled, immediately calling light to his hands, but Auriana held him back with a stern glare.
"Give me a minute," she said, her tone leaving no room for argument.

Auriana quickly rummaged through Vol'jin's tunic, pulling out no less than seven hidden daggers and a number of mysterious herb pouches that she suspected might have been of use in some kind of voodoo ritual. She walked across the room and placed the items on her dresser, well out of Vol'jin's reach, and then rummaged through her draws for the heavy set of iron shackles that she keep hidden beneath her underclothes.

"What are those for?" Anduin asked, frowning.

"When he wakes up, he's likely going to be disorientated," she said, leaning across Vol'jin to shackle one his wrists securely to the heavy oak bedframe. "There's a good chance he'd lash out, and I can't take the risk that he'd harm one of us before he realised where he was."

"You keep manacles in your bedroom?"

"I started keeping them here after Blackhand's assassins made an attempt on my life… just in case I was ever targeted again, and had the opportunity to take one of the assassins prisoner," she explained. "Why? What else would I have them for?"

"Um… nothing," Anduin said, the tops of his ears going bright red. "Are you happy for me to heal him now?"

"Go ahead," she said, stepping back and allowing Anduin access to his rather unusual patient.

Auriana watched the prince like a hawk as he worked, leaning up against the frame of her bedroom door with her arms folded across her chest. She was covered in Vol'jin's blood, but didn't dare leave Anduin alone long enough to wash it off. She had promised Varian that Anduin would be safe in her care, and somehow she didn't think that leaving him alone with the Warchief of the Horde qualified.

Why me? she thought ruefully. Why is it always me? I'm sure this kind of crap never happens to Grand Admiral Jes-Tereth, or Rogers, or anyone else…

She brooded in silence for over an hour, until Anduin finally stepped back and the bright golden glow of the Light faded from his fingertips.

"Well, he'll live," the prince said grimly, wiping the sweat from his eyes. "He's lost a lot of blood, but fortunately his wounds aren't deep. We should keep him on his stomach, however," Anduin added.

"Nicely done," Auriana said, offering him a genuine smile. "When will he wake?"

"It's hard to say," Anduin said, shrugging. "It could be an hour, it could be a day. He's strong, though, so I'd guess sooner rather than later."

"In that case, why don't you take the time clean up, you're all bloody," Auriana suggested.

"So are you," Anduin pointed out.

"I'm not leaving Vol'jin alone," she insisted, though her skin was starting to itch where the blood had dried. "I'll clean up later."

"If you're sure…" Anduin said skeptically, though he nonetheless walked off towards the small door that lead to Auriana's adjoining bathchamber.
Auriana didn't move, keeping her gaze firmly fixed on the unconscious Warchief. She knew very little of Vol'jin, having only briefly fought at his side during the Siege of Orgrimmar, and she had no idea how he might react to waking up in the middle of her garrison. Of course, by all accounts the Warchief was a wise and honourable troll, but Auriana wasn't going to put Anduin at risk by taking this turn of events lightly.

She kept her vigil over Vol'jin for well over two hours, only reluctantly stepping out for no more than two minutes to scrub the blood from her arms. Anduin stood stubbornly at her side the entire time, despite her insistence that he return to his own quarters. They didn't talk much, each entirely fixated on the Warchief as they looked for the slightest sign of life.

It was after midnight when Vol'jin finally stirred, his powerful muscles shifting visibly beneath his skin as he slowly came back to consciousness. Anduin leaned forward eagerly as he began to rise, but Auriana held the prince back with a curt shake of her head. Anduin may have healed the Warchief, but she wasn't going to let him within arm's reach of the troll when he was awake.

As she had expected, Vol'jin started violently as he woke, his eyes darkening with fury as he felt the pull of the iron shackles on his wrist. He was awkwardly positioned, lying on his stomach as he was, though he nonetheless made a valiant effort to lift his head. Auriana silenced him quickly, before he could cry out and alert the guards, and moved swiftly forwards to stand by his side.

"Be still, Warchief," she said roughly, placing a firm hand on his shoulder to hold him down. "You were badly injured, and you'll hurt yourself worse if you try to roll over."

Vol'jin bared his teeth as he felt the effects of her spell, snarling silently up at her with thunderous eyes.

"I don't think you know who I am, and you certainly have no reason to trust me, but I'm fairly sure you know who he is," she added, pointing to her prince, "And I'm going to ask you to trust him. You are safe here."

Vol'jin looked to Anduin then, his yellowed eyes widening in genuine surprise, before slowly turning his attention back to Auriana with a terse nod.

"I'm going to release the silence now. You're not going to scream, or cry for help, or draw any other kind of attention to yourself," she said slowly. "Do you understand me?"

The Warchief nodded a second time, the instinctual anger that had crossed his face fading into an expression of wary contemplation.

"Good," Auriana said, waving her hand as she released Vol'jin from her thrall.

"Where am I?" the Warchief asked, the moment his voice had returned.

"Lunarfall Garrison. I'm Commander Auriana Fenwild, and I suppose you know Anduin Wrynn," she said quickly.

"I know ya name, little lion," Vol'jin said, ever so slightly rolling his eyes.

"I see that you and Zala'din have been talking about me," she said drily, almost able to feel Anduin's smirk on her back, "Given that you're aware of that ridiculous nickname."

"Ya helped da Horde in Blackrock Foundry," Vol'jin said, by way of explanation. "I'm well aware of who ya are."
"I helped the Alliance," Auriana corrected him. "Don't get me wrong, your commander's support was invaluable during the siege, but I'm not your friend. I'll work with the Horde, if necessary, and I will treat you with respect, but my loyalty belongs to the Alliance, and to Varian Wrynn."

Vol'jin considered her seriously, his tusks shifting as he frowned up at her with an unreadable expression.

"So be it, little lion," he said slowly, "Though Zala'din did say ya were a woman of honour."

"I try," she said grimly. "Look - I have no quarrel with you, Warchief, unless you intend to give me one. You're safe in Lunarfall, so long as you cause no harm to come to me and mine. Have care, however, if you touch a single hair on Anduin's head, I will burn you from existence so swiftly that your ancestors will feel it."

"Fair enough… I agree ta ya terms," Vol'jin said seriously. "Ya get no trouble from me… though I don't really have much of a choice, now do I?"

"It seems as if you understand me perfectly, Warchief," Auriana said flatly, though she allowed herself to relax ever so slightly his words.

A long, tense moment of silence passed between them, each considering the other carefully before they spoke once more.

"Is Wrynn here?" Vol'jin said finally.

His tone was deliberately casual, but Auriana didn't miss the way his eyes darted nervously towards the door, as if Varian might burst in at any moment.

"No," she said. "He's in Stormwind."

"Den what's Anduin doin' here?" Vol'jin wondered. "I didn't tink that tha King ever let the prince outta his sight."

"Anduin is here on something of a… a holiday, I suppose you'd call it," Auriana said slowly, exchanging a quick look with Anduin. "He's in my care."

"Wrynn trusted ya with his son?" Vol'jin mused, a strange flash of realisation crossing his face.

"Yes, though I fail to see how that's relevant to the immediate situation," she growled irritably. "Why were you outside my garrison?"

"No idea, mon," Vol'jin said, his great brow crinkling. "Last ting I remember was a knife in my back, and den wakin' up here."

"You've no idea who did this?" Anduin piped up, ignoring Auriana's glare as he took a tentative step forwards. "None at all?"

"I was in Beastwatch when I was attacked, inspectin' da outpost," Vol'jin said thoughtfully. "Coward jumped me from behind. I felt the knife… den… nothing."

"Beastwatch? In Gorgrond?" she said swiftly.

"Someone dragged you all the way here from Gorgrond?" Anduin said incredulously, looking between Auriana and Vol'jin in confusion.

"Yeah mon, though I got no idea why," Vol'jin said, grinding his tusks.
Auriana's eyes narrowed as she considered the information, and with a sinking feeling in her stomach, she realised that she had a good idea of what was happening. Unfortunately, right now was not the time to discuss her suspicions. Both Vol'jin and Anduin looked exhausted, the wounded Warchief more so, and she decided that any further conversation could wait until morning.

"Alright then, Anduin, it's time you were off to bed," she said firmly. "No arguments."

"Whatcha goin' to do with me?" Vol'jin asked.

Both he and Anduin looked to her nervously, Vol'jin with a sort of uneasy defiance, and the prince with an expression of hopeful pleading. Auriana abruptly realised that they were both entirely afraid that she might kill the Warchief outright, or do something equally violent, and she frowned.

"Right now, I'm going to let you sleep. You've been stabbed and flogged, you need to rest," she said.

"Really?" Anduin and Vol'jin chorused, clearly surprised by her decision.

"I'm only going to say it once more, Warchief," she sighed. "You're safe here... unless you decide to do something stupid, of course. Oh, and Anduin - bed."

"I should stay," Anduin said firmly. "He's my patient, I..."

"You can see to him tomorrow," Auriana snapped. "He's not going to drop dead overnight, is he?"

"No, but..." the prince started sullenly.

"Anduin... what do you suppose your guards will think if you spend the night in my quarters?" Auriana said, raising an eyebrow. "You can return here in the morning, and then you can play with the Warchief all you like."

Anduin grit his teeth, as if he wanted to say more, but he accepted the dismissal without another word, nodding to Vol'jin before making his way to the door.

"Ya always in such a foul mood, little lion?" Vol'jin said lightly, once Anduin was gone.

"I am when someone drops a half-dead Horde Warchief on my doorstep," she muttered.

Surprisingly, Vol'jin chuckled at that, the deep thrum of his laugh reverberating through her chest.

"You really should sleep," she told him. "I had Anduin heal you, but you're still a far cry from healthy."

"Ya probably right," Vol'jin agreed. "He did a good job though, dat prince of yours."

"Well, you can thank him in the morning," Auriana said, cautiously reaching over the Warchief to grab a spare pillow and a blanket.

"Ya don't have to put yourself out for me," Vol'jin said, reading her intentions. "Dere be plenty of room in da bed."

"If you think I'm getting into bed with you, you've got another thing coming," Auriana said flatly, trying to ignore the sudden hot flush in her cheeks.

"Ya not be my type, little lion, don'tcha worry," he assured her, grinning, "And tha bed be much
"more comfortable."

"Still… I think I'll take the floor," she muttered. "Wouldn't be the first time I've slept on the ground."

"As ya wish…" Vol'jin said lightly. "Though speakin' of comfort… don't suppose ya wanna get rid of these manacles?"

Auriana stared down at him seriously, reluctantly admitting to herself that he would find it very difficult to sleep with one arm shackled to her bed.

"You promise you won't try to escape?" she said. "Or… or harm me, or Anduin?"

"Where would I go?" he asked. "You and da prince might not wanna kill me just yet, but I doubt ya guards would feel the same way if they saw a troll sprintin' through the garrison. Besides, I'm not much up ta runnin' in this state."

"Fair point," she conceded, though she was still reluctant to let him go.

"Ya have my word," he said gravely. "For what it's worth, I swear on da Horde that I won't try to escape."

Auriana bit her lip, surprised that he would be willing to swear to her so vehemently. Trolls took their honour seriously, and she knew Vol'jin would not have given his word lightly.

"Alright," she said finally, her heart inadvertently beating faster as she reached out to unchain the Warchief.

Vol'jin was a great deal larger than her, and she knew that if he moved fast enough he could snap her neck before she would have much time to react. Fortunately, however, the Warchief was true to his word, and he merely sighed and flexed his wrist gratefully, before rolling on to his side with a pained grunt. Auriana watched him carefully for several minutes, before she moved to lock the door, extinguish the wall sconces and move to her own makeshift bed.

It took some time to get comfortable on the hard floor, but Auriana had slept in far worse places, and she was more than capable of tolerating some mild discomfort. She had finally settled into position when Vol'jin suddenly spoke, his deep voice echoing softly in the dark.

"Thank ya for saving me. I know ya took a great risk bringin' me here."

"I would have done it for anyone," Auriana said truthfully, "Though… you're welcome. Goodnight, Warchief."

"Goodnight, Commander…"
Auriana awoke sometime in the early morning to the sound of a loud banging right beside her head. She rolled on to her back and groaned, her muscles protesting violently as she dragged herself upright. It wasn't the first time she'd ever slept on the floor, though upon reflection it probably hadn't been the best idea so soon after she had recovered from torture. Of course, given that the alternative was crawling into bed with the Warchief of the Horde, the floor had been perfectly fine.

Speaking of the Warchief... she thought, leaning on the wall for support as she found her feet and looked over at Vol'jin.

He appeared to be dead to the world, entirely un concerned by whoever it was thumping on Auriana's door, and for a moment her heart leapt into her throat as it occurred to her that he might actually be dead. A second later, however, the troll grunted and rolled over, and Auriana breathed a sincere sigh of relief. She didn't even want to think about what might happen if Vol'jin died in her garrison, let alone in her bed, given that he was enough of a problem there alive.

The relentless pounding on her door continued and someone rattled the doorknob, drawing Auriana's attention away from the Warchief.

"Stop it," she hissed through the door, assuming it was Anduin on the other side. "I'm awake."

"Oh, sorry," the prince whispered. "I wasn't sure."

"Are you alone?" she asked.

"Of course," Anduin said. "I left my guards outside your main chamber."

"Alright," she said. "Come in, but keep quiet."

She unlocked the door and cracked it just enough so that Anduin could step through, locking it behind the prince the moment he was in the room. Anduin looked far too perky for both the hour of the morning and the situation at hand, and he certainly looked far more rested than Auriana herself.

"How is he?" Anduin whispered. "He's... alive, right?"

"Dat I am, Anduin Wrynn," Vol'jin suddenly rumbled, startling Auriana and Anduin both, "But I'd not say no to some more of dat healin', if ya be so kind."

"Of course," Anduin said quickly, unable to deny anyone in need. "Er... if that's alright, Auriana?"

"Do what you have to do, Anduin," Auriana said, settling back against her dresser and folding her arms.

She watched in silence as the prince went to work, summoning golden Light to tend to the still-raw lashes on the Warchief's back. Vol'jin hid it well, but Auriana had been a soldier long enough to know that he was in a great deal of pain, and that it would take some time before he truly recovered. That said, Anduin was very skilled, and his healing eventually enabled Vol'jin to pull himself upright into a sitting position.

"You must be hungry, Warchief," Auriana said softly, not entirely unsympathetic to his pain.

"Ya gonna feed me, mon?" Vol'jin asked.
"I think we've established that I'm not trying to kill you, and food will help you regain your strength," Auriana said drily, rolling her eyes. "What do you eat? I've never had a pet troll before."

Vol'jin's eyes narrowed slightly, and Auriana wondered if she had overstepped the mark with her quip. Trolls had an odd sense of humour, Vol'jin seemingly more than most, but it probably wasn't the best idea to have provoked him. It seemed as if she had underestimated him, however, and a slow grin spread across his face as he spoke.

"I'll eat just about anything at this point, Commander," the Warchief said. "I be a good pet."

Auriana smiled despite herself, and some of the tension that had pervaded the room since the previous night dissipated. Vol'jin was very different in person from what she might have expected, and she was somewhat thrown by his surprisingly easy affability.

"Alright then. Anduin, head down to the kitchens and have them make you up some crepes and fresh fruit," Auriana ordered.

"Why me?"

"Because I am not leaving you alone with him," Auriana said sharply. "That's not negotiable. I won't say it again, Anduin."

The prince shot a nervous look at Vol'jin, but the Warchief said nothing, simply leaning back against the wall with a thoughtful expression.

"Er… won't they be suspicious if I ask for enough food to feed three people? One of whom is an enormous troll?" Anduin asked. "You did say we had to keep this a secret…"

"You're an adolescent boy, Anduin, just tell them that you're hungry," Auriana said, shrugging.

Anduin frowned at her gentle teasing, but he chose to ignore both Auriana's comment and Vol'jin's grating chuckle as he made his way to the door.

"Fine," the prince said flatly, "But don't you two talk about anything important until I'm back."

"I wouldn't dream of it," Auriana muttered as the prince slipped outside, her eyes never leaving the troll's face.

The mage and the Warchief stared at each other in silence for a long while, each refusing to move or blink. Vol'jin had the kind of calm, penetrating gaze that made Auriana feel as if he were reading her soul from the inside out, but she wouldn't give him the satisfaction of looking away.

"Ya really dat afraid to leave me alone with da prince, mon?" Vol'jin asked finally. "I don't hurt children."

"Not even the children of your enemies?" Auriana said, raising a skeptical eyebrow.

"Are we enemies den, little lion?" the Warchief asked, straightening his back.

Even seated on the bed, he was a good deal taller than she, and Auriana wondered if the move was intended to intimidate her. She was well used to being the smallest person around, but the Alliance simply didn't have anyone who could rival a troll or a tauren for sheer physical presence. Of course, Auriana didn't have to rely on size in order to intimidate someone, and she met Vol'jin's shrewd stare levelly.
"No," she said finally. "At least, I'd hope not. Your men fought with honour at Blackrock Foundry, they're a credit to the Horde. I am grateful."

Auriana sighed, and idly tangled her hands in her dishevelled hair.

"To be honest, it's not you I'm worried about," she said. "Varian, on the other hand, might not take too kindly to me leaving his only son alone with the Warchief of the Horde."

"Ahh, I see. Well, da King of Stormwind ain't exactly be known for his… er… patience," Vol'jin said sagely. "Particularly not when it concerns his son."

"Have care, Warchief, that's my King you're speaking of," Auriana said waringly. "My… very, very impatient King…"

Vol'jin chuckled once more, and Auriana shook her head with a rueful smile. She loved Varian more than she could have ever expressed in words, but she wasn't so lovestruck as to be blind to his flaws. It was strange, but right now she was rather more afraid of Varian's reaction to this whole messy business, than she was of Vol'jin. The Warchief was dangerous, even a blind man could see that, but he was also quite obviously clever, and admittedly far calmer than Auriana would have been had their situations been reversed.

_Do I… like him?_ she wondered, bizarre as it was to be considering the Warchief of the Horde in such a fashion.

Luckily, Auriana was spared from having to follow her confusing train of thought any further as Anduin reappeared, banging on the door impatiently for the second time that morning. She ushered him quickly inside and relieved him of the large platter that he had precariously balanced on one arm, placing it on her nightstand so that Vol'jin could reach.

"For some reason, your servants did not believe that I was capable of carrying this upstairs," Anduin huffed. "There were about six of them all ready to follow me back here."

"Well, fortunately you seem to have made it in one piece," she said, smiling. "Now both of you, eat up. We need to talk."

Auriana chewed thoughtfully on a fuzzy peach as she watched the prince and the Warchief dine, though she herself was not all that hungry. Anduin seemed entirely unperturbed by the strangeness of the situation, wolfing down his breakfast as if he ate with Vol'jin every day. The Warchief himself seemed equally ravenous, consuming handful after handful of Nagrand cherries and Ironpeel plantains as if they were the last things he'd ever eat. Auriana was surprised he was still able to _breathe_, given the pace at which he ate, though she knew that healing produced a particular kind of hunger that wasn't easy to sate.

The very moment the last morsel of food was devoured, both Vol'jin and Anduin looked up at Auriana with uncannily similar expressions of curiosity, each apparently unwilling to delay a discussion of Vol'jin's presence in Lunarfall any longer.

"So… I think it's clear we have a problem," she said seriously. "Your arrival here, Warchief, is no accident."

"I agree," Vol'jin said, stroking one of his long tusks thoughtfully. "Someone planned dis very carefully."

"I'm afraid it might be a good deal more complicated than you might think," she said heavily. "I… I'm going to trust you with some information, Warchief, something that no-one outside this room
knows. I have recently discovered that there is a traitor, or a group of traitors, within the Alliance who are actively working to destabilise relations with the Horde."

"What?" Vol'jin growled, leaning forwards.

Any trace of good humour disappeared from his eyes in an instant, and Auriana was strongly reminded that the Warchief had a rather formidable reputation.

"I haven't been able to yet determine who he or she - or they - might be, but I have evidence to suggest that they have sabotaged several recent garrison missions in an effort to reignite the war between the Alliance and the Horde," she added quickly. "I think we can assume that they are responsible for this attack."

"If dat be true…” Vol'jin said slowly, "Then we have a very big problem."

"I don't understand," Anduin said. "What's the issue? Why can't we just return Vol'jin to Frostwall?"

Auriana and Vol'jin exchanged a look, and she could see in his eyes that he precisely understood the gravity of the situation. The Warchief was no fool, and he had understood the full extent of the trouble they were all in the moment Auriana had revealed the truth.

"It's not that simple, Anduin. By injuring the Warchief and leaving on the outskirts of Lunarfall, these traitors are trying to force the Alliance into a very difficult position," Auriana explained. "If Vol'jin were to die in the immediate vicinity of an Alliance base, regardless of the circumstances, it would be difficult to prove that we were not involved. It would be tantamount to a declaration of war."

"If that were the case, we'd be fighting by tomorrow," Anduin realised.

"Precisely. On the other hand, if we were to discover Vol'jin and take him back to Lunarfall, as we did, it would appear to the Horde as if we had intentionally captured the Warchief in order to extort a ransom, which is almost as insulting as killing him outright. Either way, we can't win," she sighed.

"But we haven't done anything wrong. We saved him," Anduin insisted, turning his earnest gaze on the Warchief. "You don't want war any more than we do, Vol'jin, surely... why can't you just tell everyone the truth?"

"Unfortunately, appearances often matter more than the truth when it comes to politics, Anduin - you know that. The average citizen of the Horde might simply not believe the truth, and assume Vol'jin is trying to save face. Hell, I'm the one who found the Warchief and I'm still not sure this isn't some bizarre dream," Auriana said darkly. "There's far too much hatred and history between the Alliance and Horde for something like this not to arouse suspicion. There's already been trouble brewing in Ashran, and we can't have that kind of petty infighting extend to the rest of the continent. All it takes is one hot head to fire the first shot, and we're right back where we started."

Auriana shook her head and drummed her fingers on the dresser in frustration, silently cursing whoever it was that was so blind as to want to restart the war.

"She's not wrong, young prince," Vol'jin agreed, looking sternly across at Anduin. "I can't deny dat dere are... elements... within da Horde dat would not hesitate to use dis incident as an excuse. If war breaks out on Draenor, a conflict on Azeroth with soon follow, and da Iron Horde will take us all."
"We could tell my father," Anduin suggested brightly. "He might be able to think of a solution."

"I respect Wrynn for what he did at Orgrimmar, Anduin, but I'm not exactly his favourite person," Vol'jin said slowly. "I'm not sure gettin' him involved would be da best idea."

"He'd help," Anduin insisted. "I know he would. He's certainly listen to you, Auri."

Vol'jin shot her a swift, curious look at Anduin's words, and Auriana pointedly avoided meeting the Warchief's eyes.

"Anduin… we can't tell your father that I have custody of the Warchief," she said carefully.

"Why not? He's… he's your king," Anduin said, nonplussed.

"That's precisely why I can't tell him," she said, smiling sadly. "If he were anyone else… well, let me see if I can explain the problem. I am bound by both honour and the law of Alliance High Command to inform the King of the capture of a Horde Warchief. Alliance standing orders are very clear on this matter - in the event that a Horde faction leader is captured, they are to be remanded to the custody of Stormwind so that they might be ransomed back to the Horde. In the event that a ransom cannot be negotiated, they are to be killed."

She looked over at Vol'jin, though he didn't seem surprised by the fact that the Alliance had standing orders to kill him, if necessary.

"I'd imagine the Horde have a similar statute," she added.

"We do," Vol'jin nodded, confirming her suspicion.

"That's… idiotic," Anduin said flatly.

"It is what it is. You have to remember that these orders were developed in a time of war, and unfortunately for us, they were never rescinded," Auriana continued. "I don't believe for a moment that Varian would kill Vol'jin, but I can't just march the Warchief off to Stormwind without consequences. If we tried to keep it a secret and it was then discovered that the High King had lied to the other leaders of the Alliance about having the Warchief in custody, there would be hell to pay…"

"And if Father were to follow Alliance law and ransom Vol'jin, there are many within the Horde who would see it as an act of aggression," Anduin added, realisation dawning across his face. "Going through official channels only serves to suggest that we took Vol'jin deliberately."

"Exactly. If anything, this whole thing would be a damn sight easier if we were currently at war. We'd simply negotiate for the ransom, and that would be that. Unfortunately, in a time of peace, the capture of a Warchief - whether or not it was intentional - sends a fairly strong message that we are unwilling to honour the truce between the Alliance and the Horde," she said seriously. "Everything we have built since Pandaria would crumble."

"I can see why you wanted to keep this a secret," Anduin said quietly. "You realised this last night, didn't you?"

"Why do think I was reluctant to bring him inside the gates?" Auriana said, raising an eyebrow. "I'll admit that if we had found you dead, Vol'jin, I would have opened a portal and thrown your body into the deepest, darkest hole I could find. Er… no offense."

"None taken," Vol'jin said, grinning. "Can't say I wouldn'ta done tha same."
"You can see, then, Anduin, why I can't tell your father. If I inform Varian, I'll have to take Vol'jin back to Stormwind, and if I take him back to Stormwind, I'd be putting the him in an incredibly tenuous position, politically speaking," Auriana said. "Quite frankly, I think that's what someone was hoping would happen. Whether Vol'jin lived or died, they'd still have a good chance of starting a war."

"You're torn between your duty as an officer of the Alliance and the political reality of what doing your duty would mean," Anduin summarised. "That's so..."

"Frustrating?" Auriana suggested with a wry grin. "I... I can't lie to Varian, but I can't tell him the truth, either. To lie to him would be in violation of my orders as an officer of the Alliance, as well as my oath of loyalty to my sovereign... but I won't be responsible for the resumption of hostilities between the Alliance and the Horde."

"Dey - whoever dey are - obviously know Alliance law, ta know what kinda position dey be puttin' you in," Vol'jin observed shrewdly.

"Which is... concerning..." Auriana said grimly, "To say the least."

"What if..." Anduin mused slowly. "I mean... could we not just turn Vol'jin loose? After all, he just sort of... appeared... outside Lunarfall. At the moment only you and I know he's here."

It wasn't an unreasonable suggestion, but Auriana knew letting Vol'jin go would most likely be more trouble than it was worth, and judging from the look on the Warchief's face, he felt the same.

"If someone has gone to this much effort to set me up, I don't doubt that they will attempt to force my hand by revealing Vol'jin's presence in Lunarfall. They aren't going to leave this to chance if they can help it," Auriana said darkly. "Besides, it would be very difficult to get him back to Frostwall without someone becoming aware of Alliance involvement... and if I were to let him try to make it alone, I don't doubt that they would attempt to kill him."

"I can't really fight in dis state, either," Vol'jin added, champing his tusks in obvious annoyance. "Lettin' me go would be much da same as killin' me yaself."

"So what are you going to do?" Anduin asked Auriana, frowning.

"I have absolutely no idea..." she said bitterly, running a hand through her dark hair, "Though I think it's safe to assume that we have very little time to act before this all blows up in our faces..."

She stared pensively out the window, biting her fingernails as she wracked her brains for some kind of solution. Lunarfall looked impossibly serene in the early morning light, and though the view did nothing to still Auriana's turbulent thoughts, it struck her how much she would miss the garrison when she eventually left Draenor.

"Draenor..." she murmured out loud, the very word sparking an idea deep within her subconscious.

"Whatcha thinkin', mon?" Vol'jin asked curiously.

"We're on Draenor..." she said, realising that there might just be a way out of this mess after all.

"Yes..." Anduin said slowly. "Uh... Auri... are... are you alright?"

"When we came through the portal, our standing orders for this campaign reflected the fact that there was a truce between the Alliance and the Horde," she said quickly. "Given that none of the Horde leadership came through the Dark Portal, save for Thrall, we have no special provisions in
place on Draenor for their capture."

"Ah, I see where ya goin'..." Vol'jin said, nodding approvingly.

"I don't," Anduin said. "Care to explain?"

"As an autonomous Commander of an Alliance garrison, it's within my purview to exchange Horde prisoners without the need for oversight from the King or Alliance High Command, according to the orders we were given before we left for Draenor... I can make the argument that I treated the Warchief as I would have any other prisoner under our current arrangement with the Horde," she said thoughtfully. "It's a tenuous argument, at best, but as long as I turn Vol'jin over to the Horde on Draenor... I haven't violated any Alliance protocols. Technically speaking."

"That's a very fine line to walk," Anduin pointed out. "You're splitting hairs."

"Yes, I am, but it would save having to put your father in an impossible position, if I don't inform him of the trade until it's already done. He can't be held responsible for something he doesn't know about," Auriana said.

"You will tell him eventually though, right?"

"Of course. He's my King, Anduin. I took an oath as commander of this garrison and I will not so dishonour my word," Auriana said seriously. "Though if I inform him after the fact, I absolve him of any responsibility for the Warchief's capture. I think he and Alliance High Command could then be persuaded to keep this whole mess a secret, given that the Alliance can't be directly implicated if there is no official record of us ever having had him in custody."

"Ya really gonna lie ta ya King?" Vol'jin asked skeptically.

"I'm not going to lie to Varian... I'm just going to... delay telling him the truth," Auriana said shifty. "It's likely that I'll be officially reprimanded for my actions, and punished by Alliance High Command, of course, but at the end of the day I'm the only one who will suffer any consequences. Alliance law will have been satisfied, and we will have avoided open war with the Horde."

"Except you'll have to take all the blame yourself. How is that fair?" Anduin demanded.

"It isn't, Anduin, but life sometimes isn't fair," Auriana said seriously. "Maintaining the tentative peace between the Alliance and the Horde is more important than whether or not I'm punished. We've made steps in Draenor, small steps, perhaps, but there is a chance that what happens here, when we're united against the Iron Horde, can have bigger repercussions back home in Azeroth. Don't you think that's worthwhile?"

"Yes, but... what's going to happen to you?"

"As I said, there will be a mark on my record, which my might prevent my promotion opportunities in the future. I'll certainly be docked pay, and I wouldn't be surprised if I was confined," she said, shrugging. "Failing to involve the King in a matter this important is a rather serious offense, even if I technically acted lawfully by not informing High Command. If I'm very unlucky, I might lose command of Lunarfall."

"My father wouldn't do that. Not to you," Anduin protested.

Auriana saw Vol'jin's eyebrows rise in interest, and she gave Anduin a warning look. That was the second time this morning that the prince had unintentionally hinted at a personal relationship between Varian and Auriana, and the last thing she needed right now was for Vol'jin to find out
that she was the King of Stormwind's lover.

"He won't have a choice, Anduin," she said slowly. "A king can't just pick and choose to whom the law will apply. I will do my duty... and he will do his."

Anduin looked as if he wanted to say more, but he bit his tongue. He was a smart young man, but Auriana knew he had a tendency to see things as quite simply right and wrong, black and white, and he struggled to grasp the intricate shades of grey that made up the reality of a war leader's life.

"A clever plan, little lion, but it still don't explain how ya gonna get me back ta da Horde without anyone findin' out da Alliance was involved," Vol'jin interjected. "Nor how we gonna stop all dis from happenin' again."

"I think I have an idea about that. You're quite right - we need to return you to Frostwall quietly, without word gettin' out of Alliance involvement, and we need to figure out who is behind the attack..." Auriana said, biting her lip thoughtfully as her mind raced with possibilities. "Vol'jin… your commander at Frostwall… you trust him, right?"

"Zala'din be one of da finest trolls I've ever met," Vol'jin said firmly. "He's a personal friend. He'd never betray me."

"Is it reasonable to assume that he would have kept the news of your disappearance secret?" she asked.

"Yes, I tink so. He not gonna start a panic until he has all the information," Vol'jin confirmed. "He be methodical like dat."

"Good, that's good..." Auriana mused. "And... how do you feel about being used as bait?"

The Warchief cocked his head to the side, and he folded his long arms across his chest.

"Er... can't say I be wild about it, but I could be persuaded," he said slowly. "You wanna use me ta draw out tha traitors?"

"Yes. If their goal is to push the Alliance and the Horde into a war, they do not want see you safely returned to Frostwall," Auriana said. "If they think we're going to return you to Zala'din, I think it's safe to say that they'll do their very best to interrupt the exchange."

Vol'jin nodded thoughtfully, once again playing with his tusks as he considered her words.

"Say I agree... how ya gonna get me back to Frostwall without revealing your involvement? Or gettin' me killed?" he asked. "I don't plan on dyin' for a good long while yet."

"Well, whoever this is obviously has spies in Frostwall, as well as Lunarfall. There's no other way they could have known where the Warchief was travelling in order to coordinate an ambush," Auriana said.

"Ya tink there be Horde involved in this as well?" Vol'jin asked skeptically.

"You said it yourself - there are Horde who would prefer to see another war just as much as some of those in the Alliance. It's doubtful that someone in the Alliance could have made it into Frostwall unnoticed," she reasoned.

"Which suggests dat dey had help from da inside," Vol'jin swore. "Bwonsamdi take dem all..."
"It seems likely. Which also means that they have some kind of access to Zala'din, though I think we can use that to our advantage. I suspect that if my counterpart were to say... suddenly disappear... on an important but unspecified mission, it will arouse the curiosity of those who caused Vol'jin's disappearance..." Auriana suggested.

"Right, because only the traitors would know where the Horde Commander was actually going," Anduin said eagerly. "It wouldn't give away the involvement of the Alliance to anyone else, either, if Zala'din were to keep his mission secret."

"That's the idea," Auriana said, smiling. "Hopefully I'll be able to convince Zala'din to help me set up an ambush, and I can return with Vol'jin at a later time. We can catch the persons responsible for this attack, prevent such occurrences in the future, and I can trade Vol'jin back to Frostwall without anyone being the wiser."

"In theory," Vol'jin said skeptically.

His reluctance was understandable, given that it was a terribly risky and admittedly vague plan, but Auriana couldn't see any other viable solutions that would simultaneously draw out the traitorous elements in the Horde and Alliance, as well as keep her involvement with Vol'jin a secret.

"Look, if you have a better idea..." Auriana said, opening her arms wide. "I'm all ears."

"I wish I did," Vol'jin said wryly, "But it seems dis will have ta do."

Auriana nodded gratefully, well aware that Vol'jin would be the one who had the most to lose if her improvised plan were to fail.

"Of course, for any of this to work, I need to get in touch with Zala'din directly before I take you anywhere. Is Frostwall warded?" she asked.

"You know dat it is," Vol'jin said slowly.

"Do you know the location of the wards? If I pull one down, I'll be able get into Frostwall undetected."

"You know I can't give you dat information, little lion," Vol'jin said warily. "I tink ya can be trusted, but dere be a limit to dat trust. Ya wouldn't do the same for me, and ya know it."

"You're probably right," Auriana agreed, conceding the point. "Though that does put something of a kink into my plan."

"I've got a different idea, if ya be willin'," Vol'jin added. "I can give you the location of a trustworthy scout. If ya make contact with him, he can den put you in touch with Zala'din."

"Are you sure there isn't another way? The less people who know about this, the better," Auriana said.

"Well, ya don't need ta tell him what be goin' on, just dat ya need to talk to Zala'din," Vol'jin reasoned. "I'll give ya this - ya bought some goodwill in da Horde at Blackrock Foundry. He'd listen long enough."

"That's all well and good..." Anduin interjected, "But if you show up in Frostfire Ridge unannounced, what's to stop the Horde scout from killing you on sight?"

His brow was furrowed deeply in concern for her well-being, and in that moment Auriana was
suddenly struck by how much he resembled his father.

"We do have a ceasefire," Auriana said, willing to take the risk. "And I'm not entirely defenseless, Anduin, you know that."

She walked over to her wardrobe, and pulled out the travel map of Draenor that she always kept on her person when she went adventuring.

"Mark your man's location," she ordered, giving both the map and a quill to Vol'jin.

The Warchief quickly marked a point on the map just below the Daggermaw Ravine in Frostfire Ridge, and carefully wrote the scout's name in the margin. Auriana nodded gratefully as he handed it back, tucking the map carefully into her robes before she donned a heavy traveler's cloak. Frostfire Ridge was damnably cold, and she wasn't going to make this day any worse by freezing half to death. The cloak was long and fur lined, and once Auriana raised the hood, there would be nothing visible of her save for her eyes. She pulled on a pair of thick hide boots and woolen gloves, before finally tucking a long spellblade into her belt for additional protection. The outfit was oppressively hot in the mild morning temperatures of Lunarfall, but Auriana knew she'd be thankful for the warmth once she arrived in Frostfire.

"Vol'jin… can I trust that you'll stay here?" she asked seriously. "I think you can agree that walking out into the garrison would be a bad idea."

"Very bad," the Warchief said, nodding. "Ya have my word. I need dis all ta remain a secret just as much as ya do, remember?"

"True," Auriana said. "Lock the door from the inside once I leave, and you should have no trouble. There's… uh… some books on the nightstand if you get bored, though hopefully it shouldn't be too long until I get back."

"He won't be bored, he'll have me to talk to," Anduin said quickly, his confusion obvious. "Er, that is… if you'd like, Warchief."

"No, he won't," Auriana said seriously, before Vol'jin could open his mouth. "You're not staying in this room. Return to your quarters, and I'll summon you upon my return."

Anduin's eyes narrowed in open frustration, and he looked distinctly put out by her orders. Auriana knew he was rather sensitive to the perception that he was too immature or weak to be involved with serious matters, though such considerations hadn't entered into Auriana's decision-making process at all. He was her prince, plain and simple, and she would do her duty to keep him safe.

"I'm not a child, Auriana," he said flatly.

"No, you aren't," she agreed, "Which is why I let you listen in on my conversation with the Warchief. What you are, however, is my ward, and I have an obligation to see that you are protected to the best of my ability. Please, go back to your room."

Anduin looked desperately to Vol'jin for some kind of support, but the Warchief merely shrugged, unwilling to get involved. The prince looked very much as if he'd like to say something further, but between the Warchief's neutrality and Auriana's famous stubbornness, he realised he was fighting a losing battle, and he stalked from the room without another word.

"Ya really tink he gonna stay away?" Vol'jin asked, rubbing his chin. "Ya know he gonna be back in here da second ya leave."
"Oh, I know," Auriana said lightly, grinning as she began to open a portal to Frostfire Ridge. "But I figure that when Varian comes for my head, I'll at least be able to say that I tried…"
Auriana had been to Frostfire Ridge on a handful of occasions, but she lacked the intimate knowledge of the area necessary to land her teleport as accurately as she might have liked. Instead of arriving precisely at the position that Vol'jin had indicated on the map, she ended up knee deep in the middle of a snowdrift about two miles south. It took a fair bit of time and a great deal of swearing, but she eventually pulled herself out of the drift, shaking the snow out of her dark hair as she took stock of her surroundings. As far as Auriana could tell, she was the only living thing within miles, and if she hadn't known better, it would have been easy to assume that she was the only person left in existence. Frostfire Ridge was undeniably a desolate place, though she supposed there was a stark beauty in the dark, sweeping outcrops of stone and the occasional bright flash of red magma bursting upwards through the otherwise unbroken white snow.

The wind was blowing fiercely, and Auriana shivered violently into her cloak as she began her journey north. She absolutely detested being cold, and often went to great lengths to keep herself warm. On more than one occasion, she had even joked to Varian that her affection for him was mostly based on his naturally high body temperature, which never failed to make him laugh and pull her closer.

Auriana sighed at the thought of her King, and not for the first time that day she wished he was by her side. He was older, wiser, and far more experienced when it came to the intricacies of politics than she, and while Auriana genuinely believed her plan represented the best chance of getting the Alliance out of this mess unscathed, she would have welcomed his opinion. Auriana also would have welcomed his company, if for no other reason than trudging through the snow was incredibly dull.

She made good time, at least, even despite the weather, and she had only been walking for an hour by the time she found the location of Vol'jin's scout. Despite the Warchief's assurances that the scout was trustworthy, Auriana chose to fade into invisibility as she approached his position, wanting to get the measure of the scout before revealing her presence. She crept slowly forwards on soft feet, and was somewhat surprised to see that Vol'jin had sent her in search of a lone tauren bull. He was far younger than Auriana might have expected, with a dark grey hide the colour of charcoal and long, white horns. He was big, too, even for a tauren, though he moved with the ungainly lope of young animal as yet unused to the length of its legs. He stood facing towards her, his dark eyes bright as he gazed out across the snowy plains, though of course he couldn't see her through her spell. Auriana had no idea why the tauren was out here, alone, and scouting this particular area of Frostfire Ridge, and quite frankly she didn't care. She wasn't here to spy on the Horde, and all she really needed was for the scout to agree to contact Zala'din on her behalf.

She moved until she stood about twenty feet away from the scout before she cautiously removed the glamour and slowly shimmered into visibility once more. The tauren caught sight of her almost immediately, starting violently at her sudden and unexpected appearance, and immediately moved into a powerful defensive stance. He carried a vicious looking polearm, its long haft carved with the distinctive shapes of running wolves, and Auriana decided she'd rather not find out just how good he was with a weapon.

She slowly lowered her cloak so that he might see her face, though she never took her eyes off the sharp point of the polearm.

"Arith Stormchaser?" she called, using the name Vol'jin had provided and praying that she hadn't accidentally stumbled on some other tauren.
"Come no further, human!" the bull bellowed, a strange, nervous tremor echoing through his deep voice. "Leave this place now, and no harm will come to you, but I cannot guarantee your safety if you stay."

"Peace," Auriana said calmly. "I've come a long way to talk to you."

She freed her long dagger from her belt, and lifted it high in the air so he could see. The tauren instinctively thrust his weapon forwards, but paused as Auriana threw the dagger point-first into the snow, its jewelled hilt glinting in the morning sunlight.

"I'm unarmed," she added, holding out her hands in a gesture of placation.

Stormchaser looked down at the dagger, clearly thrown off guard by her gesture, though it did nothing to relax his fighting posture.

"You're a mage," he grunted warily, shifting his grip on his polearm as if he expected her attack at any moment. "That doesn't mean much."

"Well, you're not wrong..." she conceded, shrugging. "Though I assure you I mean you no harm. How did you know I was a mage?"

"You're the Alliance commander from Blackrock Foundry," the tauren said slowly. "There aren't many other human females who would risk coming this far into Frostfire."

He leaned forward, his ears twitching and his weapon inadvertently lowering as he inspected her closely.

"Nor many quite so small," he added. "By the Earthmother, you really are tiny."

The tauren bull tilted his head curiously to one side, and Auriana realised that he wasn't nearly as intimidating as his size might have suggested. He stood his guard with the same nervous eagerness that she'd seen time and time again amongst green soldiers in the Alliance, and he didn't seem to have realised that at this point she could have killed him many times over had she so desired. It had, however, occurred to him that his statement regarding her size may have been offensive, and a distinct look of abashment crossed his bovine features.

"I'm sorry," he said softly. "I haven't seen very many of your kind before."

Light, is this his first day? Auriana wondered, though she had to assume Vol'jin had some reason for sending her to this particular scout as opposed to any other.

"It's quite alright," she said quickly. "Arith - I need to talk to your Commander, but I have no way of directly contacting Frostwall. My best hope was to find a scout who could relay my request, and so I came here."

The tauren's ears pricked in interest, but he still looked skeptical of her intent.

"How... how did you know where I was?" he asked. "How did you know my name?"

"I... I can't tell you. I'm sorry, I know that's a rather inadequate answer, but suffice to say my mission here is of utmost importance," she said sincerely.

"How can I possibly trust you if you won't give me all the information?" Stormchaser reasoned.

"If you know I fought at Blackrock Foundry, then you know I'm an ally to the Horde, if not
precisely a friend. You also know that your Commander trusts me," Auriana countered. "So if you really think about it… I'm asking you to trust him, not me."

The tauren snorted and shook his head, his breath sending soft spirals of vapour into the snowy air. His heavy brow was furrowed in suspicion, but at least he had given up all pretence of threatening her with his weapon.

"Arith, please. Would I be here if it weren't important?" she added, taking a tentative step towards him. "I don't just go walking around in Horde occupied territory for giggles."

"I suppose..." he conceded, though he still looked rather put out. "What is it that you want?"

"I need you to relay a message to your commander," Auriana said swiftly. "Tell him... tell him that... um..."

She trailed off as she gathered her thoughts, trying to think of the best message to give to the scout. Vol'jin might have vouched for him, but the less people who knew the full details of her mission in Frostfire, the better, and so she would need him to relay a message that was clear enough for Zala'din to understand, while at the same time cryptic enough that no one else would deduce the truth.

"Yes?"

"Ah... tell Zala'din that... a little lion went walking through the woods and found a... a wounded raptor," she said finally.

Auriana cringed at the awkwardness of the phrase, and judging from the look on his face, Stormchaser was similarly unimpressed.

"Er... what? I have no idea what that means," the tauren said, stamping his left hoof in agitation.

"Zala'din will figure it out," Auriana said, with far more confidence than she actually felt.

"I don't think anyone could figure that out," Stormchaser huffed.

"Well... it's a little obscure, I'll give you that..." she conceded, sighing. "Though my mind is rather frozen in this weather, you could cut me some slack."

She suspected that the tauren might have smiled at that, but it was hard to tell whether his mouth moved beneath his dark, shaggy coat.

"So, you want me to tell the Commander that 'a little lion went walking through the woods and found a wounded raptor'?" the scout repeated, frowning.

"Yes, that exact message. He'll know what do," Auriana said. "Thank you."

"I'm still not sure that you are trustworthy, mage, but I will do as you have asked," he rumbled, nodding his great head. "My wyvern is about two hundred yards to the east, and it's about an hour's flight to Frostwall. Will you wait here?"

"Yes," Auriana agreed, though she wasn't thrilled about the prospect of having to wait out in the driving snow.

With little choice, however, she gathered up her dagger and sat herself down against one of the smoother looking rock outcrops nearby, and pulled the hood of her cloak back up as she watched...
Stormchaser slowly loped away. He was quickly swallowed up by the snow, and Auriana was once
left alone, a single point of darkness against the austere white plains. She rested her head back
against the rock with a sigh, trying to get comfortable as she settled herself in for a long wait. Not
for the first time in her life, Auriana was immensely grateful that she was a mage, and had the
ability to use her magic for warmth. Tucking her knees to her chest, she sent a slow burst of power
shivering down her icy limbs in an attempt to heat them from the inside out. She still wasn't
precisely warm, but at least she wouldn't freeze to death before Stormchaser returned.

As she sat and waited, Auriana's thoughts inevitably drifted to Varian, as they always did when she
had time alone to think. She desperately wished that she was right now leaning into his strong
shoulders while he held her tightly, though she did wonder darkly if he would be quite so
affectionate once the truth of her capture of Vol'jin was revealed. Although she knew that she was
saving him an awful lot of trouble by her act of dishonesty, part of her still hated the thought of
lying to not only her King, but the man she loved as well.

Her lonely reverie was eventually interrupted by the sudden wild shriek of a wyvern from above.
Auriana instantly leapt to her feet, her power surging in her veins as she sought to determine
whether the wyvern carried friend or foe. She held up a hand to shelter her eyes, and was just able
to make out the dark shape of the beast as it came into land. It was not Arith Stormchaser that flew
towards her, however, but rather Zala'din himself, almost unrecognisable in the heavy pelt that
covered most of his face and chest.

"Where be da Warchief?" Zala'din demanded, the moment his feet touched the ground.

"I see you understood my message. He's at Lunarfall," Auriana said quickly, not bothering to waste
time with pleasantries. "Someone decided to leave me the gift of a Warchief outside my garrison
last night."

"Is he safe?" the troll commander pressed her, his expression darkening.

"He's fine," Auriana assured him. "He was badly injured, but I had him healed."

"Who by? Who else knows about dis?"

"Well... you, me, Anduin Wrynn, and whoever else knows on your end," Auriana said, shrugging.

"Varian Wrynn's in Lunarfall?" Zala'din exclaimed worriedly. "With da Warchief? Dat can't be
good..."

"I said Anduin, not Varian," she said calmly. "The High King has no idea that any of this is
happening."

Zala'din looked very skeptical, and it was only then that Auriana noticed the dark circles under his
eyes and the weariness in his posture. He must have barely slept the previous night out of worry for
his Warchief, and Auriana felt a twinge of sympathy. She couldn't imagine how she might have felt
had it been Varian who disappeared without a trace, and she genuinely respected Zala'din's concern
for his friend.

"Look, I understand this must all be very confusing," Auriana added gently. "Let me explain."

Zala'din nodded tersely, but listened in rapt silence as Auriana detailed what had happened the
previous night, from the initial shock of discovering the beaten and bloodied Vol'jin in the woods
outside Lunarfall, to his healing at Anduin's hands, and finally to her long conversation with the
Warchief that very morning. Fortunately, like Vol'jin, Zala'din very readily grasped the reality of
the situation, and the importance of keeping the Warchief's disappearance and a return a secret from all but a select few.

"What do ya want from me?" he asked swiftly, once she had finally finished speaking. "I'll give ya anything ya need if it gets da Warchief back safe."

"Let me be clear, I want to turn Vol'jin over to you as soon as I can," Auriana said firmly, "But I also want to take the opportunity to try and draw out whoever is responsible for this attack."

She quickly outlined her plan, explaining how she intended to use Vol'jin as bait whilst at the same time keeping the whole affair secret. Zala'din looked rather displeased at the idea of risking his Warchief's life so brazenly, but Auriana could also see that understood the merits of her strategy.

"Of course, in order for this to work, you'll have to be publicly seen leaving Frostwall so as to draw the attackers out," Auriana said. "Which means you'll have to fly back, so we'll have to wait a few more hours before we attempt the exchange. And we'll need to find somewhere appropriate to set up our counter ambush."

"That I tink I can help with, actually," Zala'din said thoughtfully. "Let me show ya."

He swung back into the saddle of his wyvern and beckoned, indicating that she should climb onto the beast behind him. Auriana hesitated, however, not really sure if she wanted to get so up close and personal with the troll commander.

"I don't bite, little lion," Zala'din said drolly. "Come on."

Auriana flushed, silently cursing him for so swiftly deducing the cause of her reticence, and quickly took a seat at his back. She wrapped her arms around his slim waist for balance, tightening her uncertain grip and leaning forwards as the wyvern took to the air. Auriana could feel every movement of Zala'din's lean muscles beneath her breast as they flew, and she blushed nervously as she wondered what he might be thinking with her pressed so firmly against him.

_At least he's warm_, she thought drily.

Zala'din turned his wyvern northwards, and they were airborne for about twenty minutes before he finally directed the wyvern to land. Auriana dismounted quickly, not wanting to linger around Zala'din any longer than she had to, and tried very hard to ignore his roguish grin as she inspected her surroundings. He had taken them to the very top of the Frostfire mainland, where a bedraggled looking cluster of trees ended ahead of a series of high, windswept cliffs. Auriana could hear the crash of the ocean somewhere below, and in the distance she could see the points of a ragged mountain range.

"Whatcha tink?" Zala'din asked, leaning casually against his wyvern as Auriana paced about.

"This will work," she said, nodding approvingly. "With the cliffs on one side we can limit possible lines of approach, and that outcrop over there would be easily defended. We can always run into the treeline if we need cover, and I can augment our defenses with magic."

Still unable to quite meet Zala'din's eyes, Auriana busied herself with readying the site for Vol'jin's handover. The troll looked on in thoughtful silence as she summoned a number of wards around the perimeter, as well as a number of rather nasty frost and fire traps. She had no way of knowing how many ambushers they might face, if any appeared at all, but it was safe to assume that in the event of an attack, she, Zala'din, and Vol'jin would be greatly outnumbered. The traps were her way of evening the odds, and she actually felt a brief surge of pity for whoever would be so
unlucky as to set them off. She also added a number of other murderous surprises, and by the time she was finished the entire area was a veritable nightmare of concealed magical trickery.

"Well, I think this place is about as deadly as it's going to get," she said finally. "All that remains now is to return to Lunarfall to retrieve Vol'jin, and to pray to the Light that everything goes off as planned."

She turned back to Zala'din with a bloodthirsty grin, ready to bid him farewell before she teleported back to her garrison, only to find him staring at her with a kind of fierce intensity that she had never before seen on his face.

"Auriana…" Zala'din said tentatively, and she cocked her head in surprise at his use of her proper name. "Thank you."

"What for?" she said.

"Ya done right by the Horde. Again," he said seriously. "I'm startin' ta feel like I owe you a drink."

"Zala'din, please..." she said, frowning in mock seriousness. "If we manage to pull this off without getting ourselves or Vol'jin killed, you're buying drinks for all of Lunarfall..."
After Auriana had departed, Vol'jin settled into a state of deep meditation, using some of the skills he had learned while living amongst the Shado-Pan. His back still ached from his wounds, though he had to admit that the young Wrynn boy had skilled hands. Vol'jin had been healed many times over the course of his life, and he knew a talented priest when he saw one. Of course, he wouldn't be back to his full strength for some days yet, but he was determined to be ready for Auriana's return and the inevitable fight that would follow.

Vol'jin sat in quiet contemplation for nearly three hours, tapping into his own natural restorative abilities to complement the healing he had received from Anduin. Despite his injuries, he felt genuinely refreshed when he finally opened his eyes, though still a fair bit stiffer than he would have liked. He would be able to move, at least, and play his part in the Alliance commander's plan to ambush his would-be assassins. Worryingly, however, he was still alone in Auriana's room, and he began to wonder if the little mage was in trouble. He had sent her in search of one of Frostwall's most trustworthy scouts, though he knew just about anything could have befallen her on the way to meeting the eager young tauren. From what Zala'din had described, she was both extraordinarily powerful and uncommonly clever, though Vol'jin knew better than most that even the greatest warrior could still be vulnerable to a single, lucky blow.

Vol'jin rose to his feet, stretching, and peered curiously about the room. He knew very little about his rescuer, save for what he had learned from Zala'din, and he wondered if he might learn something about her from a thorough examination of her quarters. When he'd awoken in Lunarfall the previous night, he'd been more or less half-dead, and hadn't really been able to take stock of his new surroundings. He wasn't normally one to be so nosy, but if he were going to continue to trust his life to this woman, he needed something more to go on than half-truths and rumours.

Much like the woman herself, Auriana's room was difficult to read. The Commander lived more simply than a woman of her station had a right to, and everything in the room appeared to have a practical purpose. Her closet, as he had seen earlier, was filled with nothing but well-worn battlegear and simple, homespun tunics. Her only concession to vanity appeared to be a mirror at the foot of her bed, though it was rather dusty from lack of use. Even her study desk was sparse, empty save for a few pieces of parchment, quills, and a dried inkwell. Of course, it would have been a small thing to break the lock on her drawers and rifle through her files, though Vol'jin refused to show Auriana such dishonour in her own home. He wasn't naïve enough to believe that her goodwill towards him had been entirely motivated by the kindness of her heart, but she had saved him, and he was grateful.

Oddly, there was not a single decorative item in the entire room, and in fact it appeared that the only items that were not inherently necessary were the three books Auriana kept on her nightstand. She seemed to have rather boring taste, the first book being a rather heavy biography of the Archmage Antonidas, and the second a compiled history of the First War and the fall of Stormwind, though somewhat surprisingly, however, the third book appeared to be some kind of sordid romance novel.

Really, Commander? Vol'jin wondered, grinning slightly to himself.

He picked up the book for closer inspection, and as he did, a small piece of parchment fell out of the cover and floated downwards. Vol'jin caught it neatly between his long fingers before it hit the floor, and quickly realised it was not a mere scrap of paper, or a bookmark, but rather a handwritten note. Someone had scrawled a short message on one side, and Vol'jin found that his curiosity
temporarily overrode his sense of decorum as he began to read.

Auri -

Do try not to get yourself killed.

I'd miss you. I already do.

- V

Vol'jin's eyes widened in interest, and he now strongly believed that the bizarre rumours about the Commander of Lunarfall and the King of Stormwind might have held some truth after all. It had been obvious enough from Anduin's presence in Lunarfall that Wrynn trusted Auriana above and beyond any of his other officers, and the little prince had also let slip several times that Wrynn saw Auriana as more than just another one of his soldiers. The short note only served to confirm Vol'jin's suspicions, and he mentally filed the new information away for later use.

Wrynn, ya old dog, he thought slyly, scratching his tusks in surprised amusement.

Auriana was no great beauty by troll standards, though he wasn't sure how she measured amongst human women. The Commander was far too short, for a start, and she was notably bereft of the vibrant colouring that was prized amongst female trolls. Her hair was too dark, and while she did not lack for muscle, she was still far too slender for Vol'jin's tastes. On the plus side, she was at least a powerful sorceress, not to mention a war leader in her own right, and he supposed Wrynn could have done a lot worse.

Though… how does he not crush her ta death? Vol'jin wondered, gently tucking the note back into the cover of the book before placing it carefully back down on Auriana's nightstand.

He was pulled from his strange reverie by a sudden soft knock at the door, and he all but forgot about his discovery as his whole body tensed in alarm. The consequences of being discovered in Auriana's rooms would be dire, and her distinct lack of furniture meant there were precious few places Vol'jin could hide. He crept uncertainty on silent feet towards the door, pressing his left ear against the wood as his heart thumped loudly in his chest.

"Vol'jin?" someone whispered. "Er… can I come in? It's me, Anduin."

The Warchief shook his head and breathed a sigh of relief. He had expected that the prince would return, and had expressed as much to Auriana, though he was surprised that the young priest had been able to resist the temptation as long as he had.

"Ya alone?" Vol'jin muttered.

While he generally had no particular interest in conversing with human adolescents, he was willing to make an exception in this case. Anduin Wrynn was an unusual young man in many ways, especially given his parentage, and of course it wasn't every day that one got to talk with the son of a longtime enemy and sometimes tentative ally.

"Yes," Anduin said quickly. "I told my guards that Auriana wanted to see me. As far as they know, she's still here."

"Get in here, den," Vol'jin urged, stepping back from the door and opening it just wide enough for the prince to slip inside.

Seemingly unconcerned that he was alone with the leader of an opposing faction, Anduin strode
boldly into the room, and sat down cross legged on Auriana's bed. Vol'jin grunted in approval, reluctantly impressed by his utter lack of fear. Anduin may not have had his father's fighting spirit, but he was clearly no coward, either. Vol'jin also hadn't really noticed it last night, nor during the conversation that morning, but the prince had filled out significantly since the Warchief had last seen him in Pandaria. He was still far finer boned than his father, though it looked as if he would inherit Wrynn's impressive height.

*Well, impressive for a human, at least...* Vol'jin thought wryly.

"Greetin's, Prince Anduin," Vol'jin drawled, taking a seat of his own at Auriana's desk.

"Hello," Anduin replied, seemingly unsure of what to say. "Uh... how are you feeling?"

"Better," Vol'jin said sincerely. "I owe ya my gratitude for da healing."

"Really, I would have done it for anyone," Anduin replied earnestly, "Though I'm glad to hear you're on the mend. You should see a healer again once we get you back to Frostwall, however, you were rather badly hurt when Auriana and I found you."

"I'm aware," Vol'jin said drily. "Dis ain't da first time I been injured, little prince."

"Right," Anduin said, the top of his ears flushing bright red. "Er... sorry. Though... speaking of Frostwall, have... have you heard from Auriana?"

He asked the question casually enough, though Vol'jin was savvy enough to read genuine worry in his features.

"Not yet," he admitted.

"It's been over three hours," Anduin said quietly. "I would have thought she'd be back by now. What if she's lost? Or worse, what if she was attacked, or killed?"

"From what I hear, she's more than capable of looking after herself," Vol'jin said reassuringly, though quietly he shared the boy's concern.

"That's true," Anduin agreed, though it did little to change his serious expression. "You should see her fight. It's... scary, even though I think she holds back most of the time."

Vol'jin nodded, considering the information thoughtfully. According to Zala'din, Auriana had berserker blood in her, and Vol'jin had to admit he was rather curious to see how she would handle herself in battle. The prince, on the other hand, seemed as if he wanted the Commander as far away from a fight as possible. He sat in agitated silence, twisting his hands idly in the bedsheets and tapping his left foot irritably.

"What's botherin' ya, little prince?" Vol'jin asked, narrowing his eyes shrewdly. "She gonna be fine."

"I just... I can't believe she's going to do so much to protect the truce between the Alliance and the Horde, and then she's just going to turn herself over to my father for *punishment*, like she's some kind of criminal," Anduin said darkly. "It isn't fair."

Vol'jin had no children of his own, as least as far as he knew, and of course he'd had very few opportunities to talk with young humans. He didn't really know what to say to offer the prince comfort, though he could empathise with Anduin's consternation. In his time as Warchief, he'd learned that sometimes what was right was not always just, but equally that what was just was not...
always right.

"Ya not wrong, mon," he said gently. "It isn't fair, but she knows what she's doin'."

"It's just all so..." Anduin started in frustration, unable to find the words. "So..."

"Laws are important," Vol'jin said firmly. "If ya father starts ignoring da laws of da Alliance as he pleases... well, dat's how ya get someone like Garrosh Hellscream."

"My father is not Garrosh," the prince said hotly, looking up at the Warchief with bright blue eyes.

Vol'jin knew that Anduin had often clashed with his temperamental father, but it was impossible to deny the fierce love on the boy's face as he defended Wrynn. The feeling was obviously very much akin to what Vol'jin had felt for his own father, Sen'jin, and he felt an unexpected sense of understanding wash over him.

"Peace, princeling. I didn't say he was," Vol'jin said calmly, "But dat's how someone like Garrosh starts. One rule broken, and often for good reason. Outta convenience, perhaps, or even kindness... but it just makes it dat much easier to do it a second time, and den a third..."

"But Auriana is doing the right thing!" Anduin protested. "She's acting to prevent a war. Laws should protect people doing what's right, not punish them."

Vol'jin narrowed his eyes thoughtful as he considered the human prince. The young man was obviously intelligent, but it appeared he had a tendency to view the world in black and white simplicity, rather than having a grasp of the finer shades of grey that made up the reality of leadership. His view of the word was optimistic, which wasn't in itself necessarily a bad thing, but Vol'jin knew he would have to learn to work within the confines of reality if he were ever to be an effective king.

"Ya be learnin' a lot of lessons about politics today, Anduin Wrynn, and not all of dem good, or easy," Vol'jin said carefully. "But if ya take one thing away from dis - remember dat Auriana's a fine soldier, and a fine woman. Ya can't buy the kind of loyalty she's shown ya father today."

"That's exactly my point! She deserves better," Anduin huffed.

"Of course she does," Vol'jin agreed. "Dey all do. Dat's da worst part of command, always. Whether ya be a warchief or a king, ya'll spend ya whole life askin' people for more than they have ta give, and dey'll very rarely get rewarded even when they give it ta ya anyway. Ya mother deserved better than she got, as did my father. Saurfang's boy did, no doubt, and Bolvar Fordragon, and Cairne Bloodhoof... and countless others I could name. Ya take my point, Prince of Stormwind?"

"I understand, I do... though that doesn't mean I have to like it," Anduin said broodingly.

The prince fell into a contemplative silence, staring down at his hands and frowning. Vol'jin let him sit, and for the second time that day saw something of himself in the golden-haired human. He, too, had been groomed for leadership from a young age, and had struggled mightily with each of the questions that Anduin now sought to answer. Hell, if Vol'jin were being honest, he still didn't really know what it meant to be a good leader, though he tried to forge ahead as best he could.

"How... how is Baine?" Anduin said finally, changing the topic. "I haven't seen him since Garrosh Hellscream's trial. Is he well?"
Vol'jin knew that the human prince and the tauren High Chieftain were friends, or friends as much as two leaders from opposite factions could be, and it was heartening to see that Anduin still cared for Baine's wellbeing after all that had happened in Pandaria. He opened his mouth to reply when the room was suddenly suffused with a blinding white light, and Auriana reappeared beside her closet. She quickly slipped out of her winter cloak, shaking the snowflakes from her hair as she did. It had obviously been cold in Frostfire, judging from Auriana's bright pink cheeks and nose, but otherwise she looked as if she had survived her trip unscathed.

"Auri!" Anduin exclaimed, his earlier question forgotten. "Er… I was just… um…"

"Oh, save it, Anduin, you're not going to convince me you two aren't thick as thieves," Auriana said, rolling her eyes, though there was a faint hint of amusement in her tone.

"In da prince's defense," Vol'jin said slowly, "He hasn't been here long."

"That's true," Anduin said eagerly, shooting Vol'jin a grateful look. "I tried to stay away, Auriana, really…"

"I'm sure that'll be of great comfort to me when your father has my head on the chopping block..." she said drily, though to Vol'jin's surprise she gave the prince a broad, genuine grin.

The mage looked much younger when she smiled, and if Vol'jin hadn't known any better he wouldn't have thought her all that much older than Anduin. It made her look soft, and vulnerable, though of course she was anything but.

"Did you find the scout?" Vol'jin asked.

"Yes, I did," she replied. "Green one, isn't he?"

"Yes, but very skilled… and more importantly, very loyal," Vol'jin countered. "Did he get ya ta Zala'din?"

"He did," Auriana said, nodding. "We have a plan of attack, though pulling it off will be another thing entirely. Can you fight?"

"I can't say I be at full strength," Vol'jin admitted, "But I won't let ya down."

"Good," Auriana said grimly. "Let's face it - you're the only one who actually has to walk out of this whole thing alive."

"Ya really be willin' to die for me?" Vol'jin asked skeptically, wondering how far she would go to ensure that this plan succeeded.

"Not for you," she said seriously, "But I would give my life to build a lasting peace between the Alliance and the Horde. For Azeroth's sake."

"Good answer," Vol'jin said, grinning.

"Yes, well… I'm not just a pretty face," she said slowly, with a very small smile

She walked over to her closet to retrieve Vol'jin's daggers and voodoo pouches, and handed them over with only the slightest hesitation. Vol'jin had wondered where his things had been hidden, though he couldn't really begrudge Auriana for disarming him. He would have done exactly the same had their positions been reversed, though he supposed there was little point in disarming a mage.
"We need to get you up and moving," she said authoritatively. "There's a lot to tell you, and not much time. Zala'din and I have planned the ambush for sundown. It's safe to assume that we will be outnumbered in this fight, though the low light will favour us as the smaller force, rather than our new friends."

"Do ya have any idea how many we gonna face?" Vol'jin asked seriously, as he rose to his feet and began hiding his assorted daggers around his person.

"No idea," Auriana said. "I mean, I suppose there's even a chance that no-one will show… though given how well they've done spying on Zala'din so far, it seems unlikely."

"So it be da three of us against… da Light knows how many?"

"Four of us, actually. Zala'din suggested that he bring your young tauren with us, for the extra muscle," Auriana said confidently, as if they weren't still hopelessly outnumbered.

"You know," Anduin started tentatively, "I could…"

"Anduin, I swear on the life of every man, woman and child in Stormwind that I will tie you to the bed before I let that happen," Auriana said archly, raising an eyebrow, "And I'm more than willing to get creative if you push me."

"Worth a try," the prince said, shrugging good naturedly and making Auriana grin.

She had a sense of humour, at least, which was promising. Vol'jin was a serious, thoughtful leader by nature, but like most trolls, he enjoyed a good laugh, and he was pleased to see that the Alliance commander was not as humourless as she may have appeared.

"What about Zal'adin's second? The shaman girl?" Vol'jin asked. "He trusts her, she could be of use."

"We decided that she should stay in Frostwall, and see if she can figure out who in the garrison takes special notice of Zala'din's departure," Auriana explained, "And in the event that we all… well, die… at least there will be someone who knows the truth. Speaking of which…"

She turned to her prince and placed a gentle hand on his shoulder.

"Anduin, if I'm not back by morning, have your guards take you straight home to Stormwind and tell your father what happened," she said. "We're either going to win this fight quickly, or not at all."

"Auri…" the prince protested quietly, clearly disturbed by the thought that she might not return.

"Please. If I… if we don't come back… he should hear it from you," she said, holding Anduin's gaze for a long time before she finally blinked and stepped away.

The little mage let out a long sigh, but to Vol'jin's surprise she straightened her back, her expression brightening as she turned on him with a savage grin.

"In any case... I don't know what so you're worried about, Warchief," she said lightly. "The way I see it? Being horribly outnumbered just makes it more fun."
"Can you see anything?" Auriana whispered, her quiet voice barely audible over the sound of the wind and the waves beating on the cliffs below.

Vol'jin and Auriana lay flat on their bellies on a rocky outcrop overlooking their planned ambush site, each peering carefully out onto the snowy plain below. Auriana had teleported them to Frostfire Ridge just before Zala'din was expected to arrive, so that Vol'jin might get the lay of the land. They were also currently invisible, thanks to a glamour Auriana had cast before bringing Vol'jin through the portal, though she had warned him that the spell would only last so long.

The sun was rapidly fading below the horizon, turning the snow a burned orange-red that reminded the Warchief uncomfortably of blood, but there was still enough light left to see relatively clearly. Zala'din and Auriana had chosen the ambush site well, a small open field of snow in between a scraggly stand of trees and a cluster of windswept rocks, on one of which Vol'jin now perched. To the north, the snow plain ended abruptly in the jagged edge of a cliff, while to the south he could see the distant burn of dark red magma.

"Looks all quiet ta me," Vol'jin said softly, "But I don't tink it gonna stay dat way for long."

"Hmm," Auriana murmured, tilting her head upwards to look at the sky. "Zala'din should be here soon. I'll wait for him to land, and then I'll teleport us down. You remember the position of the traps?"

"I do," Vol'jin said firmly.

As soon as they had arrived, Auriana had apprised him of the position of the many deadly magical snares she had lain below, and Vol'jin had done his best to learn their location so that he was not caught unawares. The traps could not distinguish between friend and foe, and Vol'jin had no desire to run afoul of the young mage's formidable powers.

"Good," she said, nodding approvingly. "The last thing I need tonight is to have a deep fried Warchief on my hands."

"Dat bad, huh?" he asked.

"Well, you're welcome to try one out, if you'd like," she said drily, shaking her head. "I could use a laugh."

"Dat's a generous offer, little lion, but I tink I'll have ta decline," Vol'jin said, grinning.

Unexpectedly, Auriana returned his smile and opened her mouth to reply, only to be cut off by the low, mournful call of a wyvern. As one, she and Vol'jin turned to look to the south, where they could just make out the shapes of two low flying beasts and their riders.

"Zala'din," Auriana said quietly. "Right on cue."

Vol'jin and Auriana held their position as Zala'din and Arith Stormchaser came into land, their wyverns touching down precisely in the centre of the ring of Auriana's traps. They both dismounted immediately, unsheathing their weapons and looking about cautiously for any sign of trouble.

"Alright, Warchief," the Alliance commander said. "We're on."
She reached out and placed a gentle hand on his back, sending a shiver of unfamiliar magic down his spine, and suddenly Vol'jin found himself standing mere feet away from Zala'din. The other troll nodded in acknowledgement of his Warchief's presence, clear relief evident on his features as he quickly and silently assessed Vol'jin's condition.

"Commander," Auriana said formally, projecting her voice over the sound of the wind. "I bring you Vol'jin, Warchief of the Horde, in accordance with our agreement."

She looked furtively over her shoulder, her sharp blue eyes narrowing as they swept across the desolate landscape.

"Were you followed?" she added, far more quietly.

"Three wyverns picked us up leavin' Frostwall, but one of 'em broke off about two miles out. Da others stayed on our tail until about five minutes back," Zala'din said quickly. "I tink it's safe to say dat we can be expectin' company any minute."

Unfortunately, his words turned out to be somewhat prophetic, as barely a second later a series of portals opened from the south, illuminating the darkening sky with their distinctive blue glow. A full score of snarling orcs charged forth, raising their weapons and howling their fury to the sky as they bore down on the Warchief and his party.

Vol'jin let out a wild war whoop of his own and lowered himself into a fearsome fighting crouch, but before he could even pick his first target, something sharp and metal came flying towards his head at alarming speed. Surprisingly, however, he felt no pain, and looked down to see that the hurled dagger had landed harmlessly in the snow at his feet. He swung his head around to see Auriana's eyes blazing with the white hot glow of arcane power, and he realised that she must have shielded him at the last second.

"Vol'jin! Treeline!" she shouted, dispatching an orc with a powerful frostbolt before he'd even made it three steps beyond the portal. "We'll cover you!"

"I can fight!" he protested. "Da Darkspear don't run!"

"Today they do! Stick to the plan - we need you alive!" Auriana hollered back, her voice barely audible over the crash of steel on steel as Zala'din and Stormchaser barrelled forwards to meet the orcs in the melee. "Now would you please do your job so that we can do ours?"

The Warchief hesitated, reluctant to leave Zala'din, Auriana and Stormchaser at the mercy of such overwhelming odds no matter what the plan. As a battle-hardened warrior, Vol'jin itched to remain in the fight, but as an experienced leader, he understood that this mission would all be for naught if he were to be killed. It also didn't help that he was still injured and bereft of his normal arsenal of shadow hunter weaponry, not to mention that he had given Auriana his word that he would not engage in the fight unless absolutely necessary. With great reluctance, he sighed and turned to run for the cover of the trees, only to be cut off as several new portals opened from the unprotected flank to the north. Another group of assassins rushed into the fray, though this time they were human rather than orcs.

Vol'jin's aborted attempt to run for the trees had carried him very close to the human portals as they had opened, and he now stood alone and cut off from the relative safety of the treeline. Realising that he had no choice but to fight his way out, he pulled out a dagger and called a deadly voodoo curse to his fingertips. The nerves in his back screamed at the slightest movement, but Vol'jin grit his teeth and forcibly ignored the pain as he prepared to fight for his life. Just as the closest human moved to attack, however, there was a sudden burst of light, and Auriana reappeared in between
Vol'jin and his would-be assassins. Her face was twisted in a vicious scowl, and her sudden presence was enough to make the men pause.

"You want him?" she snarled. "You'll have to go through me."

"Our pleasure, Commander," the tallest of the men said, and Auriana started ever so slightly in surprise at the fact that she had been recognised.

The human assassin beckoned, and several of his men reached to unhook long metal chains from their belts.

"Shackle her!" the assassin ordered, his face fixed in an expression of cold savagery as he slowly advanced on the Alliance commander.

Auriana inhaled sharply, and Vol'jin realised that she was being threatened with arcane shackles; manacles that had been designed to bind and break the power of mages. Her face had all of a sudden turned so white that it made the surrounding snow look dull, and Vol'jin could see her hands shaking wildly, even from several yards distance. She backed up slowly, her newly fearful demeanour in stark contrast to her earlier bravado.

Vol'jin wasn't entirely sure why she had reacted so strongly, but it wasn't the first time he had seen a soldier freeze on the battlefield. Although Vol'jin was not afraid of a fight, he knew that the reality of war often became too much for some soldiers to bear, not least ones who had been as brutally tortured as he suspected Auriana had been. He shifted his grip nervously on his knife, knowing that if the mage's courage failed, he would be forced to fight a dozen men on his own.

Fortunately for the Warchief, however, it appeared that Auriana's fury outweighed her fear. She shook her head sharply, as if only just now remembering where she was, and she raised her hands in a clearly threatening gesture.

"You want my magic? My magic?" she screamed, her eyes blazing so brightly that they practically lit up the evening sky. "Come and get it..."

Vol'jin then realised that Auriana was no longer the prey in this situation, but rather the predator, and despite their careful preparations, the ambushers had severely underestimated her power and strength of will. She blinked sideways as they charged, positioning herself cleverly so that the ambushers were forced to cross the trap line to try and get her within range of their chains.

The move proved disastrous for the assassins, the first of whom hit an ice trap and was frozen solid so before Vol'jin could even blink. The second hit a fire trap, and was reduced to a heaping pile of char within seconds of triggering the snare. The assassins hesitated at the sudden, brutal deaths of their comrades, and Auriana took full advantage of their confusion to throw herself wildly into the fray.

Vol'jin had fought countless battles over the years, but the petite Alliance commander fought like no other mage he had ever seen. She was vicious, scrappy, and didn't seem to care at all whether she lived or died. She was also frighteningly effective, even against superior numbers, though it appeared to Vol'jin as if she were dangerously close to the edge of control. She threw one man aside with a burst of arcane energy, sending him flying a good thirty feet through the air where he crashed into a tree and lay still. A second assassin fell in a hailstorm of glittering ice lances, while a third met his demise as Auriana took him in the throat with a ferocious wave of frost. As for the human who had ordered the use of the shackles, she showed no mercy, pulling him into the air with her arcane powers and holding him rigidly upright while she burned a hole straight through his chest. Even at a distance and in the midst of so much snow, Vol'jin could feel the heat of the...
spell upon his skin, and he knew the man had never stood a chance. He was clearly dead, his chest now a ruined mess of charred flesh and smoking viscera, but Auriana refused to let him go, her eyes glowing with an unearthly, alien rage as she continued to channel her power.

"Commander!" Vol'jin shouted. "Stop! He's dead!"

While Auriana was skilled, she wasn't able to engage a dozen adversaries at once, and several of the humans who had not been tasked with restraining her had pushed their way past to Vol'jin himself. They came for him now, brandishing their weapons as the stared at Vol'jin with hateful eyes. Howling, he killed the first one quickly, opening the man's throat from ear to ear with a lightning fast slash of his knife, but the other three presented more of a challenge. They came on more slowly, cutting at Vol'jin's arms and thighs and forcing him to stumble backwards through the heavy snow. Normally, Vol'jin would have barely worked up a sweat against a mere handful of humans, but injured as he was, he knew he needed Auriana's help if he were to survive.

"Auriana!" he called again, hoping to break her out of her violent reverie.

She blinked twice at the sound of Vol'jin's booming, urgent voice, and abruptly seemed to come to her senses. She released her power and the lead assassin crumpled to the ground, his smoking corpse barely recognisable as something that had once been human. Her cheeks flushed brilliant red at her distraction, and she sprinted through the snow to the Warchief's defense.

She slid in beside Vol'jin in a spray of ice, moving to stand at his back as they engaged the human assassins head on. Vol'jin fought with both his knife and the gifts of the **loa**, and with Auriana's help, he was soon able to turn the tide of the battle in his favour. The little mage ducked and weaved around him with surprisingly expert timing, her earlier lapses forgotten as she committed fully to the fight. She slaughtered one of Vol'jin's ambushers with a punishing frostbolt, giving him the time to wither another away to nothing with his considerable voodoo power, and the space to finish off the third with a knife to the heart.

While Vol'jin and Auriana had been successful, however, it appeared that Zala'din and Arith Stormchaser were not as fortunate. No sooner had Vol'jin pulled his knife from the chest of his most recent adversary than a great bellow of pain suddenly ripped through the air. Both Vol'jin and Auriana whirled to see Stormchaser fall to his knees, a great orcish axe imbedded in the powerful muscles surrounding his left shoulder blade. Auriana instinctively moved to aid the hulking tauren, though she appeared torn between helping Stormchaser and staying by Vol'jin's side.

"Help dem!" Vol'jin ordered. "I got dis."

From what Vol'jin could see, there were only two humans left standing, and he was reasonably confident he could take them out. His blood was running hot from the earlier skirmish, and he could no longer feel the pain and pull of the great welts on his back. Of course, he knew there would be hell to pay after the fight, but with his adrenaline now surging he felt as if he could take on the world. Auriana still looked skeptical, however, and shifted restlessly on the balls of her feet as she tried to come to a decision.

"Go!" he repeated, even going so far as to push her away.

She nodded sharply and vanished, and Vol'jin was able to catch a glimpse of her summoning a great wall of ice before the remaining two humans closed in upon him. His attention was entirely diverted by his enemies, and it took both his natural skill and a blessing of speed from the **loa** to stay away from their sharp, slashing blades.

These two men in particular seemed older than the others, and more experienced, and Vol'jin soon
broke out into a heated sweat as he endeavoured to fend them off. They fought together with a deadly cadence, taking it in turns to dash in and out as they pushed Vol'jin back towards the edge of the cliff. He was not Warchief of the Horde for nothing, however, and he knew one of his greatest strengths in battle lay in his legendary cleverness. He danced around the two men as he looked for the pattern in their strikes, so that he might turn their own coordination against them. At the first opportunity, he struck out like a viper with his right arm, catching one of the men in the head with a fist and sending him tumbling across the snowy ground. He then took advantage of the second man's surprise to hit him with another debilitating curse, his mighty voodoo draining all of the life from the assassin and sending him off into the darkness of the other side.

The Warchief grinned with savage triumph at his kill, only to cry out a second later as he felt a sudden biting pain in his lower back. Vol'jin struck out blindly at his rear and whirled to see a slender rogue unstealth and leap back, his long blade glistening with Vol'jin's blood. The Warchief hadn't seen the rogue earlier, and he realised with a sinking heart that he had miscounted the number of remaining humans. He lashed out viciously at the rogue with both blade and voodoo, but the combination of his injuries, both old and new, finally seemed to be taking their toll.

Occupied as he was by the sudden appearance of the rogue, Vol'jin didn't realise that the man he had sent flying mere moments ago was still conscious, and had taken advantage of the Warchief's distraction to close in on him from behind once more. Vol'jin roared as the assassin hacked into the tendons at the back of his left leg and he stumbled, landing hard on his knees in the snow. He managed to hit the rogue with a particularly nasty leeching curse as he fell, but hamstrung as he was there was little he could do about the final, knife-wielding human. The man crowed in triumph as he prepared to kill Vol'jin, the wicked knife biting deep into Vol'jin's forearm as he made one last attempt to defend himself. Dimly, he heard Zala'din call his name as the assassin raised his blade for the second time, but Vol'jin knew there was nothing either he or Zala'din could do. He had fought bravely and well, but between his damaged leg and the weight of his previous injuries, he had little recourse but to close his eyes as he prepared to meet Bwonsamdi.

Surprisingly, however, the death blow never came, and Vol'jin he looked up to see Auriana reappear just behind his attacker in a blaze of light. She didn't have time to cast a second spell before Vol'jin was impaled, however, and so instead she used the momentum of her blink to force the assassin off balance. The little mage hit the man low and hard, and despite her small size, the power of her blink was enough to send both of them staggering. The ground was particularly slippery here, and both Auriana and the assassin slid almost comically across the ice as they clutched at one another for balance. Vol'jin fought mightily to get back to his feet so that he might lend the Commander his aid, but with the shock of his injuries there was little more he could do but watch on in horror as Auriana and the assassin stumbled uncontrollably across the snow, before finally tumbling together off the edge of the cliff.
Vol'jin lunged instinctively for Auriana as she disappeared off the edge of the cliff, though with his wounded leg there was realistically very little he could do to save her. He also had more immediate problems of his own, if the two orcs charging towards him were of any indication. While Auriana's brave leap had saved him from the last human assassin, there were several orcs still left alive, and Zala'din couldn't possibly hope to contain them all. If Auriana were already dead, Vol'jin reasoned, there was nothing that could be done to bring her back, and even if she were alive, he could not risk turning his back on the remaining assassins for long enough to come to her aid. He resolved that the best course of action was to finish the fight against the remaining orc assassins, and then go in search of Auriana… if she had survived.

With supreme strength of will, Vol'jin staggered back to his feet, trying to ignore the way his dark blood stained the snow. He switched his dagger into his non-injured arm, and crouched low as he prepared to fight the two oncoming orcs. The first one carried a brutish short axe, its blade already stained dark with the blood of one of Vol'jin's companions. The sight of it stirred a fierce frenzy of bloodlust in Vol'jin, and he called desperately on the loa to give him the strength to survive this last bout.

The first orc came on with his axe held high, trying to cut down towards Vol'jin's neck. The Warchief anticipated the move, dodging beneath him despite the screaming pain in his leg and punishing the orc with a brutal palm strike to the nose. A voodoo curse sent the orc staggering backwards, far enough for Vol'jin to finish him off with a knife across the throat. The second orc was larger, though he fared little better than his companion. Vol'jin was breathing heavily, but he was running on the energy granted by the loa, and despite his wounds he was still a force to be reckoned with. He blocked the orc's downward strike with his good arm, before head-butting the brute in the face and embedding a dagger deep in the assassin's neck.

He allowed himself a brief shout of triumph, before his preternaturally good senses alerted him to the presence of another being coming upon his flank. He whirled, ready to slaughter the third attacker, only to pull his strike at the last minute as he recognised Zala'din.

"Peace, old friend!" the troll Commander cried, throwing up his hands. "Ya got da last one. It be over."

Vol'jin looked around in disbelief, but it seemed the other troll was right. The snow plain was absolutely littered with the bodies of orcs and humans alike, and not a one of them seemed to be moving.

"Arith?" he asked, concerned for the life of his faithful young tauren scout.

"Wounded, but he'll live," Zala'din said quickly. "Da axe hit muscle, nothin' vital. He's over by the wyverns, takin' care of da bleedin'. Where… where's da little Commander?"

"She fell off da cliff," Vol'jin said, pointing. "I dun know if she's still alive…"

"No..." Zala'din breathed, and Vol'jin was somewhat surprised by the genuine fear and concern in his old friend's voice.

The younger troll's face darkened and he took off immediately, sprinting off through the snow towards the point where Auriana had disappeared. Vol'jin limped after him, grunting painfully as he joined Zala'din at the edge of the precipice. It was difficult to see, but Vol'jin soon spotted a
small, dark form clinging doggedly to the cliff wall about twenty five feet below, and he breathed a sigh of relief as he recognised Auriana's distinctive dark hair and ivory skin.

"Little lion?" Zala'din shouted disbelievingly.

"Zal!" she called, clear relief washing over her features. "I was shouting for you, but the damn waves are too loud."

"Ya alright?"

"Well… mostly… except for the fact that I'm hanging off the side of a cliff," she snapped. "I don't think I can last much longer."

"Can't ya just… magic ya way up here?" Zala'din replied.

"Do you think that perhaps I might have thought of that before now? I can't exactly blink straight up," Auriana said, rolling her eyes, "And I'd need to use my hands to cast a portal spell, which is obviously a problem."

She looked down over her shoulder, pressing instinctively closer to the wall as she gazed upon the wildly crashing surf and the jagged rocks below.

"Ah… I could maybe try to go down," she continued, her words all but torn from her mouth by the wind, "But I'm pretty far up, I'm not sure I could magically control the fall enough to land safely… not to mention that I'd end up in the ocean, and I'd likely be dashed against the rocks before I had time to teleport out."

"Alright," Zala'din said, stroking his tusks thoughtfully. "I tink I got an idea. Ya just… hold on."

"Oh, brilliant suggestion, Zala'din," Auriana growled. "I never would have thought of that on my own…"

"Don't get snippy with me, little lion," Zala'din huffed, frowning as he stepped back from the cliff edge.

"Feisty little thing, ain't she?" Vol'jin observed wryly.

"Yes, well… despite dat, we gotta save her," Zala'din said firmly.

"Agreed," Vol'jin said. "Whatcha have in mind?"

"Gonna cannibalise some of the strapping on the wyvern's saddles to make a rope," Zala'din explained. "It won't be pretty, but it should do the job."

"Good thinkin', mon," Vol'jin said, nodding his approval. "Though we still gonna need dem saddles ta get home."

"I know, I won't take anythin' vital. Ya should stay here, Warchief. Keep an eye on her," Zala'din said, "And stay off dat leg if ya can help it, dat wound's nasty."

Vol'jin had no intention of disagreeing, and he shifted his weight fully to his good leg as the blessing of the loa faded and the pain returned. Luckily, Zala'din seemed to have escaped the frantic fighting largely unscathed, and he showed no signs of pain or fatigue as he loped over to the wyverns and went to work. In no time at all, he had managed to cobble together a makeshift rope out of various leathers and cloths that he had found on the wyvern's harnesses, looping it over his
shoulder as he jogged back to Vol'jin's side.

Zala'din launched his rope over the side of the cliff the moment he returned, anchoring the carefully around his back as he prepared to lift Auriana up into the air and back to safety.

"Grab on, little lion!" he urged her, once he had taken up a stable position, though it appeared things were not going to be so simple.

*When are dey ever?* Vol'jin thought wryly.

"It's not long enough!" Auriana called up. "It's about… three feet too short. Can you make it longer?"

"Dat's all I got ta spare," Zala'din asked. "Can'tcha just climb up a little?"

"There's no handholds! That's why I didn't just climb all the way up to the top. I made it about fifteen feet but then the cliff sort of… sheared off," she explained. "I'm stuck."

Zala'din ground his teeth in frustration, and made a futile attempt to extend the makeshift rope further down the cliff. Unfortunately, he could not extend the rope without sacrificing the necessary length to create a safe anchor, a problem which Vol'jin immediately realised had no easy solution.

"Ya gonna have to jump, little lion," the Warchief said finally.

"I'm going to have to what?" she shouted. "In case you haven't noticed, I'm not exactly the jumping type!"

Vol'jin and Zala'din exchanged a look, and the younger troll rolled his eyes.

"Ya are today. Get a good grip, den put both ya feet up on da wall," Zala'din said patiently. "Push off upwards as hard as ya can and grab da rope."

"And if I miss?"

"Well, then ya magic gonna get tested..." Zala'din said. "Look, little lion, it either be dat or fallin' anyway..."

"Fine!" Auriana shouted, her displeasure visible even from above. "Get ready to pull me up."

As instructed, she gripped the cliff tightly, flattening her upper body against the black stone as she freed her legs. Fortunately, she was fit and strong, despite her size, and she managed to drag her feet into position with little effort. With her feet tucked up near her chest, she looked like a tiny, black bug, and Vol'jin might have found her position comical if the situation weren't so dire. Without any further preamble, she took three deep breaths and jumped, and Vol'jin actually gasped out loud as she missed the rope by mere inches with her right hand, only to somehow grab on with her left. She howled painfully as the momentum of her jump sent her crashing into the cliff face, though she managed to hold on by virtue of sheer stubbornness.

"And ya said ya couldn't jump," Zala'din said, grinning.

"Well, this day has just been full of surprises. Though… could you pull me up?" Auriana replied. "I'm not sure this 'rope' is going to hold my weight for very long."

Zala'din nodded and immediately began to haul her back to safety. Fortunately, she was very light
and put far less pressure on the improvised rope than someone like Vol'jin would have done, though he winced every time the joins in the leather strained under the weight of her ascent. It was a harrowing few minutes, but eventually Auriana crawled over the lip of the cliff and sprawled face down in the snow, breathing heavily with relief.

She lay still for a few long moments, then groaned and rolled over onto her back, squeezing her eyes tightly shut and rubbing her aching biceps.

"Lucky you found me when you did," she remarked. "My arms are killing me."

"What happened?" Zala'din asked quickly.

"One of the humans was going to kill Vol'jin, so I tackled him off the cliff. He tried to drag me down with him, but I bit his arm and forced him to let me go," Auriana explained.

"You… bit him?" Vol'jin said slowly.

"I didn't really have many other options at the time," she said drily. "I managed to snag a handhold to stop my fall, though it was a close run thing. I climbed up as far as I was able, but... honestly, if you'd been a few minutes longer, I probably would have fallen."

Her hands were still shaking from the adrenaline of her ascent, and it was some time before she clambered back to her feet and shook the snow out of her disheveled hair. The entire left hand side of her face was covered in blood from a deep gash along her hairline, and there were long scratches around her neck from where someone had apparently tried to rip out her throat. With a start, Vol'jin also realised that she also had a long orcish hunting knife deeply embedded in her right thigh, though she appeared not to have noticed.

"Er… Commander?" he said. "Dere be a dagger in your leg."

Auriana glanced down at her leg, clearly surprised by sight of the blade buried hilt deep in her thick muscle.

"So there is," she said, as calmly as if she were discussing the weather. "I…"

She cut off abruptly, her eyes fixing on something over Zala'din's shoulder. Seemingly ignorant of her wounds, she pushed past him and waded off determinedly towards the treeline, her face suddenly thunderous.

"Where ya goin', mon?" Zala'din called out in exasperation. "I gotta get dese two back ta Frostwall, dey need healin'... as do you!"

"One of the assassins is still alive!" she shouted over her shoulder, now jogging as best as she was able towards the treeline. "Hey!"

Vol'jin followed her line of sight, and saw that there was indeed a wounded human attempting to flee the battlefield. Auriana lifted her hands and made a forceful gesture, and the assassin's flight was abruptly cut short as a wave of ice engulfed his legs. Zala'din unsheathed his weapons and charged after Auriana, ready to dispatch the assassin, but she stilled him with a gentle touch to his wrist.

"Wait," she said. "I want to talk to him."

"He's an assassin…. do ya really tink ya gonna get somethin' outta him?" Zala'din asked.
"I can make him talk," she said seriously, with a quick glance back over her shoulder at Vol'jin.

The Warchief shrugged and beckoned her forwards to try, though privately he agreed with Zala'din. Auriana slowly walked in closer, her gait only slightly hampered by the knife still in her leg, though she stopped just out of the man's reach. The traitor was clearly injured, having taken two powerful blows to the shoulder and thigh, but he was still very much lucid, and he stared up at Auriana with hateful eyes.

"I have some questions for you, assassin," she said softly.

"You?" he snorted disbelievingly. "You're going to try to interrogate me? You're not going to leave me to this Horde scum?"

"Keep calling them that and they might not give me much of a choice," she said drily, crouching down so she was at the man's eye level and tilting her head slightly to the side.

"I'm not going to tell you anything, Commander," the man snarled bitterly. "I'm not afraid of you."

"If you know who I am, then you know that I'm about as much of a sweet little girl as the Warchief over there is," she said icily. "I don't like torturing people, but I love the Alliance… and you really don't want to find out how far I'd go to protect my people."

"Do your worst," the man spat back, though Vol'jin saw a distinct flash of fear behind his eyes.

"I'm not going to do that," Auriana said, her voice unnervingly quiet and hypnotic. "I wouldn't wish my worst on anyone. Keep that in mind."

Auriana sat back on her heels, her eyes igniting with the tell-tale sign of her magic. Despite himself, Vol'jin leaned forwards curiously, wondering if she would have the stomach to actually harm the man, especially after whatever had happened to her in Blackrock Foundry. Vol'jin took no pleasure in the suffering of others, but as Warchief he knew that torture unfortunately had its uses in a time of war.

Auriana's eyes flashed, and the man suddenly jerked upright, straining against his icy bonds and shivering violently. She said nothing, her face an expressionless mask, but Vol'jin could feel the distinctive hum of magic in the air.

"W…w… what are you doing?" the man stammered suddenly. "I can't see!"

"I'm icing the blood in your veins," she explained calmly, "And I've placed a glamour over your eyes. It's funny… no matter where you go… whether you're human, or orc, or troll, or elf… we all share that primal, instinctual fear of dying alone in the dark. Tell me, how does it feel?"

"I… I w... won't talk," he protested weakly.

"Give it a minute," she said. "Believe me when I say I've got nothing else to do tonight."

The man tried to put on a brave show, but it was clear to Vol'jin at least that he was terrified. Auriana hadn't really hurt the man, instead playing on his fears to convince him to talk, and Vol'jin wondered if her methods wouldn't be more effective than an outright assault. As an assassin, the man would have been well trained to resist poison or physical torture, but this kind of psychological torment was another thing entirely. Vol'jin was a strong and proud troll, but even he didn't know how long he'd be able to last under such a relentless cloud of fear.

Many impossibly slow minutes passed, and the assassin continued to twist and writhe beneath the
power of Auriana's magic. He was now shaking uncontrollably, and his lips had turned an unhealthy shade of blue. He scratched frantically at the ice holding his legs in place, as if burrowing beneath the snow might offer him any kind of relief.

"How long do want to keep this up?" Auriana murmured. "I know you can feel your heart slowing, and it must be getting hard to breathe… I can make this stop, I can make you warm again… all you have to do is to tell me what I want to know."

Auriana flicked her wrist, and a dancing flame appeared in her hands. The man was blinded by her spell, but he could instinctively sense the warmth, straining against his bonds in a futile attempt to avail himself of the fire's comfort.

"N… no…" the assassin whined, his teeth chattering wildly. "They'll… k… k… kill me…"

"And you think I won't?" she demanded. "I don't need names, I just need to know why. Why Vol'jin? Why now? I promise you, if you tell me, I'll make you warm again."

The man's face twisted into an ugly scowl, and he looked as if he very much wanted to continue to resist, but the power of the cold and the dark had entirely overwhelmed his psychological defenses.

"F… fine!" he spat. "Fine, you insufferable b… b… bitch! Make it stop, and I'll ask your questions."

"See?" Auriana said coolly. "I knew you could be reasonable."

She waved a hand and the man instantly sagged, sighing with relief as the sensation of warmth slowly flooded his body and his sight returned. Auriana gave him a few minutes to recover, tapping her booted foot impatiently as she waited for him to speak.

"I represent a group of like-minded individuals in the Alliance who believe that the Horde should be exterminated like the vermin they are," he said finally, with a spiteful glance at Vol'jin.

The Warchief growled low in his chest and drew himself up to his full height, though he made no attempt to interfere with Auriana's interrogation. Her methods had proven effective thus far, and Vol'jin didn't want to kill the assassin before Auriana had been able to obtain some useful information.

"It has been obvious to us for some time now that the Alliance will triumph over the Iron Horde, and it is high time we turned our attentions back home," the assassin said. "There is little more that needs to be done to aid the war on Draenor, though Azeroth is another story entirely. We believe the Alliance would benefit greatly from another war with the Horde."

"Hold on… you're… you're war profiteering?" Auriana exclaimed, disgust clearly evident in her voice.

"It's somewhat more complicated than that, Commander," the traitor said, rolling his eyes. "I won't deny that my masters will benefit from war, there's no doubt about that. After all, someone has to provide the stone and steel and wood to fuel the Alliance war machine… but that isn't our primary concern."

"Enlighten me then," Auriana said flatly.

"As I said, the Horde should have been eradicated long ago," he continued. "I won't deny that they were useful in the initial invasion of Draenor… but their usefulness has long since passed. Unfortunately, the High King saw fit to sign a truce with the Warchief, and so we have had to
resort to covert means to sabotage Alliance and Horde relations."

"Tell me, did you start trying to get us all killed before or after you sold me out to Blackhand?"
Auriana growled.

"That wasn't us," the traitor protested, his eyes wide. "My masters weren't exactly... displeased... by your disappearance, but I swear to you, it wasn't us. We were given instructions to discredit and defame you, not to kill you. Believe it or not, but you've actually been quite useful to our efforts. You've an unusual talent for war, Commander, though you quite obviously lack the proper will to do what needs to be done."

"Discredit me?" Auriana asked, genuinely surprised. "Why would anyone want to do that?"

"I've no idea," the man said. "I'm an assassin - I'm privy to neither the identity of the masters, nor the specifics of their plans. Our primary instructions were to start a war - discrediting you was desirable, but a secondary concern."

"Oh, well, glad to know that I'm only a secondary problem," Auriana snapped. "Though I suppose the plots of traitors don't necessarily make sense..."

"Traitor? Ha! You think you can claim loyalty to Stormwind?" he spat. "When you're out her cavorting with the Warchief of the Horde? Troll whore..."

Both Vol'jin and Zala'din roared with anger, though before either could react, Auriana swung back her arm and hit the man not with her magic, but with her fist. He cried out in pain as his nose exploded, swearing loudly as his blood showered the snow. In stark contrast, Auriana looked surprisingly calm, merely shaking her right hand and rubbing her knuckles as she continued to press the interrogation.

"He's not my type," she said coolly, "Though I could do a lot worse. Like you, for example."

"You'd pick a filthy troll over you own kind?"

"I'd take an honourable man over a traitor any day," Auriana said flatly, much to Vol'jin's surprise. "Regardless of where he came from."

"You really believe me to be a traitor? That's a matter of perspective, Commander," the man said, raising a thick eyebrow. "There are many of us who believe Varian Wrynn betrayed the Alliance when he failed to take Orgrimmar from the Horde."

"The High King prevented another war," Auriana said flatly. "He saved thousands of lives. Not to mention the fact that you have no way of knowing whether the Alliance would have won the resulting conflict... a glaring flaw which also exists in your current plan, by the way."

"There would have been casualties, no doubt, but we would have prevailed in time," he said, shrugging. "The Horde were divided, leaderless. They would have eventually fallen before the might of the Alliance."

"For what?" she snapped. "So that the Alliance could rule over a world in flames? So that we could build a kingdom on the bodies of slaughtered children?"

"We know who you are, Commander. You had family at Theramore," the assassin said slyly. "Are you honestly telling me that you wouldn't have destroyed the Horde right then and there, had it been your decision?"
Vol'jin and Zala'din exchanged a dark look as Auriana's hands balled into fists and her eyes flared. The Warchief considered Theramore to be a great stain on the collective honour of the Horde, and he knew that Auriana had more right than most to have hated them for the bombing. Despite himself, he found that he was genuinely curious as to what she might say, and he leant surreptitiously forward in anticipation.

"No," she admitted, her voice ragged. "You're right. At the time, I would have gladly watched them all burn. I was angry, and grieving… but it wouldn't have been a good decision… nor a just decision. The Alliance would have paid dearly for such a choice."

"That's weakness, Commander," the man spat. "What happened to you?"

"I learned wisdom," Auriana said softly. "I grew up. I learned that there are more important things in this world than my anger."

"Ah, like getting into bed with the Horde?" the assassin said archly.

"You're one to talk," she shot back. "Those aren't all human bodies back there."

"Tools, nothing more," he retorted. "Willing dupes. The so-called 'True Horde' want war as much as we do, though they aren't smart enough to realise that they can't possibly win. Rabid beasts, the lot of them… they were practically foaming at the mouth when we offered them the chance to fight."

Vol'jin looked across at Zala'din once more, disappointed but not surprised to learn that elements of Garrosh Hellscream's True Horde still persisted within his ranks. They had caused a fair bit of trouble in Orgrimmar of late, and it seemed that their disruptive influence had extended all the way to Draenor.

"So your grand plan is to use the True Horde to stir up trouble here on Draenor, in the hopes that war would break out on Azeroth," Auriana summarised, "And then what? Assassinate Varian and Vol'jin and put warmongers of your choice on the respective thrones of the Alliance and the Horde?"

"Vol'jin would die, certainly. We care not for the life of any Warchief, but we have no intention of killing Wrynn. Despite what happened at Orgrimmar, the High King is a great war leader, and we will need his strength," the traitor said. "He'd turn on the Horde in a heartbeat, given the proper motivation… and provided we can get him away from the influence of that mewling, pacifist son of his."

"That's sick," Auriana said coldly. "What gives you the right to play with the lives of good men like that? With the lives of my men? It's all well and good to start a war if you're not the one who has to do the actual suffering and dying."

"We are patriots!" the traitor argued vehemently, baring his bloodstained teeth. "We will see Stormwind ascendant!"

"I would burn Stormwind to the ground myself before I saw her in the hands of men like you," Auriana roared, all pretence at calm forgotten.

In her anger, she stepped forwards so that she was barely inches away from the traitor's face, though she appeared not to have noticed that she had inadvertently stepped within range of his grasp. Vol'jin saw what would happen almost before it did, but he was too far away to help the young mage. The traitor reached forwards with surprising quickness and ripped the knife from
Auriana's leg, sending a bright spray of her blood across the ground. She screamed with pain and anger as she fell to one knee, just as the traitor raised his hand to thrust the knife into her neck. Vol'jin and Zala'din both started forwards to her aid, but Auriana was far quicker. She waved a hand carelessly, as if swatting away a fly, but the man suddenly convulsed and fell to the ground before he could strike, frost rapidly forming about his nose and mouth as he wheezed and choked. He reached out a hand to her imploringly, his eyes begging her to stop, but the mage was merciless, holding his gaze with pitiless eyes until he gave one last violent shudder and lay still.

For a long moment, no one moved or spoke, as if they were all frozen in an eerie tableau. The otherwise pristine snow was now dotted with bright spots of blood, and the only sounds that could be heard were the unearthly whistle of the wind through the ghostly trees and the relentless pounding of waves on rock.

"Whatcha do ta him, mon?" Zala'din asked finally, looping an arm beneath Auriana's shoulder and pulling her back to her feet.

"I froze his heart solid," she said flatly. "I don't like traitors."

"I… uh… didn't know ya could do dat," Zala'din said slowly, nudging the dead human with his foot.

"Neither did I," she said darkly, her forehead creasing ever so slightly. "I'm sorry, I lost my temper… I…"

She bent over unexpectedly and wretched, emptying the meagre contents of her stomach on the snowy ground.

"Ya alright, little lion?" Zala'din said, touching a hand to her back in concern.

"I shouldn't have done that," she said quietly, shrugging Zala'din away.

"He was gonna kill ya first," the younger troll argued. "He got what was comin' to him, and now Bwonsamdi gonna fix him up real nice."

"I didn't mean that," she said vaguely. "Do you… do you know how I knew I could break him? Because I learned in the Foundry that fear - real fear - is far more powerful than physical pain could ever hope to be."

"Ya not Blackhand, mon," Vol'jin said carefully. "Ya did what ya had to do."

Auriana gave him a swift, pained look, her blue eyes unbelievably luminous even in the falling darkness. They stared at each other for a long time, the dainty human mage and the enormous troll Warchief, before she let out a long, shaky sigh, and leant over to tear a long strip from her cloak to tie around her leg as a bandage. The wound was now bleeding badly, having been reopened by the traitor's attempt to stab Auriana, though Vol'jin was confident that it wasn't life-threatening. She then knelt down and rifled through the assassin's pockets, though it seemed to Vol'jin as if she came up empty handed.

"We need to get rid of these bodies," she said finally, all business once more. "No one can find out what happened here tonight. If we can get them all together in a big pile, I can burn them."

Vol'jin nodded in agreement, though he was of little use with his hamstrung leg. He could limp, just barely, though there was no way he could drag the heavy bodies of orcs without risking serious damage. In the end the grisly task fell entirely to Zala'din and Auriana alone, with both Vol'jin and Arith Stormchaser taking shelter near the wyverns as they watched. Fortunately, Zala'din was still
fighting fit, and he was strong enough to carry two bodies at a time. Auriana, too, was surprisingly capable, and she performed admirably despite her small stature and the wound in her leg.

"Ya pretty strong for a little ting," Vol'jin remarked, as she dragged a man easily twice her size over towards the rapidly growing pile of corpses.

"Probably because I find myself in these situations just... way more often than I should," she quipped drily. "Despite my best efforts to the contrary."

She gave him a faint smile before resuming her work, and in surprisingly little time she and Zala'din had amassed an impressive pile of over thirty ambushers. Vol'jin knew it was a minor miracle that they had all survived, and he gave silent thanks to the loa and the spirits of his ancestors that he was still standing. Auriana ignited the corpses moments after Zala'din had added the last body to the pile, the magical flames burning far hotter and faster than any natural fire. For a long time, the four unlikely companions stood in perfect silence, each transfixed by the flames as they leapt gleefully up into the starry night. Stormchaser looked pained and weary, though he hadn't quite lost his usual expression of bovine curiosity. Zala'din looked cool and thoughtful, as he always did, while Auriana's face may as well have been carved from pale white stone.

"So," Vol'jin said finally as the last embers died, folding his arms across his chest and staring down at the petite human woman.

"So," Auriana echoed, turning to face him. "You really should be getting back to Frostwall."

"Dat's true," Vol'jin nodded. "Ya goin' back ta Stormwind?"

"I need to get Anduin home," Auriana said quietly, "And... I need to report back to the King. It's still only be late afternoon in Stormwind, and Varian needs to know what happened here."

"Are ya sure?" Vol'jin asked, knowing she was returning to face certain punishment.

"He's my King, Zala'din, I won't lie to him," she said seriously. "Well... you know, any more than I already have..."

"Ya loyalty is commendable, Commander," Vol'jin told her honestly.

He had always prized loyalty highly, but with all that had happened to the Horde over the last few years, Vol'jin now felt that it was the most important part of a warrior's character. Despite the fact that Auriana was a member of the Alliance, he could still appreciate her devotion to her King, and the personal sacrifices she had made today in order to keep her kingdom safe and peaceful.

"Thank you. I hope he sees my actions in the same light. Besides," she added, "You should want me to tell him. It would be far worse on me if he were to find out from someone else later on, and it's in the Horde's best interests to have me as Commander of Lunarfall."

"How'd ya figure dat?"

"Well... you know you can trust me, and you know I'm willing to work with you," she reasoned. "If I'm stripped of command, you could end up with someone much worse."

"Much worse den you, eh?" Vol'jin smirked, exchanging a look with Zala'din.

"You know what I meant..." she said, flushing.

"I do. Tell ya somethin' - if Varian Wrynn kicks ya out of da Alliance over dis whole business, ya
come ta me," Vol'jin said, only half joking. "Da Horde could make good use of you."

Auriana grinned faintly and shook her head, though she looked somewhat flattered by the offer.

"You know what they say, Vol'jin... you can take the girl out of the Alliance, but you can't take the Alliance out of the girl... though I'll keep your offer in mind," she said, making the Warchief grin. "Speaking of the Horde, however - where are you going to say you've been?"

"Huntin' trip gone wrong," Zala'din suggested. "As far as Frostwall and da rest of da Horde are concerned, da Warchief went out in ta Gorgrond an' got himself in a spot of trouble with da local wildlife. I personally went to find him, with one of my best trackers and a couple of wyvern ta fly us all home."

"My guards were killed in da initial ambush anyway," Vol'jin added. "So dere isn't anyone left alive who can contradict da story."

"Good... that's good," Auriana said. "So we're agreed - none of this ever happened?"

"Dat's da idea," Zala'din agreed.

"I'll see to it that this business stays quiet on the Alliance side of things," she said firmly. "Though if I don't return the garrison soon, someone is likely to notice."

She turned her head to the south east, in the direction of her home, and sighed wistfully. Somewhat to Vol'jin's surprise, she then offered him her hand, and they clasped forearms in a time honoured gesture of honour amongst warriors.

"Well, Warchief, I can't say that this has been pleasant," Auriana continued, with a slight smile, "But it has at the very least been... interesting."

"I am in your debt, Auriana, in more ways than one," Vol'jin said seriously, "And I don't say such tings lightly."

"I appreciate that," she said. "Perhaps one day you'll get the chance to even the score."

She then turned to Zala'din, acknowledging her counterpart with a respectful nod.

"Commander... I think we should continue to consider the utility of joint Alliance and Horde operations in the future," she said slowly. "It will be some time before we are able to push into Tanaan Jungle, but I think there's an opportunity there... if we were willing to work together."

"I agree," Zala'din said, eyeing her thoughtfully. "Til next time, little lion... and get that leg looked at, will ya? We gonna take Tanaan, I need ya fighting fit."

"Likewise," she said. "You don't want me to have all the fun, now do you?"

Auriana took a couple of steps backwards, and raised her hands as she opened a portal back to Shadowmoon Valley. A sudden burst of wind sent the white snow swirling around her ankles as she prepared to step through the slit of light and she paused, giving Vol'jin one final, contemplative look before she smiled enigmatically and vanished like a ghost into the darkness.
Varian sat alone in his throne room, or as alone as a man could be surrounded by a dozen guards. Anduin, of course, was with Auriana in Draenor, while Genn Greymane had briefly returned to Darnassus to visit the majority of his people. It had therefore been a lonely week for the King of Stormwind, with nothing but reports from the Stormwind treasury to keep him company. It was dull but necessary work, though the necessity didn't make things any easier. Anduin was not due to return for another day or so yet, and Greymane would be gone for even longer. Worst of all, he had no idea whether Auriana would return when Anduin did, or whether it would be several more weeks before she was back in his arms.

You're the one who had to go and fall in love with a woman who spends most of her time fighting a war on another planet, he reminded himself with a rueful sigh.

There had been a time in his life when Varian had believed himself doomed to die alone, though that had all changed after he had met Auriana. Unfortunately, she was rarely around, and in his darker hours, Varian had seriously considered simply ordering her back to Stormwind. One the other hand, he knew such an action would be about as well received as if he had punched her in the face. She took her work in Draenor very seriously, and the best Varian could do was hope for a swift resolution to the war so that she might return safely home.

Varian sighed at the thought of her, idly running his fingers across the smooth stonework of his throne. The sky was rapidly darkening outside, and there was little point continuing to work when he was so distracted. He rose to his feet, ready to return to the cloying solitude of his chambers, when a messenger rushed into the throne room, clad in the distinctive blue livery of Lunarfall.

"Your Majesty!" he called. "I have an urgent message from Commander Fenwild, sir."

Varian's heart instantly clenched and he gripped the armrest of his throne, unable to stop his mind from jumping to the worst possible conclusion. As he had come to learn over the past few months, urgent messages from Lunarfall rarely contained good news, and the fact that Anduin was currently visiting Draenor did little to quell his anxiety. He all but snatched the note from the courier's hand, roughly tearing apart the seal as he frantically sought the message within.

He recognised Auriana's handwriting immediately, and quickly perused her message with growing concern. It was almost impossible to believe what he was reading - some convoluted story about Vol'jin, of all people, showing up at Lunarfall - and he read the note three times before he was finally convinced that Auriana wasn't having him on. He roared his growing anger out loud, drawing the attention of his guards and frightening the young Lunarfall messenger half out of his wits.

"You!" he said, snapping his fingers irritably at the closest guard. "Find Marshal Tremblade and Admirals Rogers and Jes-Tereth and have them report to my war room immediately."

"Er… sire..." the guard said tentatively, "It's nearly suppertime…"

"I don't care what time it is," Varian snapped. "This takes precedence. Bring me Mathias Shaw, too, while you're at it."

The guard gave no further argument and departed for the Stormwind barracks with all haste, as Varian turned back to the messenger with a furious urgency.
"Did the Commander give you any further information?" he demanded loudly, his rough voice echoing off the stone walls. "Is my son safe?"

"She… Commander Fenwild sent me on ahead, but she said to tell you that she would return to Stormwind shortly to speak to you further," the messenger stammered. "His Highness will be returning in her company, and she instructed me to tell you that he is perfectly well. Er… her exact words were, 'not a scratch on him.'"

Varian breathed a slow sigh of relief, and relaxed his iron grip on the armrests of his throne. He was not pleased to have such dramatic news thrust upon him in such a fashion, but at the very least, Anduin was safe.

"You can return to your post," he said dismissively to the Lunarfall courier, before collecting Auriana's missive and storming off towards his war room.

Varian rested his weight pensively against the map table as he waited for the others to arrive, his already hot anger kindling brighter for each minute he was forced to wait. Fortunately, Tremblade, Jes-Tereth, and Rogers arrived in a timely fashion, each impeccably dressed in their officer's uniforms. Together, these three women made up the bulk of Alliance High Command, responsible for overseeing Varian's army, navy, and airborne forces, respectively. Varian trusted each one of them implicitly, and given the delicacy of the current situation at Lunarfall, he appreciated their loyal council now more than ever. They had answered his vague summons without question or hesitation, though he did not miss the curious looks they gave one another as they came to attention.

He studied them carefully in silence, taking the measure of three of the most powerful women in the Alliance. They were all very different people, but shared the distinction of being uncommonly brave and worthy officers. Tremblade stood tall and imposing, her expression wary but composed. She spent most of her time in Stormshield, these days, but by pure coincidence had been in Stormwind for the last week, presenting an overview of the Ashran campaign. Jes-Tereth was cool and commanding, as always, her pale grey eyes narrowed with keen interest as she met Varian's penetrating gaze. For her part, Rogers shifted from foot to foot with an eager, restless energy, looking as if she were ready to spring into battle at any minute.

Varian's brooding thoughts were interrupted by the arrival of Mathias Shaw, who acknowledged his king with a brief nod of respect, before taking up a position in the corner of the room. The spymaster's gaze swept thoughtfully between the three women, though he declined to make any comment as he settled into place.

The war room was soon consumed by an oppressive silence. No one was willing to speak before Varian, and he had no intention of explaining his summons just yet. Luckily, they didn't have to wait long, and barely a quarter of an hour passed before the war room door opened once more and Anduin strode into the room. heedless of those around him, Varian stepped forwards and pulled his son into a quick, tight embrace, before standing back and turning on Auriana.

She was so very small, and yet somehow her presence was larger than that of anyone else in the room. There were patches of dried blood along her hairline, where she had unsuccessfully attempted to clean her face, and her right thigh had been haphazardly bandaged. Varian felt a brief flash of concern, though he knew now was not the time to be asking after Auriana's condition. She was so tense that he could see the outline of each and every muscle through the thin fabric of her tunic, though she somehow met his gaze with unflinching, expressionless calm.

"Explain," he said icily, without preamble, slamming her short letter on down on the map table that stood between them.
"Father…" Anduin started, stepping forwards as if to protect Auriana from his own father.

"Not you," Varian said flatly. "Her."

Auriana swallowed ever so slightly, but her voice remained steady as she began to relay the story of the last few days.

"Thank you for providing me with an audience, Your Majesty," she started. "It is with much regret that I must admit I have lied to you about a matter of great importance, and I submit myself to the discipline of Alliance High Command."

"What are you talking about, Commander?" Tremblade asked. "What happened?"

"Last night, Anduin and I were taking dinner, when I felt something disturb one of Lunarfall's outer wards. I went to investigate, and found that someone had dumped the Warchief of the Horde on my northern perimeter," she said quickly. "Vol'jin had been badly beaten, and so I took it upon myself to hide him in my quarters at Lunarfall, until such time as I could properly assess the situation."

Varian knew all this already, of course, having read Auriana's hastily scribbled missive, though it was news to everyone else in the room save for Anduin. Tremblade and Rogers both looked as outraged as Varian felt, while Jes-Tereth's expression was more thoughtful. Shaw, as always, looked entirely unperturbed, though Varian had no doubt the spymaster's mind was ticking over with a thousand different questions.

"I had Anduin heal his wounds, so as not to attract any more attention to his presence than necessary," Auriana continued, "And I questioned him when he awoke."

"Anduin was with you while you interrogated Vol'jin?" Varian asked, his voice sharp.

"Yes. He… insisted, Your Majesty," Auriana said quietly, very pointedly avoiding looking at the young prince.

"Don't worry yourself, Father," Anduin scoffed drily. "I survived."

"It was quite safe," Auriana added, a slight note of pleading in her tone. "The Warchief was injured, and I had him shackled to my bed. If he'd so much looked at Anduin the wrong way, I was prepared to kill him, though of course murdering a Horde leader in the middle of an Alliance base would not have been… ideal."

"No," Varian said darkly. "Go on."

"After questioning Vol'jin, it became apparent that someone had deliberately left him outside Lunarfall," she said. "I'm sure I don't need to explain to you the consequences of having the Warchief of the Horde slain on Alliance ground - nor the consequences of us having apparently kidnapped him."

"Be that as it may… you must be aware that the standing orders of High Command demand that any Horde leader captured by the Alliance is remanded to the custody of Stormwind, to be ransomed back to Orgrimmar," Jes-Tereth said.

"I am aware, Admiral. However, I knew that returning Vol'jin to Stormwind in an official capacity would cause significant problems for the Alliance. There's no way the Horde would interpret such an act as anything other than a treacherous declaration of war, given our current ceasefire on Draenor," Auriana argued firmly. "In the interests of maintaining the peace, I decided to return Vol'jin to his people immediately, without informing Stormwind or Alliance High Command. In
the process of the exchange, we were ambushed by those who had kidnapped him in the first place. We were greatly outnumbered, but fortunately, we prevailed. Vol'jin was returned safely to Frostwall, and anyone who might be able to implicate the Alliance in his kidnapping was killed."

Varian could that his officers were quite simply stunned by this turn of events, and he could practically see them trying to figure out which question to ask first. He too, had many questions of his own, though it was Rogers who finally spoke.

"You disobeyed a direct order," she observed, looking none too pleased.

"With respect, Admiral... no, I didn't. Under the standing orders of the Draenor campaign, we have no special provisions for the capture of any member of the Horde leadership," Auriana said. "What I did was within the bounds of my authority. Technically speaking, of course."

"That's a very fine line to walk, Commander," Varian said reproachfully, "And it doesn't explain why you failed to inform me as your King."

"You would have been honour bound to report the situation to the other leaders of the Alliance, and Vol'jin would have been sent back to Orgrimmar in chains," Auriana said evenly. "I thought it best to handle the situation quickly and quietly, without your knowledge, so that you couldn't possibly be implicated should any of this become public. I sought to prevent a conflict."

"So you lied," Varian said, angry that she had not seen fit to trust him, even as he understood why she had made the choice.

"Not so much lied as delayed the truth, but... yes," Auriana said. "I did."

Her chin was lifted proudly, neither denying the veracity of Varian's accusation nor appearing shamed by her act of disloyalty.

"I don't like being lied to, Auriana," he muttered.

"I know," she said softly.

A brief moment of tense silence passed as Varian stared her down, though she refused to cower beneath the furious power of his gaze. He was standing mere inches away from her now, and had all but forgotten that there was anyone else in the room, until someone gave a loud and not-so-subtle cough.

Suddenly aware that all eyes were on his back, Varian stepped away from Auriana and began to pace, carefully avoiding meeting her eyes.

"Putting aside the question of the legality of your actions for a moment, Commander," Jes-Tereth said, with a placating glance at Varian, "Why would anyone have bought a wounded Warchief to your garrison? It certainly seems an unusual move, even for the Horde."

"As I'm sure you're all aware, Lunarfall has had some difficulties of late with our intelligence network. I myself was held prisoner in Blackrock Foundry after one such betrayal," Auriana said slowly, subconsciously rubbing the rune scars on her arms.

"I was sorry to hear it, Commander," Tremblade said, her face creasing with genuine concern.

"Er... thank you, Grand Marshal," Auriana said, blushing slightly. "Fortunately, I lived to fight another day, though that's neither here nor there. The point is - I've come to realise that there are two groups of traitors operating from within Lunarfall, and I believe one of these groups was
responsible for capturing the Warchief and delivering him to Lunarfall."

"What?" Shaw exclaimed. "Two?"

It took Varian sometime to identify the odd expression on the spymaster's face, only to belatedly realise that Shaw was genuinely surprised. Varian wasn't sure it were even possible for the master of SI:7 to be caught off guard, though it seemed that in the midst of all this chaos, Auriana had discovered something rather important.

"As I was saying…" she continued, looking less than pleased at having been interrupted, "I initially believed that we were dealing with a single traitor, though now I am inclined to believe that there are two people - or groups - seeking to betray the Alliance. One of these entities simply wishes to see me dead and Lunarfall crumble before the Iron Horde. I believe they were responsible for my abduction by Blackhand. The second group, however, are attempting to start a war between the Alliance and the Horde on Draenor, in hopes that the conflict will spill over into Azeroth. It was they who kidnapped Vol'jin, in the hopes of blaming his disappearance or death on the Alliance."

"Who would want to start another war between the Alliance and the Horde?" Jes-Tereth said disbelievingly. "Especially while we are currently engaged against the Iron Horde in Draenor? No matter who won, the damage and casualties would be devastating."

"Ah… apparently, Vol'jin's… arrival… at my garrison was the work of a coalition of the 'True' Horde and a powerful group within the Alliance who want to wipe out our Horde, whilst turning a profit on the side," Auriana explained.

"'True' Horde?" Anduin repeated.

"Those who remained loyal to Garrosh Hellscream during the Darkspear Rebellion and the Siege of Orgrimmar," Rogers scowled. "They believed in his vision of a grand, conquering army of orcs, slaughtering their way across Azeroth until nothing else remained - much like the Iron Horde."

"It seems there are still remnants of the True Horde active within Vol'jin's ranks," Auriana said seriously, "Who are also looking for any excuse to re-start the war."

"If this group within the Alliance seek to destroy the Horde, why ally with the worst the Horde has to offer?" Rogers asked, thoughtfully scratching her chin.

"They're looking to play both sides," Auriana said, frowning. "The Alliance traitors believe they can win any resulting conflict, and they apparently intend to use these orcs to stir the Horde to a war footing. They see the True Horde as tools, nothing more."

"But why would they want to reignite the war?" Rogers pressed, echoing Jes-Tereth's earlier question. "I have more reason than most to hate the Horde, but even I understand that peace is preferable, if at all possible."

"Old hatreds run deep," Auriana said quietly, turning briefly to Varian. "Much like Garrosh Hellscream with his Horde, they seek a world united under the banner of the Alliance, even if the price of such unity is paid in blood. These are men who would have seen the Horde destroyed after Hellscream was defeated."

Varian cracked his knuckles menacingly. While he firmly believed he had done right by the Alliance that day in the depths of Orgrimmar, the decision had come back to bite him in more ways than one. Apparently, there were still those who believed he should have exterminated the Horde when he had the chance, and were willing to do whatever it took to force his hand. He looked
thoughtfully at Auriana, and was somewhat surprised to an expression of genuine distaste cross her features. She had once been one of those who had disagreed with his decision to leave Orgrimmar standing, though with time she had apparently come to see the wisdom in his choice.

"How do you know all this?" Shaw asked Auriana curiously.

"I was able to briefly interrogate one of the assassins before he… died…" Auriana said cagily. "He was…. most forthcoming."

She dug into one of her pockets, withdrawing a small, silver medallion and placing it down on the war table. It fit comfortably in the palm of her hand, and seemed to be engraved with the crowned head of a stylised, snarling fox.

"What's this?" Varian asked.

"I took it from the corpse of one of the human assassins. A token of membership to this shadow group, perhaps?" she said. "I thought Master Shaw might be able to find out more."

The spymaster picked up the silver token and turned it thoughtfully between his fingers.

"I've never seen this symbol before," he said softly, "But such a sigil suggests organisation, a society with rules and structure. I will have to investigate this matter further."

"I suggest you do, Shaw," Varian said. "Such an organisation cannot be allowed to propagate further within the Alliance. Certainly not if they intend to start a war - and for profit, no less."

"How many of these assassins were there?" Jes-Tereth said, turning the focus of the conversation back to Auriana.

"Thirty-four, in the final tally," Auriana said modestly. "Ten humans and two dozen orcs."

"It's very impressive that you were able to prevail against such overwhelming odds," Tremblade observed. "How were you able to arrange a counter ambush so successfully?"

"I have… contacts... within the Horde," Auriana said slowly. "I was able to alert the Frostwall Commander, and together we planned a counterattack."

"I think you need to explain yourself further, Commander," Rogers said coldly, clearly displeased by Auriana's admission.

The Sky Admiral had mellowed somewhat since the Siege of Orgrimmar, though she was still one of Varian's more combative officers. Tremblade, too, looked concerned by Auriana's words, and she looked down upon the younger woman with a frown.

"I would caution you against trusting the Horde," Tremblade said, her tone slightly more measured. "Despite the ceasefire, there have been several skirmishes fought in Ashran."

"I understand that there has been tension in Ashran; however, the Commander of Frostwall has shown considerable willingness to cooperate with us throughout the Draenor campaign," Auriana explained. "He came to our aid at Grommashar, and again when we laid siege to Blackrock Foundry. On a personal note, he's saved my life twice."

"You two are friendly, then?" Jes-Tereth asked, arching her eyebrows suspiciously.

A strange look crossed Auriana's face, as if she'd never before considered the question.
"I wouldn't say that," she said carefully. "However… we do have something of a working relationship. He answered my summons on very little information, and he was instrumental in enacting my plan to save Vol'jin. I would not have survived without his help - nor that of the Warchief. I'll admit, I was surprised… but both the Warchief and his Commander were admirable comrades."

"Auriana's right, Father," Anduin added quickly. "I firmly believed the Horde can be reasoned with. When I spoke to Vol'jin alone…"

"You what?" Varian roared, rounding on his son.

Some of his frustration towards Auriana had faded during the course of their discussion, only to come roaring back at the thought of his precious son alone with an enemy leader. Auriana hadn't mentioned as much in her message, and from the way she visibly flinched, Varian wondered whether she had ever intended to inform him of this particular piece of information.

"Er… never mind," Anduin said hurriedly, glancing over at Auriana and wincing apologetically.

"Auriana?" Varian demanded.

"I needed to arrange the ambush with Zal… with Frostwall's Commander, so I secured Vol'jin in my quarters while I made the journey to Frostfire Ridge. I sent Anduin back to his rooms under guard, but…" she said, trailing off and shrugging.

Varian harrumphed, knowing exactly what would have happened. Anduin would have made Auriana all sorts of pretty promises about staying in his room, and then would have sought out the Warchief the moment she had left for Frostfire.

"Father, it wasn't her fault…" the prince implored, at least having the good grace to look guilty.

"Anduin, so help me if you do not be quiet I will throw the both of you into the Stockades," Varian muttered darkly. "Do I make myself clear?"

The room fell uncomfortably quiet, while Varian seethed in silence and resumed his thunderous pacing about the room. He was angry at whoever had orchestrated this whole sorry affair, and angrier still at Auriana for involving Anduin. More than anything, he was angry at himself, for once again having allowed his fear and displeasure to deteriorate into open rage. It also didn't help that he would be forced to punish Auriana for her actions, despite the fact that she had actually saved the both the Alliance and Varian a great deal of trouble, and prevented another faction war to boot. Varian knew he couldn't avoid it without appearing to favour her; not to mention the fact that he flat out refused to be the kind of king who ignored his own laws when it was convenient.

"I've heard enough," he said heavily. "While you were technically within the bounds of your orders on Draenor, Commander, you lied to the High King of the Alliance, and potentially endangered the life of the crown prince of Stormwind. Such transgressions cannot be overlooked."

"I understand, Your Majesty," Auriana said calmly.

"Father!" Anduin argued hotly, his face darkening with anger. "You can't possibly be serious! Do you not understand what she did?"

Varian opened his mouth to retort, but it was Auriana who spoke first.

"I appreciate your support, Highness," she said kindly, giving Anduin a small smile, "But I knew
very well what the consequences of my actions would be. We've been over this - your father isn't wrong to punish me."

"Auri… it isn't fair…" Anduin pleaded.

"Life isn't always fair," Varian said roughly, though he wasn't sure if he were trying to convince Anduin or himself. "A lesson you would do well to learn, my son."

Anduin glowered, but he was smart enough to realise that there was little point arguing with Varian when he was in such an impressive mood.

"What do you recommend as punishment, my Lord?" Jes-Tereth interjected, looking across at Varian thoughtfully.

"Thirty days confinement to the barracks in Stormwind, with docked pay for the duration," he said, hating every word. "And don't think you'll just be sitting around having a holiday, Commander, I'm going to put you to work. I want you to write a full revision of the standing orders of the Draenor campaign. Apparently, they are not clear enough, and have a number of exploitable loopholes. There are also a number of new recruits in the Stormwind barracks, who I'm sure would benefit from your instruction in fighting magic users. I also don't doubt that Jaina Proudmoore would appreciate the opportunity to get her hands on you, either. Unless, of course, anyone objects?"

"No, my Lord," Auriana replied, staring straight ahead with a fixed expression.

The other officers all shook their heads, though Varian did wonder if any of them would be brave enough to speak up in any case. Even Anduin chose to remain silent, though he was quite obviously angered by Varian's decision.

"This is classified at the highest level," the King added. "The Commander's presence here will unfortunately start rumours, but that's the nature of the thing. However, given that there appears to be no evidence connecting the Warchief's disappearance to the Alliance, I think we can safely leave the events of this night in this room. No one else needs to know what happened."

"Very good, sir," Jes-Tereth said, nodding. "As far as anyone outside this room is concerned, this never happened."

"I agree, though there is also the issue over command at Lunarfall. While I won't argue with the awarded punishment, the fact remains that Commander Fenwild is needed at the front," Tremblade observed.

"If I might, Your Majesty..." Auriana said quickly, "I don't think that will be as much of a problem as you might believe. Lunarfall is not currently engaged in any major operations. Most of Draenor is within our control, or if not ours, within the control of Vol'jin's Horde. We can't make an incursion into Tanaan Jungle until our fleet is completed, which will take at least another month. My Lieutenant is perfectly capable of handling day to day operations, and Lunarfall is but a portal away should she need my help."

"It's settled, then," Varian said firmly. "Commander Fenwild will remain here in custody for the next month, while Lieutenant Thorn takes over operations at Lunarfall. Tremblade, I trust you'll assist the Lieutenant should any issues arise."

"Yes, sir," the Marshal said smartly.

"In the meantime... Shaw, I want you to look into this business with these Silver Foxes, or whoever they are. I will not abide traitors in Stormwind - nor on Draenor. Treachery has already cost the
Alliance far too much," Varian continued, his eyes briefly meeting Auriana's as he recalled how very close she had come to death in the bowels of Blackhand's Foundry.

"Of course, Your Majesty," Shaw said smoothly. "As always, SI:7 is at your command. Though if you'll permit me, I'd like to take that medallion. It might prove useful."

"Do what you must," Varian said, waving a hand dismissively.

Shaw was an excellent spymaster, though it was admittedly disconcerting that SI:7 had not discovered the plot to start a war between the Alliance and the Horde until now.

"Is there anything else, Your Majesty?" Rogers asked, interrupting Varian's troubled thoughts.

"No. You are all dismissed," Varian ordered, nodding curtly to his officers. "Except you, Auriana… I'd like a word in private. Oh, and Tremblade… send up some guards to escort the Commander back to the barracks, once I'm done with her."

"As you wish, Your Majesty," Tremblade said formally.

Auriana, for her part, said nothing, merely inclining her head in acceptance of the order and standing to attention as Tremblade, Jes-Tereth, Rogers, and Shaw filed past her on their way out. Varian pretended not to notice the subtle glances the three women gave Auriana as they left, as well as the all too knowing look on Shaw's face. They departed without comment, however, though Anduin hesitated by Auriana's side.

"Father…" Anduin said worriedly.

"That means you, too, Anduin," Varian said firmly.

He felt a twinge of guilt, knowing that hadn't treated his son very fairly today, but as usual he found his fears for Anduin's safety overrode his better judgement. Varian had been honestly trying to give the young man the freedom he so desperately craved, but he found it damnably difficult to let go of his gnawing concern over Anduin's life. Unfortunately, the prince had something of knack for getting himself into trouble, as this latest adventure proved only all too well.

Just like his father, a small voice in the back of Varian's mind said, and he frowned.

"Anduin," he repeated flatly. "Please."

"At least let me heal her," Anduin protested. "She's injured…"

"I'm fine, Anduin," Auriana said quietly, her eyes downcast. "Healing can wait."

Anduin looked back and forth between his father and the Commander, but finding no traction from either of them, he threw up his hands in frustration and stalked from the room without another word. Varian frowned, knowing he could have handled Anduin a great deal more delicately, and he silently resolved to have a word to the boy later that evening. Right now, however, his focus was entirely consumed by Auriana. She stood to perfect attention, her hands clasped behind her back, and Varian wasn't sure whether he wanted to kiss her, cuss her out, or put her over his knee like a disobedient child.

Perhaps all three… he mused darkly.

"What the hell were you thinking?" he said finally. "If you wanted to prove how clever you are, Auriana, congratulations."
"Varian…"

"You could have been killed!" he snapped. "Cavorting around Frostfire Ridge with the Horde, throwing yourself into battle without any idea of who or what you might face. And for what?"

"For what?" Auriana repeated, real emotion colouring her voice for the first time since she had stepped into the war room. "For the Alliance! Oddly enough, I thought you might appreciate what I did here today. I thought you might be grateful."

"Bah!" Varian barked. "You know I'm grateful."

"You have a funny way of showing it," she grunted, shaking her head in obvious frustration.

Despite her carefully honed mask of control, Auriana's fury was as deep and powerful as Varian's own. It meant that she understood his turbulent heart better than anyone else in the world, though it also meant that they could clash spectacularly on occasion.

"Perhaps I'd be a little more charitable if you'd managed to avoid dragging my son into this mess," Varian said curtly.

"Oh, I'm not taking responsibility for that one," Auriana said sharply. "He's quite the little extortionist, your son… and a liar to boot."

Varian grumbled darkly at her words, though he knew that what she was saying was most likely true. Anduin may have appeared outwardly innocent, but Varian was not so naïve as to have failed to notice his son's stubborn streak and talent for manipulation. Nevertheless, the prince had been Auriana's responsibility, and he would hold her to account.

"The fact remains that he was in your care," Varian countered coldly.

"I did the best I could at the time!" Auriana said, her face flushing bright red. "In case you hadn't noticed, Varian, I was in somewhat of an impossible situation. What would you have had me do?"

Varian grunted and turned away, mostly to disguise the fact that he didn't really have an answer to her question.

"The Warchief wouldn't have hurt him," she muttered.

"You can't possibly know that," Varian said flatly.

"Vol'jin's not an idiot," Auriana countered. "I doubt there is anyone in the Horde bold enough to outright murder your son, save for perhaps Sylvanas. You have something of a formidable reputation, particularly when it comes to Anduin. The Horde may not like you, but they do respect you."

"Ah, yes, the Horde," Varian said. "Tell me, Auriana, since when have you been on such good terms with the Warchief?"

"Oh, don't start with me, Varian," she huffed, her cheeks flushing brilliant red. "I wasn't running around Frostfire making friends. Would you have preferred I dumped Vol'jin's corpse at your feet in the throne room? That certainly would have caused a stir."

"Careful, Commander…" he warned her. "I'm still your king."

"I'm well aware of who you are, Varian," she said, an odd expression twisting her features, "And as
my king, I would assume that you'd be smart enough to know that everything I did, I did for the protection of Stormwind and the Alliance. Stop being obstreperous."

Varian snarled, unused to being called to task so brazenly. There were very few people in the world willing to stand up to him, and while he normally appreciated Auriana's candour, right now he half-wished that she would simply concede the argument. Both of them would quite happily quarrel until the break of dawn, not to prove a point, but rather because neither wanted to lose.

"You know, Auriana, if you were anyone else…" he said waringly.

"You'd throw me in prison? Oh, wait…" she said sarcastically, rolling her eyes.

"You knew exactly how this would work out when you made the decision to save Vol'jin," Varian retorted. "You can't claim ignorance now."

"Yes, I did," she shot back, "And I'd do it again. Some things are worth risking even your anger, Varian."

Varian growled, though knew himself well enough to realise that his anger was not really directed her, but rather was borne of his fear for her safety, and that of his son. He hadn't appreciated being lied to, either, but he understood the necessity of Auriana's actions better than she might have believed. He considered her thoughtfully, some of his anger fading as he stared deeply into her impossibly blue eyes.

Auriana frowned under the power of his gaze, and shifted her weight nervously from foot to foot.

"You know I'd never do anything to betray the Alliance, don't you?" she said softly, her tone far less heated. "It's…. it's my life. And you… you're my king. I could never…"

"I know," he said quickly.

Varian knew very well that Auriana would rather die than let him down, or compromise the Alliance in any way. Her fierce passion for Stormwind and the Alliance as a whole was one of the things Varian loved about her the most, though he desperately hoped she would never have to pay for her loyalty with her life.

He sighed.

"If I'm being honest…" he said quietly, "I'm actually somewhat impressed. You're a far defter hand at politics than I would have thought."

"What can I say?" Auriana said dully, shrugging. "I'm a constant surprise."

She leaned back against the map table with a soft groan, wincing and touching a hand to her wounded thigh. The visible evidence of her pain cut through Varian's lingering fury like a knife, and he moved swiftly to her side. She flinched almost imperceptibly at his approach, and with a start Varian realised that she had not been as indifferent to his anger as she had appeared. A hot flush of shame spread through his chest, and he hesitantly reached out to touch her arm.

"Anduin wasn't wrong," he said quietly. "You are injured."

"I'm fine, really. Nothing a trip to the healer won't fix. Besides, when am I not injured?" she said drily. "In the time you've known me, I think I've been wounded more often than not."

She smiled slightly, though Varian grimaced at her poor attempt to lighten the mood. He did not
consider her pain to be a laughing matter, and he bitterly regretted that in his anger, he had not permitted Anduin to heal her.

"What happened?" he asked worriedly.

"Oh, you know," she said nonchalantly. "Much of the same. An orc tried to strangle me… I took a stab wound to the leg… the usual bumps and bruises. I did fall off a cliff though, that was new…"

"You fell off a cliff?" Varian repeated, unable to hide his exasperation. "Auri…"

"I was doing my job!" she protested weakly, all too aware of his displeasure. "I was protecting the Warchief…"

Varian's breathed hitched in his throat, and he had to bite back a fresh surge of rage. He was not the man he had once been, and he understood that there was value in learning to work with the Horde, but he would never be willing to trade Auriana's life for that of a Warchief, politics be damned.

"Don't you do ever do that again," he snarled.

"Varian…” she said reproachfully. "Vol'jin's Horde… they aren't our enemies…”

"I know," he said seriously, cutting her off before she could lecture him further. "That's not what I meant."

"I don't understand," she said, frowning.

Varian reach forward and grabbed Auriana by the waist, gently tucking a strand of her dark hair behind her ear. She let out a soft gasp of surprise at his sudden closeness, closing her eyes as he stroked her cheek with his calloused thumb.

"If it's a choice between him and you, or you… and anyone else, really… you save yourself, do you understand?" he murmured. "I can live without Vol'jin. I can't live without you."

A very strange expression crossed Auriana's face, and she suddenly looked down at her feet as if afraid to meet Varian's eyes.

"What?" he asked, lifting her chin and staring down at her with great concern.

"I… it's nothing," she said, shaking her head.

"I'm sorry I shouted at you earlier," Varian said quietly, wondering if she weren't upset or frightened by his anger.

"You were doing your duty as king, albeit… loudly," she said. "It wasn't exactly unexpected, either. I knew what I was coming back to face."

She bit her lip, and pulled away from him ever so slightly.

"Varian… about Anduin, I…"

"I'm not pleased, Auriana, but I accept that there was very little you could have done, short of tying him up," Varian said slowly.

"I should have opened a portal and sent him home straight away, but I didn't want to tip my hand," Auriana explained. "My plan hinged on you remaining out of the loop until after all had been said and done, so that this whole mess couldn't be connected back to the Alliance."
"You did well," Varian told her, sensing that she needed his approval. "And I need to remember that Anduin is no longer a little boy. He is not, perhaps, as strong as I might like... but he is certainly capable. It also isn't the worst thing in the world for him to have spoken to the Warchief, either. Relations between the Alliance and the Horde are better than they've been in years, if not precisely good... perhaps he can build upon that."

"He and Vol'jin did appear to be getting along reasonably well," Auriana admitted.

"Well, Anduin has something of a knack for making friends just about everywhere he goes," Varian said drily.

"I wonder where he got that from," Auriana mused, her lips quirking upwards in a tentative smile. "Certainly not from you…"

"Are you trying to make me angry again?" Varian asked, though he was now far beyond his previous rage.

Auriana looked somehow proud, beautiful, and vulnerable all at once, and Varian found that his earlier desire to kiss her had returned with a vengeance. He grasped her slender hips as he pushed her roughly back against the war table, and pressed the length of his body against her own. His hands slid into her hair and he pulled her head back, exposing both her ivory throat and her soft, red lips. She gasped as he pulled her close and kissed her fiercely, his earlier anger and frustration serving only to fuel his passion as he heatedly embraced the woman he loved.

"Auri..." he murmured. "How is it that you are at once the most desirable and the most vexatious woman I've ever known?"

"I practice," she said breathlessly.

Varian pressed his lips against the soft skin of her throat and tangled his hands wantonly in her hair. Auriana sighed throatily, her own small hands gripping the powerful muscles of his arms as she leaned into his heated touch.

"What are you going to do?" she panted, her cheeks flushed red with desire. "Throw me down on the war table and have your way with me?"

Her tone was ever so slightly sarcastic, though her doubt was belied by the way she pushed her hips eagerly forwards against Varian's own, and the sudden quickening of her pulse beneath his fingers.

"Don't tempt me," he rumbled, lowering his head to kiss her once more.

There came a sudden knock on the door, and Varian openly snarled in agitation. Time spent alone with Auriana was rare and precious, and yet it seemed he was doomed to a life of interruption.

"What?" he bellowed.

"Er... sorry to interrupt, Your Majesty," a guard called, his voice muffled by the heavy wooden door, "But I was sent to escort Commander Fenwild to the Stormwind barracks, on Marshal Tremblade's orders."

"Just a minute," Varian hollered back, his eyes never leaving Auriana's face.

She stared up at him uncertainly, her brilliant blue eyes wide with both surprise and desire. Her lips were red and swollen from the passion of his kiss, and despite everything, Varian wanted nothing
more than to tear the clothes from her body and claim her right then and there.

"Come to me tonight," he ordered hotly, running his hands down the slender curves of her waist and making her shiver invitingly.

"Ah… how?" she asked, raising an eyebrow. "Someone just ordered that I be confined to quarters."

"You're a mage," Varian growled. "Figure it out..."
Varian

After the tense meeting in the war room, Varian took dinner alone. He needed the time to collect his thoughts, though he was very much looking forwards to seeing Auriana again later that evening. Of course, he didn't expect her to arrive until around midnight, after the barracks guards believed her to be asleep, and in the meantime he intended to deal with the more pressing matter of his son.

Varian was somewhat embarrassed to admit it, but there had been times when he had wondered how it was possible that he and Anduin were actually related. He would never accuse his beloved Tiffin of infidelity, of course, but Varian had often questioned how Anduin's personality had turned out so different from his own. Even their physical resemblance had been scant for most of Anduin's life, though as the prince matured into adulthood he had taken on more of his father's looks. On days like these, however, Varian saw more of himself in Anduin than he might have liked. It seemed that the son had inherited his father's legendary stubbornness, as well as Varian's fierce loyalty to those he cared about. Neither trait in itself was necessarily bad, though as Varian knew all too well, both had the potential to cause real problems when not tempered by rational thought.

"Anduin?" he called, wrapping softly on his son's chamber door. "It's me."

"Come in," the prince called, though Varian detected a distinct note of reluctance in his tone.

The King of Stormwind sighed, and hesitated before entering his son's room. He had tried to be the best father that he could to the motherless Anduin, though he knew he often fell far too short. Things had been better in recent years, but with every argument, Varian always feared that their relationship would return to what it had been before Pandaria.

Anduin was sitting cross legged on his bed, idly thumbing through one of his dense academic tomes. The book was nearly as thick as Varian's hand was wide, and he wondered how Anduin could possibly endure reading such a thing. At the prince's age, Varian would have rather been out riding, or training, or hunting… or literally just about anything that would have kept him away from study. Of course, at around Anduin's age, Varian had already been a king, and had been forced to give up most of his own pleasures for the sake of his crown. Varian thanked the Light every day that he had lived long enough to see Anduin through childhood, which was something of a rarity for a Wrynn father, and he hoped it would be many more years before Anduin would have to bear the heavy weight of kingship.

"Can we talk?" Varian asked.

He declined to sit, instead resting back against Anduin's desk and stretching his long legs out as far as they would go. Anduin closed his book and looked up with wary eyes, as if afraid Varian might start shouting at any moment.

"I suppose it depends what you'd like to talk about," the prince said warily.

"How was your trip to Lunarfall?" Varian said tentatively. "Before all this business with the Horde, I mean."

"It was… amazing," Anduin admitted, unable to hide his genuine enthusiasm. "Karabor… Karabor felt like home. I've never felt the Light so strongly, it was… it was…"

He shrugged and gave up, seemingly unable to find the words.
"And Auriana?" Varian pressed. "Did she treat you well?"

"Of course she did," Anduin said, rolling his eyes. "I'm the Crown Prince of Stormwind, everyone treats me well."

"I meant more on a personal level," Varian said drily.

"She's good company," Anduin said. "We got on famously, actually. I forget sometimes that she's actually closer in age to me than you…"

"Don't remind me," Varian growled, though he was pleased that Anduin and Auriana had been able to find some common ground.

Anduin's mouth quirked, as if he were trying not to smile, though his face quickly regained its serious expression.

"It's a pity we had to return so soon," he said darkly. "I wasn't exactly expecting to walk into one of your tempers upon my return."

"I hope you understand the necessities of my decisions tonight," Varian said carefully, folding his arms across his chest. "Though I do apologise. I handled you less delicately than I could have… which I'm sure is of no surprise to anyone."

"I just… I hate it when you treat me like I'm a child," Anduin said bitterly.

"I know," Varian replied calmly. "However, if I'm being perfectly honest… tonight you gave me little choice."

Anduin looked up in surprise, and his mouth fell slightly open. His bright blue eyes, so reminiscent of his mother's, were huge, and his blonde brows were drawn together in a rare scowl. Varian very rarely called his son to task, but Anduin was coming to an age where he would start having to make such decisions himself, and Varian wanted to ensure that he would be amply prepared when the time came.

"What?"

"Think about what you were asking me to do, Anduin, you're a smart lad. You were asking me to show special favour to a person who had disobeyed the direct order of her king, and then lied about it," Varian explained. "For no other reason than that you like her, and that you care about her."

"I thought you were supposed to care about her…" Anduin argued hotly.

Varian sighed.

"In that room, I'm her king, and nothing else," he said quietly. "I have to be, but that doesn't mean… do you honestly believe I am indifferent to her?"

"No," Anduin conceded sullenly. "I know you care, I just…"

"A king must be objective. No one can be above reproach, if one is to be a fair and lawful ruler," Varian continued firmly.

"Not even the king himself?" Anduin said slyly.

"Oh, very funny. I will admit, I was angrier than I should have been," Varian agreed. "A common failing of mine, as you continue to remind me."
Anduin smiled at that, and some of the tension between father and son lessened.

"I understand, Father, really I do…" he admitted. "I just…. I still don't think it's fair.

"I don't disagree with you, Anduin…. but if I don't follow my own laws, who will? What kind of king would I be?" Varian asked seriously. "Auriana did the wrong thing for the right reasons, but she still did the wrong thing. I'm certainly not happy about it, but… my hands are tied."

He briefly closed his eyes, shaking a hand through his long hair.

"A king's duty is not always easy, Anduin," he added seriously. "The worst part of it all is that this sort of thing isn't uncommon. It's often the best soldiers, the most loyal soldiers… who pay the greatest price for our victories. People think… people think being a king is all feasts and riches… but mostly it's just asking good people to sacrifice everything they have in the hope that such a sacrifice might mean something."

To Varian's immense surprise, Anduin seemed not to have appreciated the seriousness of the statement, instead chuckling to himself and grinning.

"Why are you smiling?" Varian asked.

"Vol'jin said almost exactly the same thing," Anduin observed. "You two are more alike than you realise."

"Hmph," Varian grumbled, not necessarily appreciating the comparison. "That's another thing - I can't believe she left you alone with the Warchief."

"That really wasn't her fault. You should apologise to her for… well, for me. I… well, I sort of bullied her, and then I lied to her," Anduin confessed. "She really was quite protective of me… if anything, she reminded me a lot of you."

"You aren't going to let this rest until I make peace with her, are you?"

"Of course not," Anduin said blithely. "You're a bloody nightmare when you and she are on the outs. And I won't let her take responsibility for something she didn't do. She has a tendency to be far too self-sacrificing as it is."

"Language…" Varian admonished him gently, though he was not at all displeased by Anduin's willingness to admit to his own mistakes.

"I just… I mean, how many times will I ever actually get the chance to sit down with a Warchief of the Horde?" Anduin said thoughtfully. "I'm going to be the King of Stormwind someday… is it so wrong that I try to learn as much about the Horde as I can? Is it wrong that I tried to forge an understanding?"

"No, there is wisdom in such a pursuit… though you should exercise caution," Varian said seriously. "Vol'jin… Vol'jin may have honour, but you cannot forget that he is the leader of a faction with whom we have been at war for decades."

"Well, perhaps we wouldn't have been at war for decades if we actually took the time to talk to them," his son retorted.

Anduin had a point, Varian acknowledged grudgingly, though he was not in the mood to be drawn into a lengthy discussion on the merits of pursuing the path of peace with the Horde.
"I didn't come here to debate politics, Anduin," he said stiffly. "I merely wished to apologise for my earlier brusqueness. I'll... ah... I'll leave you in peace now."

Varian turned to go, only to pause at the sound of Anduin's quiet voice.

"Father... are we... alright?" he said worriedly. "I don't like it when we argue."

"Anduin... you're my son," Varian said seriously. "There is no power in this universe strong enough to break our bond."

His keen gaze met Anduin's own, and for a long moment father and son simply stared as they each took each other's measure.

"Not even the unstoppable force of my own pigheadedness," Varian added ruefully, with a tentative smile.

"I don't know..." Anduin said slowly, his eyes brightening. "Your pigheadedness is a force to be reckoned with..."

Anduin had many wonderfully qualities, but more than anything Varian appreciated the fact that he was never one to hold a grudge. He accepted Varian's attempt at reconciliation with a good natured grin, his earlier consternation all but forgotten. Growling playfully, Varian reached out a long arm and gently tousled the back of Anduin's hair. The prince had generally grown out of such physical affection in recent years, though tonight he accepted Varian's display with surprising warmth.

"Just promise me you'll talk to Auriana," Anduin said, quickly smoothing down his ruffled hair. "She's not as invincible as she likes to believe."

"I know. Why do you think I worry about her so much? Speaking of which..." Varian said, looking towards the door.

"Go," Anduin said softly, following his father's line of sight. "I daresay you've missed her."

"As usual, you are wise beyond your years, my son," Varian said, grinning. "Goodnight."

Varian decided to wait for Auriana on his private balcony, leaning back against the wall and looking out over his beloved city. There were few sights on Azeroth that could rival Stormwind at night, from the shining beauty of the Cathedral to the bright, warm lights of the many taverns in Old Town. Of course, he was somewhat biased, given that he was Stormwind's king, though he felt that any reasonable man could objectively appreciate the city's majesty.

He didn't know how long he waited for Auriana, staring out into the darkness, but at long last he felt a now familiar shiver of magic run up his arms, and he knew there must be a portal open somewhere nearby.

"Varian?" Auriana called quietly, clearly confused by the fact that he was not to be found in his main chamber.

"Out here," he replied, turning as she stepped through the open doorway on featherlight toes.

Auriana had quite obviously bathed, and was now clean and free of blood. Her hair was still wet, running down her back in sleek, dark waves, and Varian could smell the faint hint of wildflowers upon her skin. He was also pleased to see that she had apparently been offered healing for her wounds. The gash on her head had already been reduced to a healthy pink scar, and the dirty cloth
with which she had bandaged her damaged thigh had apparently been replaced. She wore a simple cotton nightdress, and Varian's eyes widened as he realised that her breasts hung freely beneath the thin material. She looked soft and pure and sensual, though Varian was determined to speak to her seriously before turning his mind to other things.

"What are you doing?" she asked curiously, rubbing her arms lightly against the cool air.

"I come out here to think, sometimes," Varian confessed. "Seeing my city like this... it reminds me of my duty as king. Of what I must protect."

"Am I interrupting?"

"No, of course not," he assured her, inviting her forwards with a wave of his hand.

Auriana moved to the end of the balcony and gasped, her eyes widening as she took in the full glory of Stormwind.

"Oh, wow," she breathed, leaning eagerly up against the thick stone parapet. "I've never really seen the city from up this high before."

Varian watched in contented silence as Auriana stared in awe at the city below, enjoying the pleasing curve of her backside as she leant forwards, and the eager pink flush that arose in her cheeks. She looked quite simply beautiful in the darkness, the radiant silver light of the moon catching in her hair every time she turned her head to marvel at a new sight.

To his surprise, she suddenly kicked off her soft slippers, pushed up on her hands, and pulled herself up so that she was sitting on the parapet. She swung her legs out into open space, wriggling her toes gleefully in the air like a delighted child.

"Careful," Varian said warningly, placing a gentle hand on the small of her back.

"You worry too much," she laughed lightly. "We used to do this all the time in Dalaran, when I was a young girl."

Varian raised his eyebrows, wondering at the fact that she had brought up her past unprompted. Auriana was notoriously cagey about her life before the destruction of Theramore, and she very rarely relayed any fond memories of her childhood.

"We had this sort of... competition, I suppose you'd call it... to see who could sneak past the masters and climb up to the highest towers in Dalaran," she explained. "We'd sit up there for hours, counting the stars and looking down at the city below."

Varian smiled to himself as he pictured an adventurous young Auriana. She was the type of person who seemed to have always been an adult, and the thought of her as a wide eyed little apprentice filled him with a sudden rush of joy.

"When we felt really adventurous," she added, "We used to play a game of chicken, and see who was willing to jump."

"You did what?"

"We were all mages, Varian, no harm done," Auriana said drily. "Well, except for the time Calla broke her arm, but still..."

"How have you survived this long into adulthood?" he asked her, shaking his head. "I'm genuinely
"Curious."

"Dumb luck?" she suggested, looking over at him with a wry grin.

"Probably," Varian snorted, "Though I hope there's a measure of skin in there somewhere as well."

"Perhaps some skill," she conceded, shaking her head.

"It must have taken some skill to defeat that ambush," Varian suggested tentatively.

As always, Auriana was difficult to read. She'd responded to his summons and seemed in a good enough mood, but given her remarkable ability to hide her emotions, that wasn't necessarily saying very much. He had no idea how she would respond to his attempt to discuss the most recent events on Draenor, but he was determined to talk to her sooner rather than later.

"Yes, well, I'd prefer not to fight thirty four against four, if I can avoid it," she agreed ruefully. "They were good, too, though fortunately… we were better."

"Four?" Varian asked. "I thought it was just you, the Warchief, and his Commander?"

"Did I not mention? We were aided by a young tauren scout of the Warchief's," she explained. "The poor thing took an axe in the back, but it seemed as if he would be alright."

"It sounds like a bloody fight," Varian observed, trying to keep his voice calm and neutral.

"We were all a little worse for wear," Auriana admitted. "The Warchief was in rough shape when I left, though to be fair he'd been badly beaten even before the fight began. Arith Stormchaser was hit by an axe, and… well, you know what happened to me."

She frowned, her nose crinkling, and running her hands through her dark hair with a rueful smile.

"Except Zala'din…" she added thoughtfully. "He walked away without a scratch on him."

"What did you think of Vol'jin?" Varian asked curiously, genuinely interested in her opinion of his opposite number. "Had you met him before?"

"I saw him at the Siege of Orgrimmar, but no… we'd never met in person. He's… cleverer than I would have thought. I think there's a tendency within the Alliance to see the Horde as mindless beasts… certainly something I've been guilty of myself, on occasion..." she said slowly.

Varian nodded seriously. He, too, had struggled to view the Horde as actual sentient creatures rather than a mindless mob of barbarians, though he had taken a more nuanced view of the faction in recent years.

"Vol'jin… on the other hand… I don't know," she continued. "If… if I'm being honest, I think in another life we might have been friends, were he not the Warchief of the Horde, and were I not…"

"The lover of the High King of the Alliance?" Varian interjected slyly.

"That's not all I am…" she replied, trying not to smile.

"Oh, believe me, I know…" Varian said.

He tentatively stepped forwards to slip his hands around her waist, and softly kissed the bare skin of her shoulder. Somewhat to his surprise, she didn't resist, leaning back slightly so that her head rested on the strong muscles of his chest.
"What did he think of you?"

"Vol'jin? I'm not sure if he knew what to make of me," she said thoughtfully. "We... I think we parted on reasonable terms, at least. Zala'din apparently owes me a drink."

"Look at you," Varian rumbled, "Charming all the trolls."

"Ha!" she barked, tossing up her feet with mirth. "We both know I'm about as charming as a rock."

"You've charmed me," Varian pointed out, tightening his grip on her waist.

"That's different," Auriana said, shaking her head.

"How so?"

"Well, I didn't let Vol'jin bed me, for a start..." she said slyly.

Even though Varian knew she was speaking in jest, the part of him that was still Lo'Gosh rankled at the thought of anyone else even so much as touching her.

"That's not funny," he said flatly, making her laugh.

"Never fear, my wolf king," she said sweetly, "I have eyes only for you. He did say he owed me a favour, however."

"I should bloody well hope so, considering you jumped off a cliff for him," Varian said drily, rolling his eyes.

"Would you let that go?" Auriana admonished him, her voice suddenly sharp. "I would have done the same for anyone under my protection."


"Are we really going to have this argument again?" she said. "I feel like you've shouted at me enough for one day."

Her tone was light, with only a hint of reproach, but Varian wondered if she weren't concealing a far greater frustration. She hadn't pulled away from him, at least, sighing as she rested her head back against the crook of his shoulder.

"I apologise for earlier," Varian said gruffly. "I know my mouth sometimes gets ahead of my mind. I have no wish for you to feel frightened, or intimidated."

"You had every right to be angry with me, Varian," she said quietly. "I would have been, had our positions been reversed."

She twisted slightly in his arms, lifting her chin to fix him with a penetrating stare.

"Why are we having this conversation?" she asked. "I've already told you... I understand. I'm not angry."

"I need to make sure that there is not a shadow of doubt in your mind," Varian said roughly. "You're one of the finest officers I've ever had serve beneath my command. And I'm not just saying that because..."
"Because I'm an officer who has quite literally been beneath you?" she said archly.

"Very funny," he growled.

"You disagree?"

"Not at all," Varian said. "You perform admirably in all instances where you must serve your King."

Ever so carefully, so as not to tip her over the balcony, Varian spun Auriana around to face him and rested his hands on her thighs. She appeared to be genuinely unconcerned with an apology, though after talking to Anduin, Varian still wasn't entirely convinced. Auriana took her position of commander as Lunarfall very seriously, and it was something of an indignity for such a visible and high ranking officer to have been confined to the Stormwind like a disobedient sergeant.

"All joking aside, however… I do apologise for… for today," he added. "Not for my decision, mind, but… well, you know I have a temper."

Auriana gave him a very strange look, and leant forwards so that there were only scant inches between them.

"Varian… again… why are you apologising?" she asked.

"For showing you my anger," he said quietly.

"Did you beat me? Did you belittle me, or harm me in any way?" she demanded.

"No, but…"

"I'm not going to say this a fourth time..." she said irritability. "Varian, I understand. In here, you might be the man I love, but down there, you're the High King. That was not the first time I've been scolded by a superior… and let's face it, it probably won't be the last. I'm strong. I can take it. Not to mention if we're going to keep our relationship secret, you can't afford to treat me differently to anyone else."

Varian frowned, uncertain what to make of Auriana's seemingly unconditional acceptance. She was staring at him thoughtfully, her brilliant blue eyes as sharp and keen as if she could read his mind.

"Varian…" she said flatly. "I'm not afraid of you."

"What?"

"You do this all the time. You treat me as if I'm made of glass," she explained, gently touching his arm. "As if you say the wrong word, or do the wrong thing… or if you let me see all of you, I'll fall to pieces or run away."

"Can you blame me? You've been through more in the last six months than anyone should have to suffer in a lifetime," Varian retorted hotly.

Her expression softened, and she reached up to tuck a strand of Varian's dark hair behind his ear.

"And... it's more than that," he continued roughly, "I'm... I'm far from a perfect man, Auri. I can be angry, and petty, and cruel. I try to be better than I am… and I think… I hope I've done better these last few years, but… still. I don't want you to see the worst of me... my anger, my arrogance, my shame…"
Auriana gently took his hands in hers, her slender fingers impossibly smooth and cool against Varian's own rough, weathered skin.

"Varian… I love you, do you understand?" she said emphatically. "All of you. The good and the bad. Varian and Lo'Gosh. You never have to hide from me. You never have to be anything more or less than you are, I…"

He cut her off with a powerful kiss, grateful beyond measure for her unflinching, unquestioning love. Auriana surrendered willingly to his embrace, pressing herself against his chest with an all-consuming urgency, her arms snaking around his neck and tangling in his hair. She tasted unbelievably sweet, and Varian felt his blood run suddenly hot with desire.

"Stop holding yourself back. You want me?" she said roughly. "Then take me…"

Something inside Varian snapped at her heated request, and with a start he realised that he had been craving such permission for a long time. Ever since Auriana had given herself to him that first breathless, extraordinary night, a dark, secret part of him had lived with the fear that someday she would see the whole truth of him, and would turn away in disgust. A long time ago, Varian had warned her that he was not a gentle man, and today was just another day when he had proven the truth of those words. And yet, miraculously, she was somehow still here; her mouth hot and eager, her flesh warm and supple beneath his hands.

Needing no further encouragement than her kiss, Varian slid his hands beneath the powerful muscles of her buttocks and lifted her easily, raising her clear above the parapet as he crushed her against his body. Auriana wrapped her legs around him for balance, and returned his kiss with such passion that it took his breath away. He stumbled backwards into his room and he pinned her against the wall with a snarl, heedless of anything but his desire to devour her whole.

Using the wall as a brace, Varian freed his hands and simply tore Auriana's nightgown away, leaving it in tatters on the floor. As he had guessed, she wore nothing but soft white undergarments and a fresh bandage over her right thigh, leaving the creamy expanse of her breasts entirely bare before his heated gaze. With a lustful growl, he buried his face in her chest, greedily snapping at her silvery skin. She cried out as his teeth found flesh, arching her back and digging her nails into his shoulders with fevered abandon.

Varian's clever fingers soon found the soft white cloth that separated him from the rest of her nakedness, and he tore that away too, with about as much consideration as he had given her nightgown. The air was thick with the intoxicating scent of her desire, and he refused to be kept from her any longer than absolutely necessary. Time seemed to have stopped altogether, and for Varian all there was in the entire world was the beautiful, writhing woman in his arms. Everything about her drove him wild, from the sight of her wanton, heaving breasts to the feel of her powerful thighs locked about his waist.

At some point, though he couldn't have said when, Varian shed his own clothes and pressed the length of his hard, naked body against her own. Normally, he would have taken his time to tease and romance her, but tonight was about pure need. Snarling wordlessly, he threw her face down on the bed, lifting her hips with one hand while he pushed her knees apart with his leg. He had never taken her this way before, as a wolf might take his mate, and he could barely keep his blind hunger in check. Of course, it also didn't help that Auriana continually called his name, her voice heady and thick with the strength of her lust.

Pausing only for the briefest second to admire the sinuous curve of her buttocks, Varian grasped her hips firmly and buried himself deep inside of her. Auriana gasped, throwing back her head and snarling her hands in his sheets as she took the length of him. She shivered wildly as he began to
thrust, the frantic clenching of her body doing all kinds of things to what little remained of Varian's self-control. She was wet and eager, and he set upon her like a wild animal; his large, calloused hands holding her hips firmly in place as took his pleasure. The skin of Auriana's buttocks felt like silk against the frantic push of his hips, and every scream and sigh that he tore from her lips sent him spiralling further down into the depths of his own primal need.

It may have been Varian who had started the passionate encounter, but it was Lo'Gosh who finished. He reached blindly for Auriana's neck, his fingers tightening around her precious throat as he pushed her down into the bed. Something about the sensation of her thundering pulse beneath his fingers made him feel unbelievably powerful, and his wild heart burned with a fierce pride in the claiming of such an exquisite woman. He crouched over her with a predatory snarl, his teeth finding the unprotected skin of her shoulder as he pushed himself over the edge. In that split second, Varian entirely disappeared as the wolf within took complete control, and he threw back his head with a savage howl. One final thrust bought him to his knees, and Lo'Gosh clutched desperately for his beautiful mate as the world at last twisted and shattered all around him.

They lay together in silence afterwards, Varian curled up protectively around Auriana's back. She seemed entirely lost for words, which he hoped wasn't a bad sign. He'd rather unleashed on her, and given the significant difference in their relative sizes, he had to wonder whether he'd inadvertently harmed her.

"Auri?" he murmured, placing soft kisses down the line of her arm. "Are you… are you alright? I know that wasn't… uh… gentle."

Auriana rolled over to face him, her hair tumbling softly over her face. Her eyes were still dark with desire and her cheeks still flushed, and Varian could distinctly detect his own potent scent all over her skin. Somewhat abashedly, he also noted what looked to be a series of bite marks across her neck and shoulders, though she didn't seem to be at all perturbed.

"I'm perfectly fine, Varian, you needn't fret. I… oh, damn…" she breathed, touching a hand to her right thigh.

Varian followed her line of sight, and was horrified to see that the roughness of their Lovemaking had ruptured her wound, and that her bandages were rapidly soaking through with blood.

"Auri," he mumbled, hating himself, "I'm… oh, Light, I'm so sorry…"

"I'm not," she said brightly, with a playful grin.

Varian didn't smile, transfixed by the sight of her wound.

"Varian, you're acting like losing some blood will kill me…" she said, rolling her eyes as she swung her legs out of the bed and went looking for something to staunch the bleeding.

"Funnily enough, that's exactly how blood works," he said drily, pulling himself into a sitting position. "Are you… is there anything I can do to help? I don't have any bandages in here, but I could get some. Or I could summon Anduin?"

"Oh, Light, the last thing Anduin needs to see is us after…" she trailed off vaguely, waving her hands. "Don't worry, I'll use this."

She bent over, carefully avoiding putting too much weight on her injured leg, and picked up the tattered remains of the nightgown that Varian had ripped so unceremoniously from her body.
"It's not like I'll have much use for it anymore," she said, shrugging ruefully as she quickly cannibalised her ruined nightgown into something resembling a bandage. "Ah… I might have to borrow a tunic or something before I leave, I can't really go teleporting naked all over the keep…"

"Er… sorry about that, too," Varian said, frowning in chagrin.

"Are you really?" Auriana asked, putting a hand on her hip and cocking her head to the side.

"Not entirely," Varian admitted. "I've… I've wanted to do that for some time."

Auriana beamed back at him, her eyes lighting up as she gave him a wide and beautiful smile. He couldn't help but smile in return, unable to resist her soft, willing acceptance. In truth, he was somewhat surprised that she had taken to his savage lust with such eagerness, though he had no intention of arguing the point with her.

"See?" she said, holding out her hands and twisting so that he could see. "It's hardly bleeding at all anymore… and besides, if the price of what we just did is a bloodied leg, I'd pay it every time."

"You… you enjoyed yourself, then?" Varian asked quietly.

"Very much so," she confirmed, blushing ever so slightly. "I thought you'd been holding out on me a little, but I had no idea… let's just say I now have a far greater appreciation of why they call you Lo'Gosh…"

"I could show you him more often, if you like," Varian said slowly.

"Well," she said, grinning slyly, "As luck would have it, the King of Stormwind has seen fit to confine me to the city for the next month…"

She crawled back into bed, stretching languorously out beside Varian and fixing him with the kind of stare that threatened to set his blood on fire. He cradled her close with a contented sigh, wondering how he had ever been so lucky as to have claimed her for his own.

"I'll be here every night," she added softly. "So you might just get your chance…"
Jaina

Jaina Proudmoore strode determinedly down the corridors of Stormwind Keep, the sharp clack of her boots echoing off the walls as she made her way towards the city barracks. Although Jaina had spent most of her time in Dalaran since the destruction of her beloved city of Theramore, she had recently been summoned to Stormwind at the behest of its King. She had received a missive from Varian a few days ago, indicating that Auriana was confined to Stormwind for some unknown reason, and inviting Jaina to continue her work with the talented young mage.

Auriana had attracted Jaina's special attention after her actions in the ogre city of Highmaul, where she had unleashed her innate berserker rage in order to defeat the ogre Imperator Mar'gok. Jaina had become even more interested in the younger mage after she had escaped from Blackrock Foundry, and she was determined to teach Auriana how to use her raw power in the safest and most effective way possible. Unfortunately, Jaina's plans been stymied by the other woman's heavy workload as Commander of Lunarfall, and they had trained together only infrequently thus far. Jaina had no idea why Auriana was currently restricted to Stormwind, and Varian had becoming increasingly belligerent when she had pressed him for an answer. Arguing with the King of Stormwind was like arguing with a particularly stubborn brick wall, and eventually Jaina had given up trying to prise free an explanation. Nevertheless, Auriana's mysterious incarceration had presented Jaina with an opportunity, and it was not an opportunity she intended to waste.

Auriana was dressed and waiting for Jaina in her quarters, sitting quietly on her bed as Jaina passed the guards and entered the room. Jaina took a moment to contemplate her somewhat reluctant protégé, and was struck by their physical differences. Where she was tall, blonde, and willowy, Auriana was dark, pale, and compact, with eyes like dark ice. What they shared, however, was an innate gift for magic, and an uncommon talent for the art. Jaina suspected that Auriana had the potential to become one of the greatest mages Azeroth had ever seen, if only she could learn to control her rage. They had made important strides in the few sessions they'd had so far, but it would take a long time and some hard work before Auriana had full control of her abilities.

"Good morning," Jaina said warmly.

"Good morning, Archmage," Auriana replied, offering Jaina a tentative smile.

"Are you ready to get to work?"

"As ready as I'll ever be," Auriana said, nodding as she rose smoothly to her feet. "Shall we?"

As she did, the edge of her dark robes caught against some sort of linen clothing, and it tumbled to the floor in a tangled pile. Jaina recognised the item immediately as a large man's tunic, and she arched her pale eyebrows in genuine amusement.

"Is that Varian's?" she asked curiously, well aware of the otherwise covert relationship between the young Commander and the High King.

"No, I… it's…" Auriana stammered, flushing brilliant red as she hastily stuffed the cloth tunic beneath her pillow. "Oh, fine. Yes, it's his. He leant it to me after… well, never you mind what happened."

"And you keep it under your bed?" Jaina asked lightly.

"I… it smells like him," Auriana confessed sheepishly. "Er… don't tell anyone I said that, will you?"
Especially not him."

She suddenly looked very young and charmingly innocent, and Jaina was forced to smother a smile behind her hand.

"My lips are sealed," Jaina promised, "Though you should probably do a better job of hiding the thing…"

"I thought we were supposed to be training?" Auriana snapped, hiding her awkwardness behind a burst of irritation.

"Quite right," Jaina said quickly, not wanting to cause the younger woman any more embarrassment. "Lead on."

Together, they strode in silence through the stone corridors towards Stormwind's arena. Much to Jaina's amusement, Auriana's cheeks were still flushed, and she stared studiously down at her feet as they walked. Luckily, for Auriana's sake, the journey to the arena was a short one, and in no time at all the two mages had reached their destination.

To Jaina's surprise, Varian was already sitting in the stands as they arrived. He waved in acknowledgement as she and Auriana entered the dusty ring, though made no attempt to move from his perch. Jaina had not expected the King to attend, even though she was here at his invitation, but it appeared that he was as eager as Jaina to see Auriana put through her paces.

He's changed, Jaina thought, staring up at him thoughtfully.

It was subtle, and not something most people would have immediately noticed, if at all. Varian wasn't the type of person one would ever describe as cheerful, but there was a lightness about him that Jaina hadn't seen in years - if ever. She looked over at Auriana, and considered the younger mage carefully. Admittedly, she had initially assumed that Auriana's relationship with the King had been a purely physical affair, though after the Blackrock Foundry incident, she had realised there was something far more serious between the King of Stormwind and the Commander of Lunarfall. Jaina had seen firsthand the devastating depression Varian had suffered at the loss of his wife, and she hadn't thought him capable of opening his heart to another woman, even after nearly two decades of loneliness. From the way he looked down at Auriana, however… Jaina knew the look of a man in love all too well. Arthas had looked at her that way, a very long time ago, and more recently she had been blessed to find a greater love in Kalecgos.

Now was not the time to get lost in her own thoughts, however, and Jaina shook herself as she returned her attention the task at hand. Auriana stood about ten feet away, her hands on her hips as she patiently awaited Jaina's instruction. Jaina withdrew a number of small, runed devices from her robes, and placed them at equidistant points around the younger mage, who raised her eyebrows curiously.

"What are those?" she asked.

"Given the inherent… unpredictability… of your powers, I thought it a good idea to bring the protection of a dampening field," Jaina explained. "If anything goes wrong, I can simply bring the field up, and you'll be cut off from your magic."

"I'll admit… the thought of being cut off from my power makes me nervous," Auriana said, subconsciously rubbing her arms, "But that's probably a good idea."

"I'll only use it if absolutely necessary," Jaina assured her. "Shall we begin?"
Jaina started off by engaging the tiny mage in a casual duel, neither woman pushing too hard as they took the opportunity to warm up their powers. As they lobbed spells back and forth, Jaina was pleased to note that Auriana had significantly refined her casting since last they had worked together, though the real test would come when Jaina pushed Auriana towards the limits of her abilities.

Jaina's main purpose with these sessions was to teach Auriana to harness her rage, to cast with the full power of both her magic and her fury. She had never in her life met a berserk with magical abilities, and she was largely fumbling in the dark when it came to helping Auriana. Jaina was never one to back down from an intellectual challenge, however, and she soon had Auriana sweating with effort beneath the morning sun. Try as Jaina might, however, she could neither convince nor provoke Auriana into a display of fury. Unfortunately, the only way to teach Auriana how to control her abilities was to have her fall into an actual berserker rage, though the little mage seemed unwilling to cooperate with Jaina's plan.

"I'm sorry, Archmage," Auriana said finally, throwing up her hands in frustration after one of Jaina's failed attempts to bait her fury. "This isn't as easy as flicking a switch. I've spent years of my life trying to repress my rage, years trying not use it as a crutch. I can't undo that all that in a single day."

"But you can feel it, yes?" Jaina pressed.

"Of course I can," Auriana said darkly. "It's always there, like… like a pit of magma burning just below my heart… but right now, I'm not angry, or threatened. We're in Stormwind, for crying out loud! I can feel my anger, but I can't touch it… and… if I'm being perfectly honest, I don't want to."

"So you've only been able to summon your rage in the heat of battle?" Jaina mused, tapping a finger to her chin thoughtfully.

"Yes. It's harder to keep control when I'm fighting, and worse still when things are going wrong. At Highmaul… we were losing. I watched my friend die. When I fought Deathwing… I nearly died myself," Auriana said quietly. "It's not the same standing in the middle of a safe arena, I can't just… get angry. Not to mention I'm sort of terrified of what would happen if I did."

Her gaze reflexively shifted to Varian, and she swallowed nervously. Jaina frowned in irritation, though she understood Auriana's point. She had rather underestimated the strength of Auriana's mental blocks, and began to suspect that training Auriana to use her berserker skills would be more difficult than she had initially anticipated.

"Very well… how about we change this up, then?" Jaina suggested.

Auriana paused and bit her lip, cocking her head slightly to the side.

"What did you have in mind?"

"You underwent quite the magical trauma when you broke those shackles in Blackrock Foundry," Jaina said thoughtfully. "I want to see how it's affected your abilities."

"If you'd like..." Auriana said skeptically. "How do we test that?"

"Link with me," Jaina instructed, "Then I want you to channel as much power as you're able into the link. It's the most direct way to assess your strength."

"Be careful what you wish for, Archmage," Auriana said wryly.
Her eyes suddenly flared with power, and Jaina felt her open up to the link. Jaina had never joined with Auriana before, and she was taken aback by how easily she fell into the flow of the other mage's power. Auriana instinctively tried to take command the link with an iron grip, and Jaina was momentarily stunned by the sheer force of her will.

"Auriana!" she snapped. "Watch yourself!"

"Sorry, sorry..." the Commander said, closing her eyes as she allowed Jaina to resume control of the link.

Jaina breathed a sigh of relief as she regained took over, though she reminded herself that what she was attempting was no easy task. She turned her head ever so slightly so as to catch a glimpse of Varian in the stands, where he sat eagerly forwards, his elbows resting on his thighs and his clever eyes sharp.

"Alright… let's see what you've got," Jaina murmured, trying to ignore the feeling of Varian's eyes on her back. "Give me your best, Commander."

Auriana hesitated slightly at first, but soon she gave herself completely over to Jaina and the link. The spell began as a foreign, tingling feeling in Jaina's chest, before the full force of Auriana's power slammed into her mind like a sledgehammer. Auriana was exceptionally strong, as Jaina had expected, and it took her a moment to adjust and control the sudden stream of power.

"Good," she said encouragingly. "Is that all you've got?"

"Not even hardly," Auriana said, her face splitting in a savage grin.

Her scars flared impossibly white, and the reflected glow was so bright that Jaina had to close her eyes. For a moment, however, Jaina felt no change, only to gasp loudly as she was utterly consumed by Auriana's channeled power. The younger mage's eyes became strangely unfocused, and far too late Jaina realised that perhaps she wasn't as prepared to contain Auriana as she might have thought.

Channeling vast amounts of power was not without risk, and it appeared that Auriana had been swept up in the flow of her own magic. She screamed and fell to her knees as her nose exploded with blood, but she stubbornly refused to release the spell. It was Jaina who should have commanded the flow of magic, but instead she found herself drawn along in its terrifying grip, like a rowboat in a hurricane. Jaina was irresistibly reminded of the time she had wielded the Focusing Iris, albeit on a much smaller scale. The energy was almost too much, and Jaina was forced to find some way of releasing the tremendous amount of power that now raced through her veins like fire. She raised her hands aloft and unleashed a torrent of raw arcane magic straight into the air, bathing the arena in a sinister purple glow.

"Jaina!" she heard Varian shout. "Stop this now!"

The King had risen to his feet, and from the look on his face, Jaina could tell he was barely seconds away from charging down into the arena and stopping her experiment by force. Auriana, however, looked eerily calm, her blue eyes icy as she stared Jaina down. Her face was a bloody mess and her hands filthy with the grit of the arena floor, but she doggedly continued to channel her power.

"Auriana!" Jaina cried. "Let go!"

"I can't!" Auriana choked back. "It's… oh, Light, Jaina, the power… it's beautiful…"
Jaina grit her teeth, and with the small amount of control that she still possessed she redirected some of Auriana's own power into the dampening field. The runes blazed and held, and in an instant Auriana's link to her magic was severed. Jaina felt oddly bereft as Auriana's power flowed out of the link, though it was all she could do to stay standing. She looked briefly up towards Varian, who couldn't have looked more like an angry wolf if he had tried, though somehow he had held himself in place.

"You're stronger than you used to be," Jaina panted, bending over to place her head between her legs.

Her entire body felt as if it had been electrified, and she was unbelievably dizzy. Auriana seemed to have fared little better, and she rolled on her back with a painful groan. Her breathing was rapid and shallow, and Jaina could see her limbs visibly twitching. Jaina held the dampening field in place, wanting to make absolutely sure that Auriana was subdued before she brought it down.

"Are you… alright?" she asked quietly.

"I'm fine," Auriana said, though her voice was strained. "I'm in control."

Jaina nodded and cautiously brought down the field, watching Auriana like a hawk as she staggered back to her feet.

"That was interesting," Jaina observed wryly. "That was my fault, I didn't think you had that much to give. I can't think of anyone who could control that much power without losing themselves a little bit."

"No, really, it isn't your fault," Auriana mumbled, looking distinctly rattled. "I pulled too much, I wanted to push my limits."

"Well, you certainly did that. When did you realise?" Jaina asked curiously. "That you were stronger than usual, I mean."

"I'm not sure," Auriana said faintly.

"You're lying," the Archmage admonished her gently. "When did you know?"

Auriana grimaced, and a long moment of awkward silence passed before she spoke once more.

"I wasn't certain until today, but I suspected after… after I killed Blackhand. I used sympathy to burn him alive within his armour. I've never done that before in my life," Auriana explained. "I know I have a natural instinct for this sort of thing, but that shouldn't have been possible…"

She trailed off, looking down at her hands, and the faint scars that marked her all the way from her fingers to her elbows. Like Jaina, Auriana bore the evidence of her magical trauma, and Jaina knew they were both likely marked for life. Fortunately, Auriana's scars weren't overly noticeable against her pale skin unless one looked closely, and her eyes appeared perfectly normal until she began to channel.

"That's incredible. Really, it is..." Jaina noted, shaking her head. "Not only did you escape with your powers intact, but you're actually stronger for the experience. No wonder Khadgar believes you should be made an Archmage..."

Jaina had meant to be complimentary, but Auriana's face went suddenly ashen.

"Can we… can we not talk about this?" she said quietly. "I don't like thinking about the Foundry."
I… I still have nightmares."

"Of course," Jaina said smoothly. "I had no intention of upsetting you."

Auriana nodded, though her jaw remained tight.

"I hope you found out what you needed to know," she said.

"I'll admit, this wasn't how expected this session to go," Jaina confessed, "Though it has given me food for thought. I'll do some more research in Dalaran… I know we can crack this."

"I hope you're right… though I really should be off for today… I was only permitted an hour to train with you. I'm still confined to quarters, and I really should go clean up," she said, waving vaguely to her bloody face.

"Are you ever going to tell me what happened?" Jaina asked, trying not to sound overly interested. "Why did Varian have you locked up?"

"No comment," Auriana said, with a quick look up at where the King sat in the stands. "If you want answers, ask him."

"Ah, because Varian is so forthcoming in these matters," Jaina said sarcastically. "I'd have a better chance asking a mountain to move."

"Perhaps if you asked nicely," Auriana suggested archly. "It always works for me."

Jaina laughed despite herself, and wondered when Auriana had developed a sense of humour, even if it was rather dry. While Jaina had never found the younger woman objectionable, they had never precisely been friends, either. Auriana had always seemed to Jaina to be cold and aloof, though it seemed that beneath the surface she was considerably warmer than Jaina had believed.

She's changed, too, she mused.

"I'm unable to return tomorrow," Jaina said, "But perhaps we could train again the day after? You'll get this, Auriana, I don't care how long it takes."

"Believe me, Jaina, no-one is more motivated to figure this out than me," Auriana said seriously. "I don't ever want to have another episode like Highmaul… or when I attacked you, Khadgar, and Anduin…"

She trailed off and looked down at the floor, and with a start Jaina realised she hadn't really considered the emotional consequences of the endeavor. Jaina had approached the task more or less as a purely academic exercise, but for Auriana it was clearly something much more.

"You won't," Jaina said reassuringly, touching Auriana's slender shoulder. "You've got more determination and willpower than anyone I've ever met."

"I only hope that it's enough," Auriana said darkly. "As you can see from today, I'm not… well… you saw what happened. If you'll excuse me, Archmage, I best be going. I'll see you in two days."

She frowned and strode swiftly from the arena, her boots kicking up a small cloud of dust in her wake. Jaina sighed and shook her head, watching the younger mage thoughtfully until she had disappeared. She then turned to collect the runed beacons that had made up the dampening field, and was surprised to find herself face to face with the imposing King of Stormwind.
"Varian," Jaina said smoothly. "How are you?"

"You're pushing her too hard," Varian said flatly. "She's a human being, not some damn… science experiment!"

His face was pure thunder, and Jaina could practically hear his powerful muscles tensing in anger.

"Well, hello to you too…” Jaina said drily, putting a hand on her hip.

Varian was one of the few people in the world that she found genuinely intimidating, though she would never say as much to his face. Nor would she ever allow herself to be visibly cowed, but she couldn't ignore the almost primal shiver of nervousness that ran up her spine as she stared up into his pitiless blue eyes.

"Hello, Jaina," the King said irritably. "Might we discuss your training methods as they apply to my… my Commander?"

"I know what I'm doing, Varian," Jaina said seriously. "As does Auriana. She's smart enough to know her limits."

"Oh, please. You know as well as I do that she'd kill herself before she surrendered a challenge like the one you gave her today," Varian scoffed. "You saw her! She was completely out of control."

"With all due respect, Your Majesty... you aren't a mage," Jaina said carefully, not willing to concede the point, but not wanting to provoke the King's ire, either. "Auriana is extremely skilled, and is probably the most instinctual mage I've ever come across. She can cope."

"I fail to see how bleeding out on her hands and knees on the floor of my arena is coping," Varian said, running a hand through his unruly hair. "Jaina…"

He suddenly looked very old and careworn, and Jaina's heart immediately softened.

"I promise you, she is perfectly safe. She's too talented for me to risk unnecessarily," she added, more gently this time. "I underestimated her today, but it won't happen again in future. I'll be prepared."

"Auriana told me once that your interest in training her was not entirely… shall we say… altruistic," Varian said slowly. "She said you were trying to figure out how to kill her, should such a thing ever be necessary."

"She isn't wrong," Jaina said, "Though that is far from my primary concern."

Varian generally appreciated honesty, though Jaina doubted whether he would take well to the thought of Auriana's death, regardless of necessity or circumstances. She sighed.

"It is one of the hardest parts of my role as Archmage," she admitted. "I train my mages, I care for them… many are my friends… and yet should any of them fall to the temptation of misusing magic, I must be prepared to terminate their lives."

"Could you do it?" Varian said quietly, the barest hint of a threat in his voice. "Kill Auriana, I mean."

"Before the incident at Blackrock Foundry, probably," Jaina mused. "Now, however… I'm not so sure."
Jaina hadn't really considered the question until now, but she wasn't lying. Auriana would was something of a blunt instrument, but the extent of her raw power was far beyond question. Jaina hadn't really seen the younger woman in action since the Siege of Orgrimmar, and before that on the Isle of Thunder, and had failed to take into account how much she had grown as a mage whilst on Draenor. Auriana would never be particularly subtle, or delicate, but Jaina had to admit there were few living mages who could now hope to outclass her.

"Why do you think I'm here?" she asked Varian. "I don't want to have to ever be in a position where killing her is my only option, and the best way to ensure that possibility never arises is to see that she is fully in control of all of her abilities."

Varian nodded in agreement, though he still looked distinctly displeased. Jaina let him stew silently in his own frustration for a moment, before she decided to try a different approach.

"She… you're very serious about her, aren't you?" Jaina asked softly. "Khadgar said you had declared your intentions to wed h…"

Jaina trailed off at the look on his face, and realised that she may have crossed a line. Varian was not the type of person to talk openly about his feelings, and she knew that his relationship with Auriana was a secret from all but a select few.

"Do the mages of the Kirin Tor have nothing better to do than gossip about my romantic affairs?" Varian grumbled.

His heavy brows were drawn together in a rather impressive glower, and Jaina could see that she had struck a nerve. Varian's eyes inadvertently flicked to where Auriana had last left the arena, and a strangely vulnerable expression crossed his face. He clearly didn't wish to discuss the topic further, and Jaina wisely decided that on this occasion, discretion was the better part of valour.

"Khadgar gets lonely," she said lightly, hoping a gentle teasing might bring him out of his mood.

"And what's your excuse?" Varian asked, raising an eyebrow. "Last I heard, you were certainly not lonely. Tell me, how is dear Kalecgos? If he's not treating you well, Jaina, I'll have words with him, you know..."

"Varian!" Jaina protested, flushing slightly at the thought of the King of Stormwind interrogating the Aspect of Magic like he was her father. "Kalec and I… we're fine. Just... fine."

Varian smirked, and Jaina realised that the King was taking no small amount of pleasure in teasing her back. It was a side of him that she had rarely seen, and yet another reminder of how his relationship with Auriana had changed him for the better. He was still clearly put out with Jaina, but he hadn't lost himself in his rage, as he might have done only a few short years earlier.

"Alright, you've made your point," she said, rolling her eyes. "I'll leave you be."

"Thank you," Varian said, his heavy jaw twitching as if he were hiding a smile. "Oh - you should say hello to Anduin while you're here. I'm sure he would very much enjoy a visit from his Aunt Jaina."

"I'll head there directly," Jaina agreed, brightening at the thought of a visit with her 'nephew'. "I'll be back in a few days anyway, to continue my work with Auriana. I'm sure I'll see you both then, too."

"Very well," Varian said, his face growing serious once more. "Though… Jaina…"
"Auriana is perfectly safe with me," Jaina said quickly, reading his mind. "I understand that this process is… harsher… than you were perhaps expecting, but this is what she was born to do. She *needs* this, Varian."

The King of Stormwind sighed, and folded his powerful arms across his massive chest.

"I know… and I am grateful you have agreed to work with her," he conceded. "Just try not to get her killed, will you? She tries hard enough to do that on her own..."
Varian made his way hurriedly towards the Stormwind arena, sending servants, soldiers, and nobles alike scattering out of his way. It had been two weeks since Auriana's first session with Jaina, and thus far Varian had made it a habit of attending her training sessions whenever possible. As far as anyone else was concerned, Varian was ostensibly there to oversee the progress of one of his most prominent field commanders, though in truth it was a show of silent support for the woman he loved.

Today, however, he was running late, having been held up by a long running meeting with the House of Nobles, and he was concerned that he would miss out on his usual spot. He always sat at the very front of the stands, close enough so as to have a good view of the action, and within earshot of Auriana and Jaina. Unfortunately, such seats were very popular with the small crowd that would inevitably show up to watch the brutal duels between the Commander of Lunarfall and the Archmage of the Kirin Tor. It was a rare privilege to watch two of the most powerful mortal women in the world fight, and in the few short weeks that they had been training together, Auriana and Jaina had achieved something of a legendary reputation amongst the peoples of Stormwind Keep.

As Varian jogged quickly down the stairs, he noted that today's duel had attracted a particularly large crowd. The stands were practically filled to capacity, with everyone from the Stormwind guard to several members of the Stormwind nobility in attendance. He frowned, unsure of what had caused such a stir, but as he made it to his usual perch at the front of the stands, he instantly understood why this particular session had attracted such great interest, as opposed to any other.

Auriana stood in the centre of the arena, accompanied not by Jaina, but rather by Kalecgos, the Aspect of Magic and leader of the blue dragonflight. He had not assumed his dragon form, of course, but rather stood as a blue-haired half-elf, his handsome features sharp as he and Auriana argued quietly. Kalecgos looked entirely unperturbed by the fact that he had attracted such an audience, though Auriana looked far more apprehensive. Her face was carefully controlled from the outside, but Varian knew her well enough to see the slight tightening of her jaw, and the way her blue eyes narrowed almost imperceptibly as her gaze swept over the crowd. He couldn't quite make out what they were saying, either, though it was clear that Auriana wasn't happy. She shook her head repeatedly, punctuating her low, heated words with forceful hand gestures. Kalecgos simply stared back at her with infinite patience, and eventually Auriana appeared to give up. She looked away, grumbling loudly, before her arms began to glow with the tell-tale signs of her magical power.

As she turned, Auriana's gaze fell upon Varian, and her expression suddenly brightened as she acknowledged his presence with a small, secretive smile. Something in the expression reminded him irresistibly of the previous evening, and he felt his ears grow suddenly hot. One distinct advantage of his having confined Auriana to the Stormwind barracks was that she was able to sneak into his chambers each night, and Varian had taken advantage of her frequent presence in order to teach her the finer points of lovemaking. She was an incredibly quick learner, much to Varian's delight, and she had awakened such a powerful lust within him that he felt fully twenty years younger. He was unexpectedly flooded with memories of her heated touch on his skin and the feel of her supple body moving beneath his own, and it took some considerable effort to force his attention back to the event at hand.

Shaking his head, he leaned forward eagerly, curious to see how his tiny Commander would fare against one of the most powerful beings on Azeroth. He took a fierce pride in Auriana's
considerable abilities, and he hoped Kalecgos' presence would afford her the opportunity to really show off what she could do. Before they could begin, however, Varian heard some call out his name, and he closed his eyes in exasperation as he recognised the voice.

"Your Majesty!"

He forced his face into an expression of studied neutrality, and turned to see Cathelora Anguile flouncing down the arena steps towards him. He had crossed paths with the young noblewoman several times since they had first been introduced, but she had become annoyingly persistent over the last few weeks. She had an uncanny ability to find Varian wherever he went, and he suspected that he knew why her attentions had recently increased. It was now old gossip that Auriana had been confined to the barracks at Stormwind, and it seemed that Cathelora's father had not given over his suspicions of Lunarfall's young Commander. For some reason, he seemed to believe that foisting his daughter on Varian at every possible opportunity was an effective way of steering the King's attention away from Auriana, though it rather served to have the opposite effect. Even if he hadn't been in love with Auriana, Varian never would have pursued a relationship with such a woman. Cathelora was very pretty, of course, and well educated, but Varian found her vapid and utterly humourless, and her presence served only to highlight just how remarkable Auriana really was.

Nevertheless, there was nothing to be gained by being impolite, and Varian had thus far tolerated Cathelora's presence with a sort of irritable patience. Most of the time, he was able to excuse himself with one an excuse or another, though sometimes he had no plausible reason to spare himself her presence.

Like today, for instance, Varian thought grimly.

The arena was for the most part a public place, and ejecting her unceremoniously would do nothing but to stir the already overactive Stormwind rumour mill. Moreover, he didn't need the headache of stirring up the frustrations of the House of Nobles. As far as Varian was concerned, the House of Nobles was a necessary evil, and while he had no qualms about putting them in place if necessary, there was no point in being needlessly antagonistic. Varian was the ultimate power in Stormwind, but the nobles still held considerable sway over the day to day running of the kingdom, and it helped no one to have a rift between the king and his aristocracy. He could tolerate the girl for the sake of his kingdom, so long as she made no attempt to force their relationship further, and if anything her presence probably helped to dissuade any rumours about his relationship with Auriana.

"Good afternoon, Your Majesty!" Cathelora said brightly, sweeping her skirts gracefully beneath her slender body as she took a seat at Varian's side.

She was dressed today in a low cut dress of pale azure blue, and a pair of large sapphires glittered upon each of her ears. The outfit contrasted rather nicely with her shining red hair, but Varian couldn't have cared less. His gaze was fixed firmly on the arena, waiting for Auriana and Kalecgos to really get going.

"Hello, Cathe," he said distractedly. "I don't mean to sound rude, but this is something of a private training."

"Is it? There are an awful lot of people here for a private session," she observed archly. "It's the talk of the Keep, apparently these sessions get quite… interesting. I've never seen mages fight before, so I thought I might come down and watch."

"This isn't a tournament," Varian growled, though he had to admit she had a point, "And the
Commander isn't some kind of… dancing bear."

"Oh, I'm sure she won't notice one more person," Cathe said dismissively, waving a delicate hand. "And how often does one get a chance to see an actual dragon? I wonder why he's here?"

Varian didn't reply, though privately he asked himself the same question. He suspected that Kalecgos represented one of Jaina's many attempts to overcome Auriana's block. Auriana's skills were rapidly growing to match Jaina's own, and she had indicated to Varian more than once that she didn't want to risk fully unleashing on the older woman. She couldn't hope to overpower a dragon Aspect, however, and Varian wondered if Jaina hadn't sent Kalecgos for precisely that reason. If there were anyone in the world that Auriana could safely fight in a berserker rage, it was the Lord of Magic, and chances are today would be the day when she would finally break through her carefully constructed mental barriers.

*That's why the crowd is here, Varian realised, looking around the arena. They think they're going to see something spectacular*…. 

It was clearly part of the reason Cathelora Anguile was here. Her lips were parted eagerly, and she stared down at Auriana with the kind of rabid curiosity that Varian found distinctly unsettling. He of all people knew how much Auriana feared and hated her fury, and he didn't like the idea of her rage being turned into a cheap spectacle.

"When are they going to really fight?" the young noblewoman asked, smoothing her skirts down gracefully and entirely failing to notice Varian's discontent. "I've never seen a mage cast anything more than a portal."

"Soon," Varian said absentmindedly, trying to keep the sting of annoyance from his voice.

So far, Auriana and Kalecgos had only performed what Varian now understood to be fairly basic magics, though they soon increased the intensity of their work to an almost frenetic pace. Varian had been impressed by Auriana and Jaina, but as expected, the Aspect of Magic was in a class of his own. The dragon lord pushed Auriana ruthlessly, forcing her to work at the very limit of her capacities to match the seemingly endless stream of magic that flowed from his long elven fingers.

Auriana's hair and clothes were soon dark with perspiration, at one point she actually called a halt to the proceedings so that she might remove her soaked outer tunic. Not a few people gasped as the terrible scar on her back was revealed, though Auriana ignored their reaction with nothing more than a subtle tightening of her shoulders. Cathelora looked especially disgusted, pursing her lips and wincing distastefully every time Auriana turned around. The young noblewoman was the type of person who was very concerned with physical appearance, though Varian saw nothing less than perfection as he stared down at Auriana. As far as he was concerned, she was not in any way marred by the disarray of her dark, silky hair or the glimmer of sweat on her breast, nor even the savage scar that split her back. To him, these things served only to enhance her appearance, to lend her that particular air of wild, predatory grace that he admired so fiercely. He gave Cathelora a withering look, unable to mask his displeasure any longer, and she visibly cowed before him.

Growling, Varian turned his attention back to Kalecgos and Auriana, who had since resumed their duel in earnest. Varian knew little about the intricacies of magical practice, though his knowledge had improved significantly since he had begun to observe Auriana's training. He now knew enough to know that there was some serious magic being thrown around, and that Auriana's skills had improved considerably over the last few weeks. She looked more focused and fluid than Varian had ever seen, and she cast with both strength and efficiency. As the Aspect of Magic, Kalecgos was far beyond the skills of any mortal mage, but he nevertheless treated Auriana with the respect due a worthy opponent.
Unfortunately, it seemed as if Auriana was just as blocked with Kalecgos as she was with Jaina. She fought fiercely, but she wasn't any closer to unleashing her rage than she had been during any other session. While her restraint was impressive, without being able to go into a true rage, there was no way she could ever learn to control her wild and unpredictable powers. Varian had offered her what little support he could, but at the end of the day, it was a journey that Auriana would have to make on her own.

It did not appear to be a journey that she was going to make today, however. She had thrown up her hands in defeat, before irritably kicking up a spray of dirt and shooting an anxious look in Varian's direction.

"Auriana…" Kalecgos admonished her gently. "You hold so much of yourself back. You have to learn to let go."

"I understand the principle, Kalec," Auriana huffed irritably. "This is what Jaina and I have been working on for weeks. Unfortunately, I'm finding it rather difficult to shake the feeling that what you're asking me to do is fundamentally… wrong."

"Jaina believes…" Kalecgos started, but Auriana waved him off.

"With respect, Jaina has no idea," she snapped. "None of you do."

Her eyes flicked briefly to the stands, and she frowned darkly.

"This is tearing me in half, Kalec. On one hand, I'm revolted with myself just for thinking of using my rage. On the other hand, I've scarcely wanted anything more," she muttered. "My fury is there, but I just don't think I have it in me to touch it…"

Her final words were barely a whisper, and Varian wanted nothing more than to run into the arena to be at her side. Such a thing would not do, however, and so he was forced to sit still, cracking his knuckles irritably as she and Kalecgos continued to argue.

"Perhaps you're right," the Lord of Magic conceded finally, "Though I would counsel you to remember that you've made considerable progress nonetheless. Jaina did not overstate your abilities."

Auriana nodded stiffly at the compliment and turned to collect her discarded tunic, the glow of magic fading from about her arms and eyes. Varian let out a sigh of frustration on her behalf, and hoped that she would not take another failure too harshly.

"Oh, is that it?" Cathelora said, pouting prettily. "I had expected something more dramatic."

"Where the Commander is concerned, you might be grateful for the lack of… drama," Varian said pointedly, well aware of what Auriana could do if she felt threatened.

Cathelora frowned at his indirect praise of Auriana's abilities, though she quickly covered her annoyance with a simpering smile.

"I didn't mean to say that I wanted something bad to happen," she said sweetly. "I merely wanted to spend more time with you, my Lord, and this was all over far too soon. Forgive my forwardness, but perhaps you'd like to take a turn about the gardens?"

She leaned forward and unexpectedly pressed a bold hand to Varian's upper thigh, her cheeks flushed dark pink. Varian started violently and shied uncomfortably away from her touch, but before he could extricate himself completely, Auriana turned and looked towards him. For a
moment, a look of pure, unadulterated fury crossed her face, and she appeared to have stopped breathing. Her luminous blue eyes were impossibly wide, and she looked as if she very much wanted to give the young noblewoman an experience with magic that she would never forget.

Cathelora seemed not to have noticed Auriana's penetrating stare, however, and leant even closer to Varian with an adoring gaze.

"You forget yourself, my lady," Varian said coldly, prising Cathelora's small hand from his leg. "I'd thank you to avoid such public displays in future."

Much to her obvious disappointment, he quickly moved away, but it appeared that the damage had been done. Auriana met his gaze steadily for a moment, surprise and hurt written across every inch of her face, before she shook her head and looked back to Kalecgos.

"You know what?" she said suddenly, her voice sharp. "I'm not done. Let's try this again."

"Are you sure, Auriana?" the blue dragon said skeptically, clearly unsure as to what had changed.

"Damn sure," she replied, her voice colder than ice.

She once again dropped her tunic into the dirt, and quickly shifted into a grounded fighting stance. Kalecgos mimicked her movements, his ancient eyes sharply attuned to the sudden power and aggressiveness of Auriana's posture.

"Ready when you are," Kalecgos shrugged, though he looked thoroughly confused by Auriana's abrupt change of heart.

Quietly, Varian shared the big dragon's uncertainty. His well-honed instincts screamed danger, but he didn't want to intervene unless absolutely necessary. Auriana had closed her eyes, frowning as if in great concentration, and Varian saw her hands begin to shake violently. Her breathing rapidly increased to almost frenetic levels, and she bit her lip so hard as to draw blood. Varian leant forwards in alarm, itching to climb out of his seat, but Kalecgos saw his movement and subtly waved him off.

"Auriana?" the blue dragon said tentatively.

Before anyone could react, Auriana's eyes flew open and she snarled like a wild animal. Her hands blazed with sudden flame and she threw herself into a blink. She did not blink forwards towards Kalecgos, however, but rather sideways, her furious gaze falling on none other than Cathelora.

"Kalec!" Varian shouted, on his feet in an instant. "I think we have a problem!"

Varian had never seen Auriana in a true rage before. He'd seen her angry, of course, but he'd never seen her go berserk, and if he were being perfectly honest with himself, it was somewhat terrifying. Gone was the brave, clever woman that Varian loved so fiercely; replaced by nothing less than a force of nature. There was no restraint or mercy in her eyes, and even at this distance, Varian could feel the fury radiating off her body like fire. She looked absolutely murderous, and Varian realised that both he and the crowd were in very real danger.

"Kalec!" he hollered, as Auriana hurled a powerful wave of fire into the stands.

Varian flinched, and reflexively moved to shield Cathelora from Auriana's ire. Fortunately, Kalecgos was not the Aspect of Magic for nothing, and he threw up a powerful, shimmering shield between Auriana and her targets in the crowd. She howled in disappointment as the shield absorbed the brunt of her power, and she turned back on Kalecgos with a bloodthirsty scowl.
Like a predator, Varian thought. Focusing on the greatest threat...

Auriana threw herself on Kalecgos in a frenzy, throwing magic with a speed and ferocity that Varian had scarcely ever seen before. She was still outmatched by the Aspect, of course, but it appeared that her ability to present him with a challenge had significantly increased. Varian didn't miss the small trickle of sweat that now ran down Kalecgos' face, nor the heavy frown that marred his otherwise youthful features.

"Come now, Auriana," Kalec urged her, dancing lightly to the side as he fended off a twenty foot high tornado of fire. "Remember who you are!"

Auriana was entirely beyond reason, however, and continued to hurl spell after spell at Kalecgos with savage abandon. She seemed utterly tireless, lost in her own world of all consuming fury.

"Kalec!" Varian shouted, waving to the spectators to evacuate. "Cut her off!'

Cathelora had already bolted from the arena in tears, her light blue skirts flinging into the air as she raced away with surprising speed. She had been followed by almost everyone else in the stands, the crowd practically falling over one another in a frantic stampede.

"Not yet!" the dragon aspect argued firmly. "This is what we wanted. She has to learn how to come back on her own."

"Are you sure you're the one in control here?" Varian fired back.

He had no intention of following the crowd out of the arena unless absolutely necessary, and instead hovered anxiously behind the rail that bordered the front edge of the stands.

"Of course. She's trying to work around my defenses, but…"

He was cut off as Auriana suddenly laughed madly, and conjured a massive dragon construct, its body made from both cold frost and burning flame. It roared as she sent it towards Kalecgos with a flick of her wrist, its incorporeal maw opening wide as if to consume the Aspect whole. Varian was forced to duck as a wave of pure energy exploded across the arena, and he smelled the distinct, acrid scent of his own burning hair.

"By the Lifebinder," Kalecgos breathed, "She is strong."

"How lovely for her," Varian snapped sarcastically. "Stop this now."

The blue dragon hesitated for the briefest of seconds, but in the end acquiesced to Varian's angry request. He raised his hand and snapped a dampening field in place around Auriana, instantly severing her from the flow of magic. She roared with dismay and fury as her power failed, and she lunged forwards, apparently just as willing to beat Kalecgos to death with her tiny fists as she was to challenge him with magic. Startled, he stepped back, and bound her in place with a ring of glittering frost.

Kalecgos approached her like she was a wild animal, speaking soothingly and raising his hands. She was well snared and entirely unable to move, but if looks could kill, Kalecgos would now be lying dead on the floor.

"Stop this, Commander," Kalecgos said. "Find your way back…"

He continued to mutter soothingly, but it seemed to have little effect. Auriana was entirely rabid, and she seemed to be unaware that Kalecgos was even there. She tore blindly at the ring of frost
encasing her legs, tearing her hands open on the sharp fragments of ice, and Varian wondered how she'd ever be able to step back from the edge of the abyss. He knew she'd probably return to normalcy if he or Kalecgos were to hit her across the back of the head, though he considered such a violent action to be a last resort.

"Come on, Auri," Varian muttered softly, adding his own deep voice to Kalecgos' litany. "Come back..."

She snapped her head towards him, as if she had somehow heard his words, and something in her expression changed. She didn't soften, precisely, but some of the unbridled fury that blazed from her eyes lessened, and she looked ever so slightly more human. Varian wanted to go to her side, to talk her down, but he was extremely conscious of dozen or so people who remained in the arena.

*That's right,* he thought, settling for silently willing her on, *Come back to me...*

Auriana let out a long, tortured sigh and suddenly crumpled, falling painfully to her knees in the dirt. Kalecgos shot a look in Varian's direction, and the King let out a breath he didn't realise he'd been holding. The blue dragon strode slowly forwards, his hands raised defensively, unwilling to release Auriana from his thrall until he was completely satisfied that she was herself again. Varian leaned forward over the railing, trying to gauge Auriana's condition. She was panting as if she'd just run a mile, and she still quivered with nervous energy, but otherwise she seemed to be unharmed.

"Well, that was a disaster," Auriana drawled suddenly, her voice sounding slightly hoarse.

She frowned, and tapped her knuckles against the ring of frost still encircling her legs.

"You can let me loose, Kalec, I'm quite safe," she added drily.

"I'd like to be the judge of that, if you don't mind," Kalecgos said slowly. "Though, for what it's worth... I haven't had to work that hard in years."

"Do you really think flattery is going to help this situation?" she snapped, taking several deep, steadying breaths. "The fact remains, I failed..."

"I'm not one to engage in flattery. You really *are* tremendously talented, Commander," the dragon mused. "And I wouldn't say today was a total loss. You came back to your senses by your own power. You may not have been able to control your rage, but it's a start."

"I suppose," she said skeptically, frowning down at the tatters of her palms.

She swung a brief look in Varian's direction, and her cheeks and ears suddenly flushed bright red.

"Have you ever done such a thing before?" Kalecgos pressed her.

"Once, in Highmaul. I came back on my own... though it took a very long time," she admitted.

"Today you were able to do so within a mere half hour," Kalecgos pointed out. "Surely that's an improvement?"

"Perhaps, but I'd still consider this endeavour a failure," Auriana said coldly.

She fell silent, and a visible shiver ran down her spine. Frowning, Kalecgos gently released the bonds of ice that held her legs fast, and she scrambled back to her feet. Her arms flared briefly white, and Varian realised that she was checking the strength of her power. After her ordeal in
Blackrock Foundry, she was somewhat paranoid about losing her magical abilities, and he knew how much being forced into a dampening field would have frightened her.

"I frightened away our crowd," she added listlessly, staring up at the arena stands with a pained expression. "Oh, Light…"

Varian frowned, and followed her line of sight. Most of those who had been brave enough to remain were the soldiers who trained with Auriana regularly. They seemed not to have been put off all too much by her display, and instead stared down at her with expressions of profound, if slightly terrified, respect. Most of the nobles had stayed away, including Varian's would-be suitor Cathelora, but a few of the other spectators had trickled back into the arena, clearly curious as to the aftermath of Auriana's rampage. Varian bitterly regretted not ordering them all out earlier, having made the assumption that this training session would be ended by Auriana's block like all the rest.

He made a mental note to offer her an apology as soon as possible and turned his gaze back towards the arena floor, only to see Kalecgos standing alone. He raised a questioning eyebrow at the blue-haired dragon, but the Aspect merely shrugged, gesturing to the lower exit to the arena. Varian growled in frustration, though he knew it was just like Auriana to have run away. She would likely be embarrassed, and ashamed, and terrified by her own failure. She was incredibly sensitive when it came to her berserker blood, and Varian would not see her discouraged by one bad training session. Determined to track her down and set her thinking straight, he rose to his feet, acknowledging Kalecgos with a terse nod before turning on his heel and striding briskly back towards his Keep.
Auriana bolted from the arena, disgusted that she had turned her rage on the watching crowd, and even more horrified that she had done so in front of Varian, of all people. The hot, metallic taste of shame burned deep in her throat, and her hands shook violently from the excess adrenaline. She had fled the arena before she'd even been able to look Varian in the eyes, so afraid was she of what she might find in their depths. Auriana had explained her rage to Varian many times before, but it was another thing entirely for him to see her terrible fury, for him to bear witness to the smouldering madness that lurked just below the surface of her tempestuous heart.

She was so consumed by her own turbulent thoughts that she failed to pay any real attention to where she was going, and at one point unexpectedly slammed straight into an athletic young woman with flaming red hair. Startled, the other woman tumbled backwards and landed heavily on her backside, crying out in surprise as she hit the floor. Her brilliant hair reminded Auriana uncomfortably of Cathelora, and before she could stop herself, she had raised her hands furiously and called on her still seething magic. The younger woman's warm green eyes widened with genuine fear, and she instinctively scrambled backwards away from the threat. Auriana blinked, horrified by the look on the girl's face, and she flushed bright red with remorse.

"Sorry," she stammered, nearly tripping over her own feet as she lowered her hands and backed away. "I… sorry."

Swearing under her breath, Auriana left the girl lying on the floor as she stumbled backwards down the corridor. She knew she should have returned to her quarters immediately, but the thought of being held in such a small space made her hair stand on end. Auriana needed air and time to get her thoughts under control, which would be impossible if she returned to the cloying confines of her temporary rooms. Instead, she raced blindly through the grey stone corridors of the Keep, scattering servants and other passers-by as she fled to the relative freedom of the palace gardens.

The fresh air hit Auriana like a blow to the face and she gulped it down greedily, hoping the cool breeze would do something, anything to quell the fire in her veins. Her magic was right there, and it pleaded with her to seize it, demanding that she fill herself to breaking before she hunted down the shameless hussy who had so brazenly dared to lay her hands on Varian.

"He's yours, her rage whispered. Not hers. Teach her a lesson she'll not soon forget."

Auriana bit her lip, unable to deny that the suggestion was awfully tempting. While she was surprised by the strength of her jealousy, with everything else that had happened today, it was only with supreme force of will that she had thus far resisted the siren call of her rage.

Squeezing her eyes tightly, she pressed her head back against the cool stone wall of the keep as she fought to get her breathing under control. She had no idea how long she stood there, panting heavily, until her dark reverie was interrupted by someone furiously shouting her name.

"You!" a man bellowed loudly, and Auriana turned to see none other than Rohas Anguile, father of Cathelora, striding furiously down the corridor towards her.

His face was contorted with genuine rage, and before Auriana could either move or speak, he had grasped her arm painfully and dragged her around the corner into the relative privacy of a darkened alcove. Anguile wasn't an especially large man, but compared to Auriana, pretty much everyone was large, and he moved her with surprisingly little effort. She could have resisted him with her magic, of course, but even in her rather hysterical state Auriana knew she couldn't exactly assault a
leading member of the House of Nobles for no reason. Unfortunately, she was still coming down from the thrill of unleashing her rage in the arena, and her magic sang for release. Her adrenaline surged, and she thought of a hundred ways to kill Anguile before her rational mind realised that murdering a nobleman in cold blood might not be such a good idea.

"What do you want, my Lord?" she said, her voice shaking as she tried to keep up some pretence of decorum.

"Would you like to explain to me," Anguile said icily, "Why you attacked my daughter this afternoon?"

"I did no such thing," Auriana snapped, though it wasn't strictly true.

She had wanted to turn her rage on Cathelora, to freeze the simpering little smile of her face, or perhaps turn her fiery red hair into an actual fire. The pretty young nobleman had acted as a catalyst for Auriana's fury, and even just remembering the way Cathelora had looked at Varian set Auriana's teeth on edge. She wasn't going to admit as much to Anguile, however, and she forced herself to bite her tongue.

"That's not the way she tells it," Anguile growled, "When she ran to me in tears. I don't know what game you're playing at, girl, but you should know that I'm a dangerous enemy. I won't stand for such a slight against my family."

"I do apologise for frightening your daughter," Auriana admitted, trying desperately to keep her tone even, "But she's an adult. No one forced her to be in that arena. It was a private training session that she made a choice to attend – she should be aware that working with magic is inherently risky."

"Are you saying she should have expected to be attacked by some half crazed mage?! You're a bloody menace," Anguile spat. "Oh, I know you think you're special, running around Stormwind after Varian Wrynn, but someone needs to put you on a damn leash!"

Auriana snarled wordlessly, pushing very hard on the limits of her wavering sense of reason. After the Foundry, more than anything she feared being restrained, and Anguile's comment was enough to just about shatter her remaining self-control. Shaking, she turned to walk away, but the nobleman suddenly reached out and grabbed her wrist, his fingernails digging deep into her arm and actually drawing blood. The pain shot up Auriana's arm like a bolt of lightning, and her arms and eyes blazed white with sudden, uncontrollable burst of power.

"How stupid are you?" she growled in disbelief, having only avoided killing him by the barest margin.

"I'm not afraid of Varian Wrynn," Anguile hissed, digging his fingernails in even deeper.

"Varian? Ha!" Auriana laughed recklessly. "Varian Wrynn is a damn picnic compared to me."

At that point, Auriana decided that she didn't care whether she lived or died, or whether she was thrown into the Stockades for the rest of her life. All that she cared about was wiping the smug, arrogant expression of Anguile's face, consequences be damned. She lifted her free arm threateningly, her fingers tingling with a spell of breaking flame, when she dimly heard someone else calling her name.

"Auri?"

"Anduin?" she exclaimed, blinking in surprise.
Anguile ground his teeth, but he immediately released his grip on her arm and stepped back as if nothing had happened. Apparently, he was the type of coward who was more than willing to bully her in private, but not in front of the Prince of Stormwind.

_Not afraid of Varian, my ass..._ Auriana thought bitterly, stepping sideways out of the nobleman's reach.

"Is... is everything alright?" the prince asked, looking curiously between Auriana and Anguile.

He was far too perceptive not to have noticed that the air was thick with tension, nor the fading glow of Auriana's magic. She quickly tucked her wounded arm behind her back, with a cautious sideways look at Anguile. The nobleman gave her a look cold enough to freeze the blood in her veins, but made no comment. Evidently, they had come to the unspoken agreement that their bitter feud was a private thing, played out without interference from others.

"Everything's fine, Anduin," Auriana said wearily. "Lord Anguile and I were just having... a chat."

"A chat," Anduin repeated, clearly not believing a word she was saying. "I see."

"The Commander is quite right, Highness," Anguile said smoothly, all of a sudden the perfect courtier. "I was just leaving. Excuse me."

He gave Auriana another pointed look, but she refused to bow before him as he turned sharply on his well-polished heels and stalked away. She did, however, breathe a sigh of relief as he left, sagging back against the wall and closing her eyes.

"What are you doing here, Anduin?" she asked.

"Saving you, apparently," he said drily. "What on earth was _that_ all about?"

"It was nothing," Auriana said firmly, fixing Anduin with a serious stare. "Nothing at all."

"Alright..." he said skeptically, but it appeared he wasn't game enough to press her further. "I was heading to the arena, actually. I felt... I don't know, it's hard to put into words... like a tidal wave of magic. I felt it from my rooms."

His eyes widened.

"It was you, wasn't it? There's no-one else around here with that kind of power," he realised. "What were you doing?"

"I... I was working with Kalecgos, actually," Auriana confessed. "It didn't go very well."

She shivered and subconsciously rubbed her arms, and in that movement Anduin saw the damage done to her by Rohas Anguile.

"Did he do that to you?" the Prince demanded, his expression suddenly reminding Auriana very much of Varian. "Auri..."

"It's nothing," she repeated, covering the wound with her other hand.

"He just physically assaulted you! That's hardly _nothing_," Anduin protested, looking furiously down the corridor after Anguile. "You need to tell my father."

"No!" Auriana exclaimed forcefully. "No. You know how he is... Varian will... overreact."
"In this situation, I think his anger would be warranted," Anduin observed. "I don't care who Anguile is, he can't just go around hurting people like that. Especially not you."

"As I said… today hasn't been a great day," Auriana said quickly. "Please, Anduin, this doesn't need to be taken further. I can handle myself."

Anduin watched her very carefully, his blue eyes narrowed as if he were studying a particularly difficult and complex book. Eventually, however, he conceded, shrugging his shoulders ever so slightly and taking a small step backwards.

"If you're sure," he said. "Though at least let me heal you…"

Auriana held out her arm to the prince, letting out an involuntary sigh as she felt the familiar sensation of his magic shiver up her arm. She watched as her wounds slowly closed under Anduin's careful touch, though surprisingly his work with the Light did nothing to slow her still pounding heart.

"Do you need some help getting back to the barracks?" Anduin asked, clearly aware that she was still struggling to breathe.

If Auriana's run in with Anguile had been any indication at all, however, she was certain she still needed to be alone. Right now, it seemed as if any small thing might set her off, and she didn't want to take the risk that something like that would happen again.

Especially not in front of Anduin, she thought grimly.

"I'm fine, really," she said firmly. "I just need to go for a walk. Alone."

"Auri…"

"Anduin, please… I really just need to be alone right now," Auriana insisted, giving him what she hoped was a reassuring smile. "I'll be alright, I just need a moment."

"Very well," Anduin said slowly, though he was clearly unhappy to be leaving her unaccompanied. "Though you know where I am if you need anything else…"

He gave her a final, penetrating look, before nodding thoughtfully to himself and walking slowly back in the direction from which he had come. For her part, Auriana walked swiftly off in the other direction, wondering if there was any possible place in Stormwind Keep that she could be alone.

I need air, she thought broodingly. I need to run, I need...

"Varian!" she exclaimed, as she rounded a corner and toppled into the King of Stormwind.

Varian was so large as to be unmoved by someone as small as Auriana, and she practically bounced off his muscular chest. He caught her quickly and steadied her shoulders beneath his big hands, looking down on her with an unreadable expression.

"My chambers," he said seriously. "Now."

Auriana swallowed, but didn't dare disobey the King of Stormwind when he looked at her like that. She didn't want to face the indignity of walking through the castle after him like some naughty child, however, and so instead she touched his arm and teleported them both directly to his chambers.
Once there, he didn't immediately speak, and a million possibilities raced through Auriana's mind as he stared her down. She wasn't sure if he was going to yell at her, or lecture her, or simply walk away in disgust... and she wasn't sure she was ready to handle any of those things if he did.

To her complete and utter shock, however, he instead suddenly opened his arms wide and beckoned her into his embrace.

"C'mere," he murmured, his keen eyes surprisingly kind.

Auriana came forwards, hesitantly at first, but soon surrendered herself willingly to the arms of her King. He was so warm, and the innate strength of his broad chest helped to contain the raging storm within her heart. For the first time since she had left the arena, she felt almost like herself, though she knew it would still be some time before she completely regained control.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly, pressing his face into her hair. "I never should have allowed Jaina and Kalecgos to push you that far."

"What?" Auriana said, surprised. "You're apologising to me?"

"I had no idea," Varian said quietly, rubbing soothing circles on her back with the flat of his palm. "I know you've spoken to me of your rage before, but... that was something else."

"I understand if you never... if you..." she stammered. "I know I'm a monster..."

"No," he said quickly. "No. Don't you dare think that. This doesn't change how I feel about you at all, Auriana. If anything... you carry this with you all the time?"

"Yes," she admitted. "It's always there, just... waiting."

She shuddered, and Varian instinctively pulled her closer. He held her in silence for a long while, the strength of his arms never wavering as he offered his silent support. Auriana sighed, more grateful than she could possibly say, though still secretly terrified that the truth of her would one day turn him away. She shifted uncomfortably, and Varian finally released her, brushing her hair back from her cheek with a small smile.

"I never thought I'd see you jealous," he remarked, trying to lighten the mood, though it was perhaps the worst thing he could have said. "I have to say, Auriana, I'm quite flattered."

Auriana pulled back and turned away, trying not to let Varian see the hurt and shame in her eyes. She had been jealous, furiously so, and she couldn't quite let go of the feeling that she had been jealous for good reason.

"Wait..." Varian said seriously, all too quickly picking up on her troubled expression. "You don't actually believe I'm interested in that girl, do you?"

"No..." Auriana said, though she was unable to fully disguise the wavering trepidation in her voice.

"Light, Auri, who on earth would choose her when they could have you?" Varian exclaimed, sounding thoroughly perplexed.

"Well, she has more legs than I have... an entire body, for a start," Auriana said, frowning.

"Do you really think that what I'm looking for in a woman is... height?" Varian said drily.

Auriana sighed, scuffing the toe of her boot idly across the floor. It sounded so silly when he put it
that way, but she couldn't shake the gnawing sense of her own inadequacy.

"She's a lamb; a pretty, puffed up lamb," Varian continued earnestly, reaching out to grab her arms and staring down at her proudly, "But you... you're magnificent. You're a wolf, a predator, and you're all mine."

On any other day, his determined words might have been enough, but after the incident in the arena, Auriana's emotions were already frayed. She shivered and shook her head, finally allowing herself to speak to a fear that had been growing within her heart for some time.

"I don't think you realise how extraordinary you are," she said quietly. "I... sometimes, I wonder if I'll ever really be worthy of you. Seeing her with you today... it was a reminder of all the things that I'm not."

"What the hell do you mean?" Varian demanded, grasping her firmly by the shoulders. "How could you possibly be unworthy?"

"Because you're Varian Wrynn!" she exclaimed, throwing up her hands. "You're the King of Stormwind... the scion of a wolf god... a hero of the Alliance. I'm just... some stubborn, angry girl with magic hands."

Varian frowned, and raked a hand through his hair in evident frustration.

"What's gotten into you, Auriana?"

"Nothing. I just... I'm still a little on edge," she said, unable to meet his eyes. "It takes a while to come down, you see..."

"No," he said carefully, slipping his fingers beneath the line of her jaw and gently lifting her chin. "It's more than that."

His face was stern, now, and she knew he would not be swayed from the argument.

"It's... it's her," Auriana confessed. "You have no idea... I hated seeing her touching you, I wanted to wring her neck. And what's worse, you allowed her to..."

"Hold on a minute," Varian growled, flushing with sudden anger. "I didn't allow her to do anything. Believe me, I was just as surprised as you, and I told her in no uncertain terms to keep her hands to herself. What did you want me to do, Auriana, pick her up and throw her twenty feet across the arena?"

"Maybe..." Auriana muttered, though she was simultaneously ashamed of her own bitter jealousy. "I just... I can't stand obvious women. It killed me to see her all over you today."

"Well, whose fault is that?" Varian asked.

She could see that he regretted the blunt phrasing the moment the words had left his mouth, but he couldn't have hurt her more if he had slapped her across the face. He reached for her hand, but she stepped backwards, staring up at him with wide eyes.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Auri... I understand why you've insisted on secrecy around our relationship," he said slowly, "But you can't simultaneously keep all of this secret while also demanding that people respect a relationship that they know nothing about. As far as the rest of the world is concerned, I'm a
bachelor, and women will try."

"Because you're so irresistible?" Auriana scoffed sarcastically, her rage bubbling to the surface once more.

Her anger wasn't really directed at Varian, of course, but right now he was the only target she had. Her fury was spoiling for a fight, any fight, and it was willing to settle even for one so ill advised as this.

"Because I'm the King of Stormwind," Varian said flatly, "And a man whose wife died twenty years ago. I'm not flattering myself here, Auriana, but being the king does attract a certain kind of attention."

"Attention that you don't seem to be in any particular hurry to dissuade," Auriana said, well aware of how petty she sounded, but unable to stop the words from flying out of her mouth like daggers.

"I can't just go around insulting every noblewoman in Stormwind. That's not to say I'm entertaining any of their ideas, but I won't be rude about it unless I have to be. Besides, if you don't like it, then do something about it." Varian snapped. "You want to chase off little strumpets like Cathelora? Then give up this secrecy. Allow me to court you properly."

"Why do you always insist on pushing me on this matter?" Auriana retorted. "Is what we have not enough?"

Varian frowned and turned away, his shoulders rigid with tension. He looked as if he were thinking very carefully about something, and when he spoke, his voice was low and surprisingly bitter.

"No. It isn't," he said seriously. "Auriana... I want to take your arm when I'm walking in my own damn Keep. I don't want to have to wait until midnight just to kiss you. I want you in my bed at night, I want you tangled up in my sheets in the morning. I want you standing by my side, where you belong. I want you as my..."

"Don't say it," she said sharply, holding up a warning finger. "Please."

"And why shouldn't I say it?" Varian countered. "Do my feelings on the matter mean nothing? I want to marry you, and I refuse to be ashamed of that desire."

"I know. I know. It's just... it's too much, Varian..." Auriana plead weakly.

"I know. I know. It's just... it's too much, Varian..." Auriana plead weakly.

"So you keep saying," he said lowly. "Has it ever occurred to you that you're the first woman since... since she died that I've even looked at twice... let alone wanted as my wife? Does that... does that count for nothing?"

Auriana's heart suddenly caught in her throat, and for the first time, she really appreciated how much of a toll their secret was taking on the normally stoic King. He mentioned the secrecy of their love only rarely, but it appeared that she had drastically underestimated how he truly felt. Her anger vanished in an instant, only to be replaced by a cold and all consuming feeling of guilt.

"Varian..." she whispered, backing away from him so fast that she actually bumped into the hard wood of his desk. "I... I'm sorry..."

He turned to face her, his eyes dark with such powerful, longing sadness, that Auriana was forced to look away. Part of her; even the greater part, now; wanted to grant Varian his deepest desire, but there was still a small, fearful voice in the back of her head that gave her pause. She wished she could find the words to explain her fear and her hesitation, so that Varian might know it had
nothing to do with how she cared for him, but she had already well pushed her limits of emotional control for the day. Instead, hating herself, she took the coward's way out and reached for her magic, giving Varian one final pained look before she gathered her power, and vanished.
After the incident in the arena and their subsequent argument, Varian hadn't seen Auriana for three
days. It had been genuinely terrifying to see her lose control in the arena, but despite their
disagreement he had hoped that she would call on him for help in her time of need. Unfortunately,
it seemed that Auriana intended to stay as far away from Varian as possible. While she was a bright
and brilliant woman in many ways, she was also shockingly unequipped to deal with emotional
conflict. She had a frustrating tendency to run away whenever she was confronted by the reality of
her own feelings, and it appeared that this incident would be no exception. Of course, Varian knew
that he himself tended to be little better, and he had no idea how he might bring her out of her self-
imposed isolation. She had steadfastly refused to work with Jaina and Kalecgos any further, though
otherwise had behaved as a model officer seeing out the duration of her punishment. Varian had
waited up each night, hoping against hope that she would come to him, but it seemed that she
would not be moved.

Varian was not a man prone to insecurity, but after three days brooding over his argument with
Auriana, he had begun to question whether her reticence to reveal their secret relationship was
some kind of judgement on him. While he knew that she loved him deeply, he couldn't help but to
wonder if there was something he could have said or done to encourage her, or whether her
hesitation was driven by some sort of embarrassment or lack of faith in his love for her. More than
once, Varian had asked himself whether there was something he could do to convince her of the
depth of his love, but he had always come up short. Auriana didn't strike him as the type of woman
to be swayed by sonnets or shiny trinkets, and Varian wasn't sure what else men typically did to
win women over. His first marriage to Tiffin had been arranged, and while he had been fortunate
enough to fall deeply in love with her, he didn't really have any idea how he might go about
charming a woman.

His foul mood had not gone unnoticed by Anduin or his servants, who had collectively and silently
decided to give the King a wide berth wherever possible. Genn Greymane, too, had noticed
Varian's ill temper, but unlike the others, the King of Gilneas decided on a more direct approach.
He found Varian in his study late one afternoon, and barely waited for Varian to acknowledge his
knock before he entered the room.

"What can I do for you, Genn?" Varian asked, carefully placing his quill down on his desk and
trying to keep his voice neutral.

Despite their rocky first meetings, Greymane had become a great friend and confidante to the King
of Stormwind, and Varian had a lot of respect for the older man's opinion. Like Varian, Greymane
could be stubborn, strong-willed and arrogant, though the brasher aspects of his personality had
been tempered by the fall of Gilneas. He was a clever man, and a shrewd leader, his savage worgen
heart otherwise hidden by his smooth and courtly exterior. Despite their friendship, however,
Varian wasn't much in the mood for talking, and he hoped that whatever the other King wanted
wouldn't take long.

"I thought I might see if I could cheer you up," Greymane said, leaning up against the side of
Varian's desk and stroking his moustaches thoughtfully.

"Cheer me up?" Varian repeated, somewhat annoyed that Greymane had been able to read him so
easily. "I'm fine."

"You're terrifying the castle servants. Again," Greymane said flatly. "Don't worry yourself, Varian,
I'm not suggesting we sit around and talk about our feelings. I was about to head out for a hunt, and
I thought you might like to join me."

"Yes," Varian agreed, already on his feet before the worgen King had finished speaking.

Although he didn't really appreciate Greymane's interference, he was more than willing to join the older man for a hunt. Varian's mind was always clearest when he was doing something physical, and he hoped that some fresh air and physical exertion might ease his troubled heart.

"I thought you might say that," Greymane said, smiling slightly. "Did you want to change, or are you right as you are?"

"This will do," Varian said quickly, looking down at his loose shirt, breeches, and long boots. "The sooner we're outdoors, the better."

Without any further debate, Varian and Greymane walked in swift silence to the stables, stopping only to gather their knives and bows from the armoury, as well as an escort of half a dozen Stormwind guards. Both men preferred to hunt on foot, but would use horses to ride out into one of the many ample hunting grounds within Elwynn Forest. Greymane, of course, always hunted in his worgen form, while Varian relied on his preternatural senses and unparalleled physical strength. The two men were well matched, and had spent many enjoyable hours chasing deer and boar through the verdant green forests of Elwynn.

Once in the stables, Greymane quickly saddled up his hardy bay hunter, Duskheart, while Varian called for his fearsome pitch black charger, Indomitable. Varian would normally have ridden one of his lean, well-bred hunters, but today he felt like a challenge. Indomitable was exquisitely bred, and undoubtedly one of the finest horses alive, though he required a strong seat and a firm hand. Varian hadn't taken Indomitable out for some time, and he was looking forwards to the distraction that riding the high strung stallion would present.

The two kings mounted up with little preamble, and within minutes had turned onto the cobbled road leading out towards Stormwind's main gates. Indomitable danced excitedly beneath Varian as they walked, tossing his big head and pulling eagerly on the reins. Varian shared the stallion's excitement, but knew that he couldn't let him run until they were outside the gates and on the road to Elwynn proper. The guards followed at a respectful distance, carefully watching for any sign of trouble, but giving Greymane and Varian the space to talk freely. Mercifully, however, Greymane did not take advantage of the opportunity, and remained silent as they trotted outside the gates and down through Goldshire.

When riding through the village, Varian held his over-eager stallion to a stately walk, but once out on the open road, however, he slipped the reins and heeled Indomitable into a flat out gallop. The big stallion complied eagerly, taking the bit between his teeth and stretching out his long legs as he raced away. The big black was surprisingly fast for his size, and absolutely loved to run. The trees soon became a blur of green, and Varian grinned as the wind whipped at his cheeks. Greymane and the Royal Guard were left in his dust, but Varian didn't care. They would catch up eventually, of course, but right now, he needed the freedom that only the solitude of the wild outdoors could give him.

Varian let his horse run for over a mile before he pulled up outside one of his favourite hunting grounds and patted the magnificent animal proudly on the neck. Despite the speed of his run, Indomitable was barely lathered, and he pulled at Varian as if he were ready to go again at any moment. He pranced eagerly in a circle as Varian waited for the others, and in the end it was several long minutes before he heard the pounding of hooves and turned to see Duskheart and Greymane approaching.
Greymane's cheeks were ruddy from the ride, and he grinned broadly at Varian as he pulled his hunter to a halt. Varian's guards were soon to follow, though they looked rather less pleased to have had the King run off. Stormwind's guards were very dedicated to their jobs, though Varian was well aware that he wasn't an easy King to serve. Their eyes swept over him with rapid, practiced concern, and they only relaxed when they had determined that Varian was unharmed from his hectic gallop through the woods.

"Are you satisfied that I'm in one piece?" Varian jested, though the guards did not appear to be at all amused.

Shrugging, he dismounted, and handed Indomitable's reins to the nearest guard. Greymane did the same, turning over Duskheart before howling loudly as he shifted into his worgen form. The guards, too, dismounted and secured their horses, though they would not follow Varian and Greymane further into the forest. They would wait here, ready to assist their monarchs at a moment's notice, but not otherwise interfering with the hunt.

"Let's go," Varian said to Greymane, tucking a knife through his belt and securing his bow across his back.

Greymane snarled and followed after him, and the two kings loped easily into the forest. Varian could smell deer about a mile south, and from the way Greymane's shaggy ears perked up, he, too, had scented their prey. He did not drop to all fours, however, as Varian might have expected, and instead slowed his pace to a brisk walk.

"So," he growled, his voice taking on the distinctive timbre of a wolf, "Are you going to tell me what's going on?"

"I thought we weren't going to discuss feelings," Varian snarled, not wishing to be drawn into a lengthy discussion of his problems with Auriana.

"I said we weren't going to sit around and discuss feelings," Greymane rasped lightly. "We're walking outside."

"That's a very fine distinction," Varian muttered.

"You're a politician, Varian, you should know that fine distinctions make all the difference," the worgen added, sniffing the air lightly and adjusting their heading.

"I may be a king," Varian said firmly, "But I've never been a politician in my life."

Greymane laughed, throwing back his head and letting out the curious half howl, half chuckle that passed for mirth amongst the worgen.

"Seriously, though…" he added, "What's on your mind?"

"Alright," Varian conceded, though he did not bother to hide the displeasure in his voice. "Speaking… uh… hypothetically… how does… a man… not me, specifically… deal with a woman who is being… obstreperous? One who won't see reason?"

"I'm sure I wouldn't know," Greymane said slowly. "I don't think my wife has ever been obstreperous in her life. Stubborn, yes, but never difficult."

He looked over at Varian with sly eyes, his snout twitching into something that might have been a wolfish smile.
"Admittedly, I don't go out of my way to antagonise her…" he added.

"What makes you think I antagonise her?" Varian asked hotly.

"I thought we were speaking hypothetically?" Greymane said gently, trying not to smile. "Who ever said we were talking about you?"

Varian growled, more at his own mistake than anything else, and Greymane sighed patiently.

"Must we continue with this charade, Varian?" the older King said slowly, stopping abruptly. "I'm assuming that this has something to do with that little Commander of yours."

"She isn't mine…" Varian started, only to trail off as he realised that there was little point hiding the truth from Greymane any longer.

The old worgen's dark grey eyes were far too clever, and he raised a suspicious eyebrow as he waited for Varian to explain himself. Varian sighed and ducked his head, feeling for all the world like a young man confessing a first love to his father, rather than a forty year old King with a son of his own.

"Fine," he snapped. "She and I are… we're…"

"Lovers?" Greymane supplied, his sharp teeth spreading wide in a knowing grin.

"I hate that word," Varian grimaced. "I mean… we are, but it makes it sound… cheap. It's more than that, I'm…"

"In love with her?" Greymane suggested gently.

"Is it that obvious?" Varian said ruefully, shaking a hand through his dark hair and screwing up his nose.

"Varian, I've known you for some time now, and I've never seen you look at anyone the way you looked at her that night we all took dinner together. I had an inkling, even before you started feeling up my leg," the worgen King laughed.

"Er… sorry about that," Varian said quickly, genuinely embarrassed. "I hadn't seen her in a while, and…"

"You were so frustrated you were even willing to flirt with me?" Greymane teased, shaking his shaggy head. "As I said before, I'm flattered, Varian, really… you're a handsome man… but not so much my type…"

Even Varian had to crack a half smile at that, and he scratched his chin as Greymane began to walk ahead once more. The older King looked thoughtful, and it was some time before he spoke once more.

"Why is this a secret, Varian?" the older man asked. "It's obvious you care deeply for this woman. I know she isn't noble, but…"

"She is, actually. On her mother's side, out of Lordaeron," Varian said slowly. "Never claimed the title, but… she could."

"Then what's the problem?" Greymane asked, clearly surprised by the revelation. "I could see the difficulty if she were a commoner, but there's little scandal in courting a noblewoman."
"That's just it - I have no idea. I think she's afraid of how people would react, but lately… I'm not so sure. What if it's… me?" Varian said worriedly, giving voice to something he'd been trying very hard not to think about. "Tiffin and I… we were arranged. I was fortunate enough to fall in love with her, but I never had to win her… and even if I'd had to… Tiffin was such an open woman. I don't know even know where to start with someone like Auriana."

"Well, I'm no expert… but comparing your young lover to your deceased wife might not be the best approach…" Greymane said slowly.

"How idiotic do you think I am?" Varian said, raising an eyebrow. "I know that much, at least. And it isn't a comparison… they're different people, and I love them for different reasons."

Greymane titled his shaggy head to the side and studied Varian carefully.

"Has it occurred to you that her hesitation has nothing to do with you personally, and rather everything to do with her?" he suggested. "I'll admit, I don't know much about the Commander herself, but it occurs to me that this must all be very daunting to a young woman. You've lived your whole life knowing that you were destined to be the King, and even then I know you find your position stifling sometimes. She's going to be the talk of the city, and if everything goes the way I think you want it to, one day she's going to be the Queen. That's an awful lot to take in for someone who has been a soldier all her life."

"I suppose…. I suppose I fancied myself to be worth the trouble," Varian admitted, wrinkling up his nose in disgust at his own childishness.

"Oh, I'm sure you are," Greymane said quickly, "But you might need to be patient."

"I have been patient!" Varian protested, knowing full well that he sounded very petty. "I just… I never thought I'd feel this way again, Genn, and I want… I need her at my side. I didn't even realise how lonely I was until she came along. I'd convinced myself that I was doomed to be alone, and now that I have her… I don't want to lose her."

Varian scratched behind his ear, suddenly embarrassed. He wasn't one for emotions at the best of times, and revealing himself so plainly in front of the Gilnean King left him feeling very vulnerable. Greymane, however, seemed to take it in stride. Even in his worgen form he looked fatherly, and Varian felt a strange and sudden longing for a bond with the father he'd lost at such a young age. Greymane frowned, and Varian suddenly wondered if he, too, was thinking similar thoughts about his lost relationship with his only son.

"You've really fallen for this girl, haven't you?" Greymane observed, smiling faintly. "Which begs the question - why are you out in the forest talking to me, instead of her?"

"We… we had an argument. She won't talk to me," Varian huffed. "She's all but refused to see me."

"You're Varian Wrynn," Greymane retorted, shrugging his heavy shoulders. "When has someone else's reticence to listen ever stopped you?"

"Oh, funny," Varian snapped, fixing the Gilnean King with a withering stare. "Really, Genn, you're quite the comedian."

"Look, Varian - I'll make you a wager," Greymane said, smiling faintly. "If I bring down a deer first, you talk to Auriana. If you win the hunt… you still have to talk to Auriana. Agreed?"

"Bah. Agreed," Varian said grudgingly, "Though the victory will be mine."
Before Greymane could speak further, Varian darted into the forest, stretching out his long legs into the run. He heard the worgen howl behind him, and grinned as he sprinted through the trees. Greymane was blessed with the physical advantages of his hulking worgen form, but Varian was the more versatile, with reflexes far superior to those of any normal man. His sensitive hearing picked up the sound of a deer tracking softly through the forest a little ways south, and he smoothly changed direction to follow his prey.

Varian was unnaturally fast for such a big man, and yet he moved through the forest with barely a sound. He knew Greymane was somewhere off to his right, with the deer a little ways ahead. Sensing the closeness of his prey, Varian drew his bow and nocked an arrow in one smooth movement, ready to fire at a moment's notice. One of the distinct advantages that he possessed over Greymane was the advantage of range. If he could get off a clear shot, he'd bring the beast down before Greymane even had a chance to close with his vicious claws, and the hunt would belong to Varian.

Not wishing to startle to the deer, he slowed his pace, and crept carefully around to the north so that he might be upwind. He peered carefully through the trees, and realised that he was tracking not a deer, but rather a magnificent stag; a big buck that any hunter would be proud to claim. He heard the slight crack of a twig and his head instinctively snapped towards the sound, just barely able to make out the dark charcoal of Greymane's hide amongst the trees. The stag, too, had heard the sound, raising his great antlers and pawing nervously at the ground. Varian forced his twitching muscles to remain still, and ever so slowly raised his bow. He was looking for a shot to the eye, or perhaps below the shoulder and into the heart, so that the stag would die instantly. Hunting for food was one thing, but Varian was not the type of man who killed unnecessarily, and nor was he the kind to be cruel.

The stag must have sensed something in the movement, however, and he leapt away, flattening his ears and bounding away through the forest. From the other side, Greymane growled and threw himself into the chase, running on all fours in the peculiar yet graceful lope of a worgen. Varian snarled in frustration, turning and ducking back into the forest. He couldn't hope to outtrace the worgen and the stag on foot, but he could outsmart them. Varian had been hunting in the forests of Elwynn since he'd been barely old enough to ride a horse, and he knew the game trails like the back of his hand. Out in the forest, his mind was clearer than it had been in days, and his instincts hummed as he shot down a path perpendicular to the direction that Greymane and the stag had disappeared.

It was something of a risk to take this path, but if Varian had guessed right, the stag would pop out right in front of him, and he'd get one good shot off before Greymane closed the beast down. He had to be quick, however, and make his single shot count. Varian absolutely hated to lose, even in a friendly hunt, and he hoped that his gamble would pay off.

He increased his pace, his bow still ready, and his heart thumped wildly as he heard the sudden thunder of hooves and paws on the ground. Grinning savagely, Varian leapt forward, hurling a fallen log like it was nothing and rolling onto his shoulder. He sprang to his feet almost as soon as he landed, his bow up and ready as he awaited his chance. Time seemed to slow down, and Varian watched with a strange calm as Greymane chased the stag into a small clearing just ahead. The King of Stormwind let out a long, slow breath, paying careful attention to the powerful beat of his heart, and as the air left his lungs, released the arrow in between heartbeats. It flew truly, arching across the small clearing and taking the stag perfectly in the eye. The stag died instantly, its slender forelegs crumpling as the arrow pierced its brain, and it tumbled heavily into the dirt. Greymane howled his defeat, sliding to a stop mere feet behind the dead animal and panting heavily as he stood upright once more.
"The hunt is yours," Greymane conceded, bowing slightly before the younger King.

"You're getting slow, old man," Varian teased good-naturedly, walking over to inspect his kill. "Another few moments, and he would have been yours."

Greymane snarled and shook his head, but in the depths of his wolfish eyes, Varian distinctly saw amusement. The worgen king was almost as fiercely competitive as Varian, but he would not begrudge a fair kill. Varian had made an exceptional shot, and he knew Greymane well enough to know that the King of Gilneas respected skill and victory above almost all else.

As Varian had expected, the stag was something of a prize. He would have easily weighed five hundred pounds, and he was over six foot long. He was also an older deer, Varian was pleased to note, and likely would have already had offspring all over the forests. Varian hunted for food and food alone, and no desire to rid the forest of a proud bloodline. Greymane, too, seemed similarly impressed, and he howled wildly into the air as he crouched over the dead stag.

"Let's get him back to the Keep, shall we?" Varian asked, preparing to lift the stag onto Greymane's back. "I think we're going to eat well tonight."

Greymane grunted as he took the weight, but he bore up well. The deer was heavy, but worgen were strong, particularly across the shoulders, and the bulky Greymane was more than capable of carrying the dead deer back to the horses.

"You also won our wager," Greymane rumbled, shifting the stag into a more comfortable position. "Which I believe means you need to talk to your lady love."

"Very well. I'll take this one back to the kitchens, and then I'll go to her directly," Varian conceded. "Happy?"

"Of course. It's a fine day, Varian," Greymane said, turning his muzzle upwards into the breeze. "We have claimed a victorious kill, and tonight we will feast. And you - well, you have the honour of hunting the most dangerous game of all."

"What are you on about?" Varian asked, hitching his bow over his back as he followed Greymane back up the trail. "What's 'the most dangerous game of all'?"

"Isn't it obvious, my friend?" Greymane growled, baring his sharp teeth as his face split in a lupine grin. "The love of a good woman, of course..."
Upon arrival back in Stormwind, Varian returned Indomitable to the stables, before heading down to the kitchens with the slain stag slung about his shoulders. The Keep's head cook had been delighted to receive such a magnificent offering from the King, and had already set about cleaning and dressing the buck before Varian had even left the kitchens. Varian had to admit that he was looking forward to eating the fresh deer later that evening, though his first order of business was Auriana.

The late afternoon sun had just begun to dip below the horizon as Varian made his way to the Stormwind barracks, nodding politely to several soldiers and guardsmen as he went. Varian had an excellent relationship with the loyal soldiers who made up the Alliance army, and he felt far more at home walking across the plain stone floors of the barracks than he ever did in his throne room. He made his way quickly to the one of the top floors, where all of the officers' quarters were located. Auriana was not a prisoner, and she had been afforded quarters appropriate for her rank, though there were two guards stationed outside her door to ensure that she complied with the rules of her punishment. Both men saluted crisply as Varian approached, and moved to permit him entry to the room.

"Here for the Commander, sir?" the taller guard asked, his tone formal but friendly.

"Yes," Varian said. "Is she in?"

"Been here all day," the guard confirmed. "Er… if I might… she's been very quiet in there, my Lord. We've barely seen her for the last three days, and from all accounts she's been eating very poorly."

Varian sighed.

"Not to worry," he said, keeping his tone carefully neutral. "I'll have a word to her."

"As you wish, sir," the guard said, reaching across to rap sharply on the thick oak door. "Commander? King Varian to see you, ma'am."

There was a long silence, and for a moment Varian wondered whether he'd have to forcibly enter the room. The guard knocked once more, and Varian heard Auriana audibly sigh before she spoke.

"Thank you, Sergeant," she said quietly. "His Majesty may enter."

The sergeant nodded and pushed open the door, allowing Varian to step inside. Auriana was standing with her back to the King, though she turned slightly as he entered and closed the door behind him. She was wearing a well-made, dark tan dress, and her hair was simply but neatly knotted at the base of her head. Her bright blue eyes were wary, and Varian could see the tension in the sharp outline of her powerful muscles.

"Er… I…. I bought you flowers," Varian started awkwardly, reaching into the fold of his tunic and withdrawing the small posy of peaceblooms that he had hidden earlier.

He'd gathered the flowers from the side of the road as he and Greymane had ridden back to Stormwind, and tucked them beneath his shirt for safekeeping. It had looked a bit ridiculous; the big, brawny King of Stormwind kneeling down to pick the delicate white flowers like he was a fanciful young girl, but his guards were far too well trained to make any comment. Greymane had shown considerably less restraint, however, smirking knowingly to himself while Varian tried his
very best to ignore the lot of them.

Unfortunately, the small white blossoms had been somewhat crushed during travel, and Varian flushed red with embarrassment at the meagre offering. It didn't help that Auriana frowned and looked completely confused, and he nervously wondered if she were displeased.

"They're… for me?" she said slowly.

"Of course," Varian said. "I... I know they aren't exactly…"

"No one's ever brought me flowers before," Auriana said quietly, as if she hadn't heard him. She turned to face him fully, and she reached out a trembling hand to accept the posy. Her cool fingers brushed gently against Varian's weathered skin as she did so, and they both shivered.

"Varian…"

"No," Varian said quickly, holding up a hand. "I will speak, and you will listen. Please."

Auriana looked as if she would dearly love to argue with him, but for once chose to remain silent. She sat back on her bed, the posy resting carefully in her lap, her expression both curious and pensive.

"I love you, Auriana. I want you, and I don't apologise for that. I never will," Varian said. "You've saved my life in so many ways, and I want nothing more than for you to take your rightful place at my side."

He spoke softly but firmly, and he could see her shift uncomfortably under the power of his stare. Varian didn't want to intimidate her, but nor did he want to leave any doubt in her mind as to the power of his convictions.

"That said…" he continued, "I will admit that my impatience to show you off to the world has sometimes overridden my better judgement. As much as I would like to pretend otherwise in this case, I am the King of Stormwind, and my position does present certain challenges… particularly for you. I've not been fully sympathetic to those issues."

"I appreciate that," Auriana said seriously, looking up at him through her dark eyelashes. "Really, I…"

"Let me finish," Varian said softly, holding up a hand. "After some careful thought, I've come to realise that… at the end of the day, what I really want is you. Whether I have to wait for a year or for the rest of my life... I'll do it gladly. I apologise if you ever feel like I've pushed you."

Auriana touched a hand to her chest, as if it was suddenly hard to breathe, but the ghost of a smile crossed her features.

"Can I speak now?" she asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Go ahead," Varian said, crossing his arms.

"I'm sorry we fought the other day," she said, looking down at her hands with a sigh. "And I'm sorry I've been avoiding you. I wish I could say that this was all a consequence of my… episode… the other day, but the truth is… I was embarrassed."

"Embarrassed?"
"I've been... well, I've been selfish. I've been so focused on why I want to keep our secret, that I never really considered how it was affecting you," she admitted, flushing.

She placed her posy of peacebloom very gently on her pillow, and rose gracefully to stand before him. Her expression hardened, and she frowned, as if unsure what to say.

"What is it?" Varian asked.

"Varian..." she said slowly, "You really never... since she died? Not in twenty years?"

Varian sighed, and rubbed a hand across his temples. He had half been expecting the question, but even then, it was not something he was entirely comfortable addressing.

"No. I... for the first few years, after she died, I could barely bring myself to look at a woman, let alone ever consider... anything else. I won't deny that I've been lonely... I've sought the company of a few women in the past... but never for anything more than physical comfort. Then there was that whole ugly business with Katrana Prestor..." he said, shuddering, "But there's never been genuine affection. Never love. Until you."

"Varian... I'm so sorry..." she said painfully, shaking her head. "I..."

"Don't be," he said roughly. "I just need to know that... that you and I are alright."

"Of course," she said, fixing him with a wide eyed stare. "More than that, I... I think I can say that my giving up this secret is no longer a matter of if... but... but when."

"Really?" Varian demanded, unable to stop himself from stepping forwards and gripping her shoulders urgently.

"Don't get me wrong," she said quickly. "I'm still not ready for our relationship to be public knowledge... but I'm getting there. I... I'm afraid of what's going to happen when all this comes out, but... you... you're worth it."

She smiled tentatively, and took a small step closer. Emboldened by her move, Varian released her shoulders and gently stroked her arms. She trembled slightly at his touch, and came forward willingly as he reached for her waist and pulled her closer.

"I love you, you know," she said, wrapping her arms around his neck. "And... thank you for the flowers. They're beautiful, really, if a little... crushed."

Auriana very rarely expressed her feelings in words, and Varian could count on one hand the times she had actually said those few precious words out loud. His heart leapt, and he tightened his arms willingly as he reached for her waist and pulled her closer.

"I love you, you know," she said, wrapping her arms around his neck. "And... thank you for the flowers. They're beautiful, really, if a little... crushed."

Auriana very rarely expressed her feelings in words, and Varian could count on one hand the times she had actually said those few precious words out loud. His heart leapt, and he tightened his arms around her slender frame as he lowered his head to kiss her deeply.

At first, his kiss was soft and sensual; a gentle, tentative exploration of her willing mouth, but it soon deepened into something heated and wildly passionate. Varian was at heart a physical being, and he knew he could never really find the words to explain his love for Auriana. What he could do, however, was show her; leave her breathless and gasping from the strength of his passion.

Varian knew full well that the Stormwind barracks were perhaps not the most appropriate place for an amorous encounter, but he decided he didn't care. He fumbled for his belt buckle as he pushed Auriana back towards the wall, fully intending to take her right then and there.

"Varian... what are you...?" she gasped, nevertheless allowing herself to be pressed wantonly up against the cool stone.
"What does it look like I'm doing, Auriana?" he said hotly.

"Here?"

"The thing is, Auri..." Varian murmured, running his hands over the generous curves of her breasts, "I've gotten rather used to having you in my bed every night, and since our little argument... I've been rather lonely."

"There are two guards out there..." she protested weakly, while at the same time exposing her throat for him to kiss.

"I don't care..." Varian said hotly, hungrily pressing his lips against her alabaster skin. "Do you?"

"I... oh, Varian... but what if they hear?"

"Then you're going to have to be a good girl and keep quiet, aren't you?" he growled softly.

He hitched Auriana's skirts up over her hips, roughly pushing aside her soft cotton undergarments as he lifted her easily into the air. Making love to Auriana had become second nature to Varian, almost as easy as breathing, and he pushed inside her with a well-practiced thrust. She moaned, and while the soft sound was music to Varian's ears, he couldn't very well have guards barging in on such a private and intimate moment. He roughly covered her mouth with a single broad hand, and he bent his head to whisper throatily in her ear.

"What did I just say?"

Auriana whimpered slightly, and in lieu of words she responded by wrapping her legs around his waist and tangling her hands in his hair. Varian grinned wolfishly, gripping her firmly by the buttocks as he buried his face in her neck and pounded her roughly against the wall. He kept his other hand held firmly across her mouth, knowing full well how loud she could be in the grips of passion. Normally, Varian loved to hear her scream, though admittedly there was something intoxicating about taking her this way; desperately, wantonly, without a care for any other person in the world. All he could hear was the soft thump of her back against the wall, her stifled moans, and his own heavy breathing. The rough cotton of her dress contrasted sharply with the bare, silky skin of her buttocks beneath his fingers, and Varian was driven wild by the primal, heady scent of sweat and lust and flowers upon her flesh.

He thrust inside her as deeply as he was able, and was amply rewarded for his boldness as she tightened her thighs about his waist and dug her nails into his shoulders. In the month that Auriana had been confined to Stormwind, he had come to know her body like the back of his hand, and soon he could feel her body shaking in such a way that indicated she was rapidly approaching her peak. There was nothing that Varian loved more in the world than to press Auriana to release, and in response he increased his pace, ravaging her furiously as her body twisted licentiously in his arms. Groaning, she arched her back, and actually bit down on his hand to prevent from crying out. The sudden pain only served to drive Varian to greater passion, however, and he finished her with a single, powerful push of his hips. She closed her eyes and threw her head back, her soft flesh tightening around his length as she came, and the sight of her pleasure was enough to send Varian tumbling over the edge in her wake.

As his body spasmed one final time, Varian gently lowered Auriana to the ground and rested his forehead against her own. She wobbled slightly as her feet hit the floor, and she was forced to cling to Varian's chest as she struggled regain her balance. Not that he minded, of course, as there was something immensely satisfying about having reduced Auriana to putty in his hands. He pressed her carefully back against the wall, holding her hips steady as the tremors that still shook her body
gradually subsided.

"Auriana…" he breathed huskily, closing his eyes.

She mumbled something inaudible and rested her head against his chest, still panting desperately. For a long moment, they stood together in contented silence, until there came a sudden loud knock at the door. Their peaceful embrace was shattered by the sound, and Auriana practically shoved Varian away as she scrambled to readjust her dress and smooth her dishevelled hair. Her face turned an unbecoming shade of bright red, and her blue eyes opened impossibly wide.

"Is everything alright, Your Majesty?" one of the guards called anxiously. "We heard… uh… banging noises."

Auriana's blush somehow deepened, and she clapped a hand over her mouth in horror.

"Nothing to concern yourself with, Guardsman," Varian said loudly, with a sidelong glance at Auriana. "I was merely… ah… debriefing… the Commander, and tripped on the corner of her bed."

"Oh," the guard said quietly, though he still sounded faintly concerned. "No trouble then, my Lord?"

"No trouble at all," Varian said firmly.

"Well, if you're sure, my Lord," the guard said skeptically.

"I'm sure. I'll be out in a moment," Varian said, waiting until he heard the guards moved back into position before he turned back to Auriana.

"Debriefing the Commander?" she repeated quietly, sounding half torn between amusement and absolute mortification. "Really?"

"Well, technically, I didn't say anything that wasn't true…" Varian said, offering her what he hoped was a winning smile.

She gave him an exaggerated frown, but he could see a playful gleam in her eyes.

"We probably shouldn't have done that," she said shyly.

"You could have said no," Varian shrugged, running a finger gently down the side of her cheek. "Though I'm rather glad you didn't."

"I could have said no? How do people who say no to you generally fare, Varian Wrynn?" she said sarcastically, a slow grin spreading across her face. "I think it would be easier to take on the entire Iron Horde myself, than to resist you when you look at me like that. Or when you…er… throw me up against a wall."

"Fair point," he admitted, "Though I'd never dream of forcing you to do anything against your will…"

"I know," she said seriously, resting her head against his chest. "I know. Not that you'd ever need to… I'm entirely yours. I'd do anything for you, Varian."

Her voice was muffled slightly by Varian's own large chest, but her soft words were still clearly audible, and they fired something in the back of Varian's mind. He frowned and gathered her
closer, forcing himself to concentrate as the vague notion began to coalesce into something resembling an actual plan.

"Say that again," he murmured.

"'I'd do anything for you'?" she repeated, twisting to look up at him with luminous eyes. "You know I would. Why do you ask?"

"It just… I just had a thought," he said slowly, turning the fresh idea over in his mind. "How long will you still be in Stormwind?"

"I'm due to return to Draenor in four days," she said slowly, her beautiful face confused. "Why? What's going on?"

"I think I know how to help you," Varian replied earnestly. "If I got Jaina and Kalec back to the arena, would you come? I know this has been hard on you, but I really think you have it within you to master your rage."

"Varian…" she sighed, all her earlier playfulness vanishing in an instant.

"Please, Auriana. Trust me," he said seriously. "I think this could work."

She bit her lip doubtfully, staring up at him with wide eyes. At the same time, she unconsciously pressed closer to him, as if his physical form could somehow shield her from the darker side of her own nature.

"I'm not sure…" she said apprehensively. "What do you want to try?"

"You'll just have to trust me," Varian said, cupping her pale face reverentially between his large hands. "The arena. Tomorrow afternoon. I'll make sure no one else is around, you won't have to worry about a repeat of… of the other day."

Auriana winced, and Varian felt her body tense as she recalled turning her rage on the innocent bystanders in the arena.

"I just don't want to hurt someone," she said quietly. "I don't want to be a… a monster."

"Listen to me," he said, gently stroking her hair. "You aren't a monster. Far from it, in fact. I've seen many monsters in my lifetime, and you are nothing like them."

Varian knew she had just given voice to her greatest fear, and he was determined to convince her of her own inherent goodness. She was dangerous, yes, and powerful, but Varian would not stand to have her fall into a deep pit of despair and self-loathing after one bad experience.

"The arena. Tomorrow," he repeated firmly. "We're going to fix this… and we're going to do it together."
True to his word, Varian arrived at Auriana's quarters a few hours after midday, ready to escort her down to the arena. He looked serious but strangely eager, and Auriana wondered what he was planning. Varian was a strong and powerful warrior, perhaps the greatest of his kind in the world, but he didn't possess a single drop of magical talent, as far as she knew. Auriana had discussed magical theory with him on several occasions, and while his knowledge had certainly improved, he had barely progressed beyond a very basic understanding of the intricacies of magic. Auriana had no idea what the afternoon had in store, but surprisingly Varian had come through for her in magical matters before, and in the end her trust in him won out.

She followed him silently through the barracks and out into the arena, where Jaina and Kalecgos were waiting. They made for an impressive couple, the immaculately dressed Archmage and the imposing dragon lord, and Auriana couldn't help but to find herself a little intimidated. Both Jaina and Kalecgos bowed slightly to Varian as he approached, before they both turned to look Auriana over with uncannily similar expressions.

"Good afternoon, Your Majesty," Kalecgos said smoothly. "And you, Commander. How are you this fine day?"

"I'm… well, my Lord, thank you," Auriana said slowly. "Though I'd feel a bit better if I knew what His Majesty had planned."

"You haven't told her?" Jaina said quickly, putting her hands on her hips. "Varian…"

"Just… give me a minute," the King said, shooting the beautiful Archmage a stern look. "Auriana… can I have a word?"

He walked over and gently gripped Auriana's upper arm, pulling her aside so they could talk in relative privacy. She followed willingly, though she was somewhat put off by the fact that everyone else seemed to know what was going on. It didn't help that Varian wouldn't quite meet her gaze, and it was some time before he finally spoke.

"You said to me once," he said quietly, his expression very serious, "That you came back for me. After Highmaul… you said that you stopped… because of me. Because you heard my voice."

"Varian, what are you…" she began, only for her heart to leap into her throat as she realised what he was implying. "No."

"Hear me out. If there are certain triggers for your rage, is it not also possible that there are certain things that could bring you back?" he asked. "For example… ah… me?"

Auriana stepped back, certain that she must have misheard. While it was true that the thought of Varian had brought her back from the edge before, what he seemed to be suggesting was insane.

"You want to throw yourself on my mercy like… like… bait?" she exclaimed.

"I know you'd never hurt me," Varian said firmly. "I think… I know that your love for me is greater than your rage."

"It's not me you're trusting!" she said sharply. "It's… it's her… and she's chaos and pain and everything bad inside me. I can't… I can't turn her loose on you."
Auriana was very aware of Jaina and Kalecgos nearby, and she fought to keep her voice quiet. Varian was unquestioningly a brave man, but she found it hard to believe he’d be so willing to risk his life after a lost cause. Auriana knew better than anyone the kind of damage she could do when fully roused, and while Varian’s faith in her was admittedly heartening, she didn’t share his belief.

Varian clearly read her objection in her eyes, and he frowned as he reached forward to take her by the shoulders. His hands were so large that most of Auriana’s arms disappeared in his grasp, but the gesture gave her little comfort.

"Listen to me," he said quietly. "I trust you, but you need to learn to trust yourself. Your rage is as much a part of you as anything else, Auriana, and you can't run away from yourself forever. Believe me, I've tried, and I know better than anyone that it doesn't work. Just as I was made whole - Varian and Lo'gosh - so must you reconcile your rage with your greater self."

His words struck a nerve, but Auriana could not allow herself to be persuaded. Varian was far too important, both to her personally and to Stormwind and the Alliance more broadly. She shook her head and looked down at the ground, unable to consent, but unable to deny that there was merit in Varian’s argument.

"I've done this," Varian added. "I've been where you are. Perhaps not quite on the same scale, but I certainly understand something of what you're going through. Two people can't share the same body forever. Eventually someone has to win. Personally, I'd prefer that the winner be you, rather than your rage."

Auriana winced and squeezed her eyes shut, finding she had nothing to say. Varian’s voice was kind, but his soft tone did little to disguise the hard sheen of steely determination in his eyes.

"Kalecgos and Jaina agree with me," he prompted, plainly trying to elicit some sort of response. "They're here to help. If anything goes wrong, they'll cut you off. I'll be perfectly safe."

"So the three of you have conspired against me?" Auriana muttered.

"It's hardly a conspiracy," Varian said irritably, his forehead creasing. "Auriana, you can't go on this way. You can't be in the field like this, knowing that you could snap at any moment without any way back. I saw you after Highmaul, and again after the incident in this very arena. I can't have that in one of my field commanders, and I certainly can't have that happening to... to the woman I love."

"With respect, Varian, don't you think I know that? I've been living with this for years," she said, unable to keep the heat from her voice. "But that doesn't mean you should put yourself in the line of fire. You're too important."

"The choice isn't yours," he said, his tone leaving no room for argument. "This is my risk to take."

"Whatever else you are to me, Varian, you're also the High King. I took an oath to protect you. If I let you do this, I'm in violation of that oath," Auriana pleaded.

"And as you're so fond of saying to me, I'm Varian Wrynn. I don't need anyone else's permission. I could order you," he pointed out.

"Would you really?" she asked quietly, subconsciously standing to attention.

Varian was not afraid of treating her as a subordinate when necessary, as most recently evidenced by her temporary incarceration in Stormwind, but she had to wonder if he’d push her in this particular instance.
"No," he admitted. "But I will use my considerable powers of persuasion to convince you. Please. Let me do this for you."

Auriana sighed, and looked over towards Jaina and Kalecgos. The dragon aspect wore the same curious, mildly amused expression that he always had, though Jaina's elegant features were sharp and fiercely determined. Her icy blue eyes bored into Auriana's own, and it was all Auriana could do not to look away.

"Jaina… could we not try this without magic?" she asked.

"What would be the point? We know you can come back if you've been exhausted or cut off, your work with Kalecgos has proven that," Jaina said. "What I want from you is control. I want you to be able to work within the grips your rage, and I think Varian here is a viable mental trigger. I can't say I'm thrilled to be risking the High King of the Alliance, but he made his case well, and I'm inclined to agree."

Auriana looked nervously back at Varian, but found no quarter in his hard expression.

"I suppose I'm outnumbered," she sighed, reluctantly conceding the point. "Though… promise me that you'll cut me off the second anything even looks like it might be going wrong. Please?"

"I promise," Jaina said gently, with a quick sideways glance at Kalecgos. "I won't take chances with his life, Commander, you know that. Trust me."

"Alright," Auriana said, trying not to let her voice shake. "Where do you want me?"

"In the middle," Varian instructed, gently prodding her in the right direction. "I'll stand over here, and I suppose… well, you do whatever it is that you do. Oh, and don't even think of pretending that you can't touch your rage. I'm not letting you run away this time."

Auriana tried very hard to look as if that hadn't been exactly what she'd been thinking, but Varian knew her far too well, and he shook his head in exasperation. She sighed, and as instructed, reached for her rage. Although Auriana had struggled over the past month to really let herself go, she found it relatively easy to conjure a vision of Cathelora Anguile as a trigger for her fierce anger. The thought of the tall redhead with her hand on Varian's thigh sent a fierce heat burning across Auriana's cheeks and down into her stomach, and despite her considerable reluctance, she latched on to the uncomfortable feeling and held fast.

She had fully experienced her rage on a number of separate occasions, and by now she knew what to expect. It began as a hot feeling around her heart, which quickly turned into a roaring fire that threatened to burn her from the inside out. Her breathing rapidly increased until it hit fever pitch, and she could feel the thrill of adrenaline racing through her veins. A cloud of dark red descended over her vision, and she no longer saw the distinct faces of Varian, Jaina, and Kalecgos. To her rage, all she saw was three threats; three heartbeats just begging to be extinguished by the furious flames of her relentless magic.

"Auriana?" Varian asked cautiously. "Are you still in there?"

Pathetic little King of Stormwind, Auriana snarled, reaching blindly for her magic. Desperate puppet. I'll show you real power...

Unable to control herself, Auriana roared in fury as blinked forwards and conjured an eight foot high wall of pure flame. She sent it sweeping towards the unarmed Varian without hesitation, already calling on more magic as she watched the flames race across the arena floor. To his credit,
however, Varian didn't flinch, not even bothering to step back as the flames threatened to consume him utterly. He relied instead on Jaina and Kalecgos, who immediately countered the spell with two coordinated bursts of frost magic, and Auriana hissed in disappointment as the fire burned out a mere foot in front of his face.

She dodged to the side, dimly realising that if she wanted to do any damage to Varian, she'd have to go through Jaina and Kalecgos. She blinked towards Jaina, calling on her deepest reserves of magic as she prepared to send the Archmage of the Kirin Tor to an early grave.

"Varian!" Jaina shouted warningly, the fear in her voice only serving to urge Auriana onward.

"I know!" the King shouted back. "I've got her."

Varian darted forwards with impossible speed, and physically intercepted Auriana before she could close in on Jaina. His outline shimmered strangely, and in the back of her mind Auriana realised that Jaina and Kalecgos had protected him with a shield. He grasped her wrists tightly, forcing them behind her back as he trapped her painfully against his chest. His powerful arms made for a rather effective prison, and Auriana howled in fury as she struggled impotently against his crushing grip.

"Auriana!" he snapped, holding her steady. "It's me. You know me. You don't want to hurt me."

"Let me go," she snarled, staring up at him with hateful eyes. "Let me go, or you will burn."

"No," he said, his voice infuriatingly calm as he lowered his head to meet her eyes. "I will not let you go. I'll never let you go. Come on, Auri, fight it… fight it for me. You control your rage, it doesn't control you."

His words had a strangely hypnotic effect, and with a sudden fresh burst of anger, Auriana realised he was somehow pulling her back from the edge. Her rage refused to be beaten so easily, however, and her limbs shook with effort as she fought to resist the temptation of his deep, soothing voice. She could not cast magic with her hands pinned behind her back, and nor could she manoeuvre effectively when she and Varian were standing this close. Desperate to escape, she snapped her head upwards, the hard point at the top of her skull impacting Varian's heavy chin with a stunning crack. Auriana knew she couldn't hit him hard enough to do any real damage, but the surprise of her movement was enough that his grip loosened, and as he staggered backwards, she took the opportunity to blink away.

Snarling triumphantly, she reached deep into her magic reserves and used her reckless power to tear apart the shield keeping Varian safe from her fury. Before Jaina and Kalecgos could react, she lifted her hand to call down a veritable storm of death and destruction... only to find herself curiously unable to finish the spell. Varian was shaking his head dazedly, and there was something so oddly vulnerable and human about the gesture that Auriana hesitated.

Her hand was still outstretched towards him, flames dancing at her fingertips, but she no longer felt an all-consuming urge to burn him to a crisp. His quiet words had stirred something deep within her soul, and she felt like she was being torn apart as her thoughts fluctuated wildly between wanting to protect him at all costs, and wanting to see him burn for daring to restrain her.

"Auri?" Varian said quietly, taking a tentative step forwards as if he had somehow sensed the change within her.

Auriana's rage still boiled in her very bones, but some shred of her real consciousness began to emerge as she stared deep into Varian's eyes. She could actually see him, now, not just a nameless,
shapeless threat, and the longer she hesitated, the more difficult it was to bring her spellpower to bear against him. Part of her still saw Varian as a danger to be eliminated, but she saw other things now, too: memories of his wry smile, his touch, his sarcastic humour. Auriana saw the way he curled protectively around her body after making love, and the look in his eyes right before he moved to kiss her. She heard the desperation and deep passion in his voice the first time he had confessed his love for her, and she knew right then that she could never again turn her powers against him.

"It hurts," she choked, her throat raw, though with a start she realised she was now somewhat lucid.

"I know," he said quietly. "I know. But I also know you're stronger than the pain. Stronger than your rage. Control yourself."

Auriana found herself nodding blindly, though her rage still bubbled away beneath the surface. Her breathing was strained, and her vision began to swim slightly as she fought to keep herself in check.

"Varian…" she heard Jaina say softly. "Back away, please. I think we've got her right where we want her."

"Are you sure?" Varian said quietly, never taking his eyes off Auriana.

"Quite sure," Jaina said firmly. "This is precisely what we were hoping for. You've done your part, now comes the real test. Kalec?"

"I've got her," the blue dragon lord said, shaking his sleeves back as he stepped forward and prepared his magic.

"Remember, Auriana," Varian said, moving slowly away to stand beside Jaina. "Control. I'm right here."

"Auriana? Can you hear me?" Kalecgos said soothingly, very slowly raising his hands. "I'd like to see if we can duel."

Auriana's head snapped towards the blue dragon and her limited sense of control began to waver. She dearly wanted to indulge Kalecgos' request; not with control, but rather with fire, and it took everything she had not to immediately throw herself towards him. Part of her longed to test herself against the mighty dragon Aspect, to see if she had what it took to match one of the most powerful beings on the planet, but the echo of Varian's quiet voice held her in place.

"Good…" Kalecgos said, his eyes darting briefly to Varian. "Alright, Commander, let's see what you can do…"

He raised his hands into a classic defensive position, and Auriana took his movement as permission. She summoned a great pyroblast and sent it hurtling towards the dragon's head, and in seconds they were locked into the fastest and most brutal duel Auriana had ever fought in her life. Auriana normally associated her rage with a frenetic sense of pain and audacity, but today, there was something different about the way she burned. As she began to cast, she felt an unusual synergy between her rage and her magic, and for the first time she felt as if she was no longer at war within herself. Both forces tugged at her psyche, each trying to tempt her over the edge and down into a dark pit of frantic, swirling power, but part of her was able to hold back and retain some semblance of control. Some of her usual sense of panic and unreality had faded, and despite her brightly burning anger, she was actually able to think.

The feeling was undeniably wonderful, and with a wild grin Auriana began to hurl her magic with
increasing recklessness and rapidity. Kalecgos met her spell for spell, as she had well expected, but Auriana knew her own powers were not insignificant. Her rage allowed her access to a wellspring of magic far beyond her ordinary abilities, and she used her newfound understanding of the balance between chaos and control to push herself to the very limits of her considerable talent.

Unfortunately, while Auriana's mind and soul were willing, her flesh was not quite so cooperative. While Kalecgos seemed to possess an endless supply of physical stamina, Auriana was only mortal, and eventually she was forced to pay the price for her reckless use of magic. She realised belatedly that she was drawing on too much power, only noticing when she tasted the warm, distinctive tang of blood on her lips. Her head spun painfully, and hot bile rose in her throat as she tried and failed to keep going. As simple fire spell fizzled away into nothingness, she fell to her knees, barely able to lift her head. Her rage demanded that she get up, that she keep fighting, but by this stage she was completely and utterly spent. From the corner of her eye she saw Kalecgos lower his hands and step forward in concern, but she was now too far gone to care. The world around her twisted strangely, and she saw a brief burst of strange and unsettling colours before everything finally faded to black.

When Auriana eventually came to, the first thing she noticed was a relentless throbbing at the top of her head. She vaguely remembered head-butting Varian's chin, and realised that she'd probably done far more damage to herself than to him. She blinked rapidly, and could just make out Jaina and Kalecgos standing a few feet away on her left hand side, while Varian loomed anxiously near her feet.

"I think… I think it worked," Jaina said disbelievingly. "Auriana… are you alright?"

"Just… give me a minute…" she mumbled, resting her head gratefully back on the arena floor.

Auriana knew she was getting dirt and sweat and Light knew what else in her hair, but she didn't have anything left within her to care. Her heart was still racing and her limbs quivered uncontrollably, and dark black spots danced across her vision. She could still feel the lingering traces of her rage, and knew it wouldn't take much to push her back over the edge. For now, however, she remained herself, if a rather bloody and exhausted, and she squeezed her eyes tightly shut against her terrible headache as she attempted to get her breathing back under control.

Mercifully, Varian, Jaina, and Kalecgos stood back, and simply watched in silence as she sought to regain full mastery of her wayward self.

Eventually, the sense of terrible pressure in her head faded, and she was able to shakily pull herself upright into a sitting position. She half-raised a hand to let the anxious looking Varian know that she was alright, but was not yet ready to stand up. Kalecgos nodded approvingly, looking down at Auriana like she was some kind of particularly interesting science experiment.

"Excellent work, Commander…" he said slowly, "You appear to have regained full control. Remarkable."

"Unfortunately," Auriana said hoarsely, surprised by how raw her voice sounded, "While we may have found something resembling a solution, it isn't very useful. I can't exactly have the High King of the Alliance follow me around on the battlefield just in case I lose my temper."

"I… actually wouldn't be opposed to that…" Varian said, lifting an eyebrow. "You know me, I'm always up for a fight."

Auriana re-opened her eyes, and gave him a withering stare. She knew he was joking, at least mostly, though she also knew he wouldn't actually say no if given a genuine opportunity to go fight
at the front. He smiled faintly and offered her a hand to her feet, which Auriana accepted gratefully. The world spun a little he pulled her upright, and she had to lean into his forearms heavily for balance. Her legs felt weak and watery, as if she'd just run twenty miles, and she found it hard to concentrate with the dull pounding in her skull. Fortunately, Varian didn't seem to want to let go of her anytime soon, and she accepted his support without argument.

"That's a fair point," Jaina agreed, her blue eyes sharp as she eyed Auriana up and down, "But I am satisfied that you've made progress. I think if you continue to work hard, we'll find a more permanent solution. Good idea, Varian."

"It's been known to happen," Varian said drily. "On occasion."

"Yes, well..." Jaina said, her mouth twitching. "With your permission, Varian, I'd like to take Auriana back to Dalaran overnight for observation. We're treading in uncharted waters here, I don't want her to lapse back into an episode without supervision."

Auriana frowned at Jaina's blunt assessment of the situation, but she had to admit the Archmage had a point. She had never been able to control her rage in such a fashion before, and a part of her still wondered if her success wasn't some sort of fluke, or trick. If she were going to have a relapse, she'd rather be in Dalaran, around many powerful mages who could take her down, rather than amongst the unsuspecting populace of Stormwind.

"Agreed," Varian said, "Though... could you give us moment?"

He scratched the back of his head thoughtfully as Jaina and Kalecgos both bowed and walked a short distance away, giving him the space to address Auriana in private.

"I'm proud of you," he said seriously, placing a hand on her shoulder. "That... that took courage."

"I think it took just about everything I had. I feel awful. And you... well, you shouldn't have taken the risk," Auriana replied, though she appreciated the comfort of both his words and his touch. "I nearly took your head off with that first strike."

"At least it worked though, right?" Varian said, tracing gentle circles on her arm with his thumb.

"Apparently..." she said quietly, relaxing for the first time since she had entered the arena. "Er... I'm sorry about your chin."

"Don't be. Not the worst I've ever had... though that's no slight against your head-butting abilities. It was a good hit, I was actually rather impressed," he said, grinning.

Varian was not the kind of man who smiled very often, and even when he did, he was more prone to a sly smirk or a mere upward twitch of the lips. When he truly smiled, however, the effect was remarkable, and Auriana found herself momentarily stunned by his handsome face and powerful presence.

"With Jaina spiriting you away to Dalaran, I guess I won't see you very much before you leave for Draenor," he added, disappointment evident in his voice.

"I guess not," she agreed. "You could refuse Jaina, I suppose..."

"No," he said quickly. "She's right, you'd be safer in Dalaran."

"Still... perhaps there's another option. We're about to launch our first ships to Tanaan. Isn't it usually traditional to have some sort of ceremony when one builds a new ship?" she suggested.
"You want me to come back to Draenor with you?" Varian asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Just for a couple of days. This isn't like your first trip to Draenor, when we barely had any hold on the continent whatsoever. Lunarfall is safe," she insisted.

"I suppose I could," Varian mused. "Certainly, I could spare a day or two. Would… would you like that?"

"I asked, didn't I?" she said quietly, touching a hand to her eyes. "Besides, I think it would be good for morale. We have no idea what we're going to find in Tanaan, our soldiers could use the inspiration."

"You think?" he said, thoughtfully scratching his chin.

"You've no idea how much your men look up to you, Varian," she said seriously. "I know it would mean a lot to them to see you."

Varian harrumphed slightly, but Auriana could tell he was pleased. She could also tell from the look on his face that he wanted to kiss her, but wouldn't risk such a thing out in the open. He settled instead for tightening his grip on her shoulder, and he stared down at her with undisguised tenderness.

"And what about you?" he teased softly, his eyes crinkling warmly. "Do you look up to me?"

"Of course I do," she said drily, offering him a tired but genuine grin. "I'm only five foot tall..."
Several days later, Varian stood in his throne room, eagerly awaiting Auriana's return from Dalaran. Varian had given her permission to spend the last few days in the great floating city, so that she might rest under Jaina Proudmoore's watchful eyes. By all accounts, she had recovered well from her recent ordeal in the arena, and Varian was hopeful that her control of her berserker rage would continue to improve.

Today, she was due to return to Draenor, having served out her month long sentence for her role in the incident with Warchief Vol'jin. Varian had agreed to return with her, ostensibly to oversee the launch of the Alliance fleet to Tanaan, though he was also looking forward to being out in the field. He had felt terribly stifled in the Keep of late, knowing that his troops were out fighting a war, and he welcomed any opportunity to make the journey to Draenor. He would be accompanied by no less than two dozen guards, of course, but it was still a chance to get out there, amongst his soldiers, where he belonged.

Auriana arrived right on time, as usual, appearing in the centre of the throne room in a blaze of arcane light. She was neatly dressed in an officer's uniform, her long hair pulled tightly back, and Varian was pleased to see that she looked both fit and well rested. She carried herself with an air of lightness and confidence that he hadn't seen in her in a long time, if ever, and he wondered if their breakthrough in the arena had done more for her than he had initially realised.

Varian nodded warmly as she bowed respectfully before him, and she gave him a very slight smile.

"Morning, Commander," he said formally, well aware of the royal guards in the room.

"Your Majesty," she replied. "Shall we get going?"

"We'd like to go through first, sir," the Guard-Captain said, looking between Varian and Auriana. "Conduct a quick inspection. We don't want a repeat of your first visit to Draenor."

"Very well," Varian agreed, though privately he felt the guardsmen were being overcautious.

"Auriana?"

She nodded and raised her hands, calling on her power to open a portal through to Lunarfall. Varian's guardsmen quickly organised themselves into two neat lines, filing silently through the portal with their weapons drawn. They were quick, efficient, and deadly, and Varian trusted them with his life, though he had little reason to believe he'd be in danger in the heart of Lunarfall Garrison.

The guard's caution also served another unintentional purpose, in that Varian and Auriana were briefly left alone as they waited for the guard's signal of approval. Varian decided to take advantage of their temporary absence, stepping closer to Auriana and gazing down at her fondly. His good mood faded slightly as his gaze fell upon her arms, however, and the dark bruises that marked her slender white wrists. He then realised that he must have injured her when he'd restrained her the other day in the arena, and he felt his ears go red with shame.

"Sorry," he said, gesturing her arms.

"Hmm?" she said, following his line of sight. "Oh. It's alright."

"No, it isn't," he said seriously. "I don't... I've never been the type of man to abuse a woman, and I don't intend to start now."
"To be fair, you only grabbed me after I tried to... light you on fire," she said ruefully, screwing up her nose. "How about we call it even?"

"Hmph," Varian grunted. "Still..."

"You could make it up to me later," she suggested quietly, smiling up at Varian in such a way that his ears burned for entirely different reasons.

"I'd like that..." he murmured, struggling mightily with the urge to reach out and stroke her arm.

Fortunately, he was saved from his temptation as one of the guards waved through the portal, indicating that it was safe to depart. Varian secured Shalamayne firmly on his back, and indicated that Auriana should step through ahead of him. She smiled ever so slightly at his chivalry, before moving forwards and ducking through the portal to Draenor.

Lunarfall was practically in uproar, stirred up by not only the return of their Commander, but by the presence of the High King himself. It seemed that half the garrison had turned out for their arrival, cramming around Lunarfall's centre square and cheering excitedly as Varian and Auriana stepped through the portal. Varian lifted a hand to acknowledge the crowd, though Auriana's response was more reserved. Nevertheless, she held herself with an aura of quiet determination and powerful spirit, and he wondered if she weren't finally becoming the woman he always knew she had the potential to become.

Auriana lead him quickly through the throng, and up into the relative quiet of the garrison's main building. A number of Varian's guards took up posts outside, while the rest followed him inside and took up defensive positions around the war room as he and Auriana went to speak to Lieutenant Thorn,

"Commander!" the young worgen said, saluting sharply the moment they walked into view.
"And... Your Majesty. Welcome back to Lunarfall."

"It's good to be back, Thorn," Auriana said, genuine happiness evident in her voice. "Though it seems I've hardly been needed. I've been reading the reports, you've been doing an excellent job."

"Only because nothing's really happened, ma'am," Thorn said. "The shipyard has been completed on schedule, as you'll soon see, and our outposts across the continent have been largely quiet."

"Have there been any other missions gone awry, or betrayed from within?" Auriana asked sharply.

"To be fair, there haven't been many missions to betray," Thorn said seriously. "As ordered, I have largely focused on consolidation of our position in Nagrand and Talador, so that we might safely infiltrate Tanaan. We've fought a few skirmishes, but it appears that the Iron Horde have largely retreated behind that great wall of theirs."

Thorn reached across the desk to a slim parchment file, and held it out to Auriana.

"I've summarised the most pertinent information in this document," she said.

"Hmm. This is amazing, Thorn, really," Auriana said, briefly flicking through the file. "You are to be commended, and I'm sure His Majesty would agree."

"Of course," Varian said quickly, knowing how much the praise of a King could mean to a junior officer.

As a worgen, Thorn couldn't precisely blush, but she did duck her head in a way that showed she
was immensely flattered by the praise.

"Still..." she said slowly, "It's good to have you back. Lunarfall... Lunarfall is yours. It feels right to have you here, ma'am, especially after all you've been through lately, with the Foundry and all..."

Auriana shifted uncomfortably at the memory of her ordeal in the Foundry, and she briefly looked over at Varian.

"If you don't mind, I'll just put my things away," she said quietly, changing the topic. "And then we'll make our inspection of the shipyard. What time are we expected?"

"I have arranged a tour with the shipyard foreman at midday, and will assemble the men at one o'clock for your address," Thorn said crisply. "It is currently just after eleven thirty."

"Thank you, Thorn," Auriana said, giving the young worgen an approving smile. "Again, excellent work."

She gestured politely to Varian, but as they turned to leave, Thorn spoke.

"Oh, I forgot! There's a... delivery for you in your rooms, ma'am," she added.

"A delivery?" Auriana repeated, pausing at the door. "A delivery of what?"

"Er... alcohol, ma'am," Thorn said flatly, looking faintly disapproving.

"Who would be sending me alcohol?" Auriana asked, with an incredulous glance at Varian.

"We've no idea. Several crates of the stuff simply appeared outside the garrison one day. There was a note, but it was addressed to you, and I thought it best not to open it until you returned," Thorn explained. "Ironfist has checked the contents for poison. Quite thoroughly, as evidenced by the fact that half of the shipment is now missing. We are confident that it is not intended to be an attempt on your life."

"Well, that's a first," Auriana said, chuckling drily, and even Varian had to smirk.

Thorn retrieved a sealed piece of rough parchment from her desk, and handed it over to Auriana. Her muzzle twitched curiously, but Auriana simply nodded and tucked the note into her tunic, before turning to lead Varian upstairs. Varian ordered his guards to stay below with Thorn, and gallantly offered to carry Auriana's bags upstairs.

"You don't think all this business with traitors is done," he said to her quietly as they mounted the stairs.

"No. When we killed the assassins who came after Vol'jin, I think we killed the servants, not the masters. We may have put a dent in their operations, but if they - whoever they are - truly want war between the Alliance and the Horde, they aren't going to give up after one failed skirmish," she said grimly. "And that still doesn't explain who sold me out to Blackhand. I don't know why they've been quiet lately, but I'm sure it can't be good."

"Still, there isn't much you can do until you have more information," Varian pointed out.

"No," Auriana said, frowning slightly. "There isn't. Besides which, we need to solve the far more pressing mystery of the randomly appearing alcohol."
She pushed open the door to her rooms, and true to Thorn's word, found several piles of crude wooden crates stacked waist high. Each contained about a dozen bottles of a dark purple liquid, several of which appeared to be missing, though Varian estimated there would have to be at least a hundred bottles remaining.

"Would you look at that… where do you think it all came from?" Varian asked, placing her bags carefully on the floor before turning to more closely inspect the alcohol.

"Not sure…” Auriana murmured, her gaze flicking briefly towards him as she withdrew the note from her tunic and slid her thumb beneath the seal.

Her eyes narrowed slightly as she read over the note, before she threw back her head and unexpectedly roared with laughter.

"Well, I'm reasonably sure it isn't poisoned," she said drily, passing the note to Varian and inspecting a bottle of her own.

Frowning curiously, Varian accepted the piece of parchment and turned it over in his long fingers. The message was direct and simple, and Varian harrumphed in surprise as he read over the roughly formed letters.

*The Darkspear keep their promises, little lion.*

*Drink up.*

"The Horde?" he asked.

"Zala'din," Auriana confirmed, sounding much less confused. "He… uh… during all that business with the Warchief, he said that if we managed to successfully pull the whole thing off, he'd buy drinks for the entire garrison. Apparently he came through."

"I see. And… 'little lion'?" Varian repeated.

"He gave me a nickname," Auriana said, blushing furiously. "I have no idea why."

"It suits you. I should call you that when we're alone..." Varian teased, raising an eyebrow.

Auriana rolled her eyes and turned away with supreme disdain, but Varian could see that she was trying not to smile. She picked up a bottle, and much to Varian's surprise, reached down and slipped off one of her small boots. She cushioned the bottom of the bottle in the heel and thwacked the shoe hard against the wall several times, eventually causing the cork to pop. Varian looked at her curiously, impressed by her ingenuity, and she gave him a nervous half smile.

"What?" she asked, holding the now open bottle out towards him. "I didn't have a corkscrew."

"Where'd you learn to do that?" he asked, amused.

"My father was Kul Tiran. You think I don't know about a hundred ways to open a bottle of wine?" she said archly. "Would you like a drink?"

"Now?"

"Well, we've just built a fleet. Isn't it somewhat traditional to drink a toast on an occasion like this?" she said, shrugging.

"Very well," Varian agreed, never one to turn down a good drink. "To Lunarfall, and victory in
"By the Light!" Varian exclaimed. "Did your troll make it himself? It tastes like distilled kodo piss!"

"How would you know what kodo piss tastes like?" Auriana teased, raising an eyebrow. "They didn't have water when they kept you in Dire Maul?"

"Oh, ha, ha," Varian growled, passing her the bottle. "You try it then."

She gave him a skeptical look, as if it couldn't possibly as bad as he had made out, only for her bright eyes to go wide as she took a sip.

"Eurgh!" she coughed, covering her mouth with her hand as she tried not to retch. "It tastes like the sweat of an orc left out in the sun for three days."

"How would you know what that tastes like? Been licking orcs, have we, Auri?" Varian shot back.

"They're tasty," she retorted, deadpan, as if she tasted sweaty orcs all the time. "Ugh, are we sure this isn't poisoned?"

"Well, according to the Lieutenant, your dwarf seemed to enjoy it," Varian shrugged. "He's still alive, right?"

"I think that says more about dwarves than it does about the quality of this drink," Auriana observed drily, placing the bottle disdainfully down on the table.

She steadied herself on the wall as she replaced her boot, still wincing at the taste of the troll liquor.

"We should be heading out to the shipyard, anyway," Auriana said. "It's a bit of a walk, and we have an appointment at midday, apparently."

"By all means, lead on," Varian said. "I don't care what we do, but I'm not having any more of that bloody drink."

Auriana laughed as they walked back downstairs, picking up Varian's royal guards from the war room as they made their way back outside. The guards followed closely behind Varian as he walked, their hands openly on their weapons, though they stood far back enough to allow Varian and Auriana to converse in relative privacy. She pointed out several features of the garrison as they made their way down the steep sloping hill towards the shipyard, as well as some of the exotic local wildlife.

Lunarfall's shipyard was situated in a shallow bay along the Shadowmoon coast, and Varian could see no less than twelve new ships either tethered at dock, or further out on the water. Even from a distance they looked powerful and deadly, made of either shining steel or sturdy wood, and each adorned with the proud lion insignia of the Alliance.

"Ah, Your Majesty!" a voice called from behind them, and Varian turned to see a sailor with a thick beard and a long brown ponytail approaching from the east.
His uniform was freshly pressed, from the tips of his shining black boots to his well starched sailor's hat. He bowed low before Varian, with a sweeping gesture worthy of any courtier, before offering Auriana a crisp salute.

"Welcome, my Lord," he said warmly. "Foreman Merreck Vondor, at your service."

"Thank you," Varian said. "I see you've been busy."

"Oh, yes, my Lord," Vondor said eagerly. "We've had to push hard to meet the Commander's requirements, but I'm pleased to report that we're right on schedule."

"You did all this in a month?" Auriana asked, casting an appraising eye over her new fleet.

"Yes, though not without help," Vondor admitted.

"I heard," Auriana said, turning fully to face him. "Thorn's report stated that you were able to use the expertise of an Iron Horde defector?"

"You're quite correct, ma'am," Vondor said, nodding. "The knowledge of the orc shipwright Solog Roark was instrumental in the construction of our fleet, however the ultimate responsibility for operations lies with me."

"Well, it appears that you've outdone yourself," Varian said, nodding approvingly.

The foreman swelled with pride at praise from his king, and stood that little bit straighter as he began to lead Varian and Auriana in a tour of the shipyard. He pointed out a number of interesting sites, and began to explain in great detail the differences in form and function between carriers, destroyers, and battleships. Varian was no maritime expert himself, but he knew a good fleet when he saw one, and could even appreciate the improvements the Iron Horde shipwright had made on the traditional Alliance designs.

Vondor eventually brought them alongside a monstrous battleship, its bright blue sails flapping proudly in the breeze. It was clearly the pride of the fleet, superbly made and easily twice the size of the nearest ships.

"Finally," he said, his voice rich with satisfaction, "Commander, might I present to you your flagship, Varian's Blade."

Varian tried not to react to the name, but it was hard not to notice the glaring double entendre. It appeared that Auriana, too, had had a similar thought, looking at him sideways as she fought back a smile. It was an oddly whimsical expression, and Varian was surprised by both her playfulness and her dirty mind.

"I'm sorry, what did you call it?" she asked slyly, prompting Varian to give her a withering look.

"Varian's Blade," Vondor repeated loudly. "A fitting name for a ship representing the unparalleled might and power of the Alliance. With the greatest respect to His Majesty, of course."

"Of course," Auriana said smoothly, very pointedly not looking in Varian's direction.

"Are you pleased, Commander?" Vondor asked hopefully.

"Well… it certainly is… large. Much larger than any of the other ships we've seen today," Auriana said, deadpan, and Varian practically choked on a sudden, uncontrollable burst of laughter. "And very… wide."
"It's made of the finest, sturdiest wood," the foreman continued eagerly, seemingly entirely unaware of the double meaning to his words. "I have no doubt it will serve you well."

"Oh, I agree," she said, smirking.

"Er… if you'll excuse us, Foreman, I'd like to speak to the Commander alone," Varian interrupted, shaking his head in embarrassed amusement. "Thank you very much for the tour."

"You are most welcome, Your Majesty. I'll be just over by the command tent if you need any further information," Vondor said.

"Thank you," Varian said, as he gripped Auriana's upper arm and turned to lead her away.

The royal guardsmen made to follow, but Varian waved them off with a stern expression. Auriana was in a surprisingly good mood, and Varian wanted to take full advantage of her beautiful smile, the warm sun, and the fresh sea breeze. He supposed that he had never fully appreciated how much she was weighed down by her rage, and now that she had been presented with something resembling a solution, she suddenly seemed lighter than air.

They walked in perfect unison along the docks and down towards the water's edge, a gentle smirk playing across Auriana's lips.

"Stop giggling," Varian growled in mock anger, as they slipped into the shadow of a heavy transport in dry dock. "You're such a child."

"Better than a humourless old man," she shot back.

She gave him a broad smile, and he desperately wished he could slip his hand into hers. The light breeze had picked up a few stray strands of her dark hair and brought a pleasing blush to her cheeks, while her sly good humour made her dark blue eyes sparkle.

"You know… for what it's worth, I'm almost certain the name was intended as a reference to Shalamayne," she added, patting him consolingly on the forearm. "Almost."

"I certainly hope so," Varian said, frowning as he considered the alternative possibility.

Auriana bit her lip and looked away, though her hand lingered on his arm. Varian looked around, and with a start realised that they were entirely alone, hidden behind the great bulk of the transport.

"You know… we could always go back to your quarters after the ceremony, Commander," he murmured throatily, gently placing a hand on the small of her back.

He felt her shiver, and she looked up at him with hungry eyes.

"And?"

"I could show you the might of the Alliance, if you liked," he suggested roguishly, giving her his very best smile.

"The **might of the Alliance**?" she repeated, her delicate eyebrows raising. "I don't know if I should be excited or terrified..."

Unable to help himself, Varian laughed, and he was just about to see whether he might be able to steal from her a kiss, when he felt the earth beneath his feet surge wildly as a massive explosion detonated somewhere nearby. He staggered to his knees, his ears ringing, and he instinctively
curled his body around Auriana to protect her from harm. In the distance, he could hear terrified shouting from all around, but his immediate priority was Auriana. She was so small that she had practically disappeared beneath his powerful bulk, and Varian realised that he may have done more damage crushing her than she might have otherwise received from the explosion.

"Auri?" he said, shifting his weight slightly so that she could move.

"What the hell was that?" she demanded, her voice muffled by the muscles of his chest.

She urgently pushed him to the side and clambered out from underneath him, her eyes instantly sharp. All her earlier playfulness had disappeared, and she now had the same fevered intensity of a wolf closing in on its prey. Varian rose to his feet behind her, withdrawing Shalamayne from its sheath as he followed Auriana out of the cover of the transport ship.

Varian's mouth fell open in horror as he beheld the Lunarfall shipyard, which had only moments ago been an orderly testament to the power of the Alliance. Now, however, it stood in chaos, as panicked sailors and soldiers fled for their lives. One of the large carriers had been reduced to nothing but char and scrap metal, destroyed by some kind of massive explosion, while a second ship was on fire. Green fire, in fact, which could only mean one thing...

"Legion," Varian hissed, tightening his grip on Shalamayne as his blood surged with fresh adrenaline.

Auriana's face curled into a determined snarl, and her arms and eyes blazed to life as she reached for her power. She didn't turn towards the epicentre of the chaos, however, where Varian could now see dozens of demons springing from a warlock's portal, but rather back towards Varian himself.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, wincing, and before he could react, she slammed both of her hands into his chest.

Varian's eyes widened in disbelief as he felt her power surge, and seconds later he felt the unmistakeable pull of a portal drawing him away from the battlefield. He lunged forward in a vain attempt to stop her, only to find himself stumbling forwards through the middle of his own throne room as he disappeared from Lunarfall and reappeared in Stormwind.

"Dammit, Auri!" he shouted into the ether, drawing the attention of Genn Greymane and a number of very startled guards.

"Varian?" Greymane said urgently. "Er… weren't you in Draenor?"

"Lunarfall is under attack from the Burning Legion," Varian said quickly. "They blew up one of the new carriers. Auriana… the Commander… she pushed me through a bloody portal."

"She did her duty," Greymane growled, rising to his feet. "You can't blame her for that."

"No, I can't. What I can do, however, is send help," Varian said firmly, already waving to his guards. "I'll take a company back through with me to fend off the attack."

"You're not going to stay?" Greymane asked, his heavy brows drawing together in a frown.

"Not on your life," Varian snarled. "She needs help, and I'm going to personally ensure that she gets it. Now, someone find me a damn mage!"

Varian strode into his war room, barking orders to guards along the way. Stormwind's guards were
quick and efficient, but even then Varian found himself pacing in frustration as he waited for a company to assemble. Greymane watched him carefully, his eyes narrowed, though the older King made no comment. Varian was well within his rights to fight with his troops as he saw fit, but Greymane knew all too well that this had far more to do with Auriana than anything else. Varian hated when she was out fighting in Draenor without him, and if he had the opportunity to defend her, then he intended to take full advantage.

Unfortunately, his men appeared to be assembling as slow as humanly possible. While Varian knew that his observation was objectively untrue, his anxiety and surging adrenaline overrode his better judgement. He forced himself to bite his tongue to avoid snapping his agitation at the loyal soldiers who were only doing their jobs, though he was admittedly relieved when they were finally ready to depart. Every second wasted in Stormwind was a second that Auriana was in danger, and Varian itched to get back into the fight.

Three of his mages had answered the summons, and they were smart enough not to delay Varian's departure for any longer than necessary. Together, they opened a large portal in the war room, wide enough that three or four soldiers could step through at a time. Varian himself was the first to go, hefting Shalamayne easily as he charged. The mages had been careful not to put him in the heart of the fighting, and instead he found himself near the fountain at the centre of the garrison. Even here, away from the fighting, the garrison was in anarchy, with soldiers and civilian camp followers alike rushing in all directions.

"Shipyard's this way," Varian ordered his fresh company, the moment they were all through the portal.

He didn't wait to see if they'd follow, charging swiftly down the hill with Shalamayne raised. Varian kept himself in impeccable shape, and he rapidly outpaced his men as he accelerated into the fray. From what he could see, things had gotten much worse in the brief time he had been in Stormwind. The shipyard was crawling now crawling with demons of every conceivable type, though Varian was heartened to see the Alliance were giving as good as they got. The carrier that had exploded was now slowly sinking into the harbour, though it seemed that the fire on the second ship was now under some semblance control. A number of his royal guards had joined in the fighting, and the relief on their faces was palpable as they saw Varian sprint past them into the melee, as yet alive and unharmed.

What Varian couldn't see, however, was Auriana; no bright blue flash of frost magic to indicate that she was still alive and fighting. He growled in frustration, seeking her slim form amongst the crush of demons and mortals, but it was to no avail. Unfortunately, he didn't have the time to look further, as a wrathguard suddenly charged him from the left. Varian twisted his body around, ducking under the first of the wrathguard's swinging blades and bring Shalamayne up to meet the second. There was a sharp clang as steel met steel, and Varian strained hard as he fought to resist the much bigger and heavier wrathguard. The demon's face contorted as shifted his weight, coming body to body against Varian. His breath smelled like death and burning flesh, and he snarled as he pressed his blade down towards Varian's neck. The wrathguard had easily two feet and perhaps three hundred pounds on Varian, and the King knew he wouldn't last long in this position. While Varian was more than a match for most opponents in terms of raw strength, a wrathguard was another story entirely. If Varian was going to win, he would be forced to rely on his dexterity and ingenuity, rather than his brawn.

Instead of resisting, Varian suddenly dropped his blade, and used the split second of the wrathguard's surprise to drop to his knees and roll to the side. He felt the demon's blade whistle past his head with mere inches to spare, but before the big demon could react further, Varian sprang to his feet and whipped Shalamayne around in a perfect arc. Varian knew he could move
faster with the mighty sword than any mortal man had a right too, and the wrathguard was unable
to turn in time to prevent Varian from slicing across his hamstring. The demon roared in agony and
fell to one knee, blindly swiping out at Varian with his own blade. Varian blocked the blow
smoothly, before using the wrathguard's own leg to launch himself onto the demon's back. He
lifted Shalamayne high in the air, and without hesitation, drove the sword through the back of the
demon's neck.

The demon's flesh parted before Varian's steel like water before the bow of a ship, its thick green
blood sizzling along the blade. The wrathguard tumbled forward as it died, howling in genuine
surprise and pain. Varian clung to the hilt of Shalamayne as the demon fell, using the blade for
balance as he rode the demon down to the ground. The wrathguard hit the ground with a heavy
thump, and as he landed Varian freed Shalamayne and rolled clear in one smooth leap.

Varian knew the situation was dire, but he permitted himself a savage grin of satisfaction as he
raced away from the wrathguard and into a small pack of felhunters. This was where he truly
belonged, in the middle of a fight, bringing fear and death to anyone who would dare stand against
the might of the Alliance. The nearby Lunarfall soldiers cheered with each demon that he fell, and
soon Varian found himself at the centre of a rapidly growing counter attack. With any luck, Varian
would be able to finish off the last of the demons and close the warlock portal, and find
Auriana still alive.

Unfortunately, he had more immediate problems, and he was forced to delay his search for his
wayward mage. Varian heard an agonised howl from somewhere to his right, and he snapped his
head around to see Lieutenant Thorn cowering on the ground beneath a vicious succubus. Snarling,
Varian raced to her defense, pushing himself into a flat out run and closing the distance between
them in mere seconds. The succubus pulled her whip back, read to lay into Thorn's unprotected fur,
but Varian was the faster. He slid to a stop in a spray of dirt, reaching out for the succubus' throat
and grasping it with his massive hand. He ripped the demon away from Thorn in a single
movement, snapping her neck like a twig as he threw her body backwards. The succubus died
instantly, hitting the ground with her neck at an impossible angle, and allowing her whip to fall
uselessly to one side.

Breathing heavily, Lieutenant Thorn stared up at Varian with wide eyes, dazed from both the
demon's attack and the identity of her rescuer.

"T…thank you, my Lord," she stammered, gratefully accepting Varian's proffered hand and
allowing him to pull her back upright.

Her ears flattened back against her head, and she made a strange twisting gesture with her muzzle.
For a moment, Varian was confused, until he realised that he'd seen such a gesture before. Her
expression was reminiscent of one the hunting dogs kept in Stormwind Keep; a pack member
acknowledging an alpha.

"Where is she?" he demanded, gripping the young worgen woman's shoulder.

He didn't need to waste any more words, as Thorn knew exactly what he was talking about. She
pointed wordlessly to the north west, and Varian turned in horror to see Auriana singlehandedly
duelling no less than three warlocks. She had somehow ended up on the smouldering remains of
the deck of the carrier, her hands and eyes ablaze with pure power as she ducked and weaved
amongst shadow and fel flame. She was holding her own, at least for the moment, but Varian was
forced to wonder how long she could possibly last against such overwhelming odds. Auriana had
been unarmoured when the fighting had broken out, and against three obviously skilled warlocks,
she was horribly exposed.
"We have to get to her," Varian said urgently, not bothering to hide his concern.

"With respect, Your Majesty, I don't think we can. The gangway was destroyed in the initial attack, and there's too much power being thrown around up there," Thorn said worriedly. "We can't risk teleporting someone into that danger, much less you... and we can't risk moving to help her until that demon portal is closed."

Varian snarled wordlessly and slammed Shalamayne angrily into the dirt, making Thorn jump. Every instinct in his body screamed at him to help Auriana, though his more rational mind had to concede the point. He looked down the hill towards the portal, still issuing forth tides of demons, and his eyes narrowed.

"Alright. Then our main priority is that portal. Gather what men you can and..."

Varian's orders were suddenly cut off as the portal darkened ominously, and he quickly closed his hand over Shalamayne's hilt. The portal swelled as two monstrous infernals emerged, howling with terrifying intensity as they charged up the hill towards Varian's position. Varian reflexively moved to stand in front of Lieutenant Thorn, his eyes burning from the reflected glow of felfire.

"Move," he snapped, pushing Lieutenant Thorn out of harm's way and raising Shalamayne defensively.

Oddly, it was if the infernals actually recognised Varian, ignoring several other soldiers as they charged up the hill towards him. He dropped into a low crouch, his mind racing as he calculated every possible defense. The infernals were at least fifteen feet tall, and made of rock and searing flame. They were not as intelligent as most of the other denizens of the Burning Legion, but they were certainly destructive, and Varian knew he was in for a hell of a fight.

"You want to face the King of the Stormwind? You want to claim my head?" he bellowed, tightening his sweaty grip on Shalamayne as he began to charge. "Give it your best damn shot..."
Varian was no coward, but even he felt his heart race faster as he charged down the hill to meet the infernals. They were both huge, and even at a distance he could feel the heat of felfire radiating off their bodies. He knew he would have to be inhumanly fast if he were to survive, and he quickly began to calculate all his possible options. Infernals may have been dull creatures, but they were exceedingly strong, and they outweighed Varian by several hundred pounds. More worryingly, their reach exceeded his own by several feet. Varian wasn't generally used to being the smaller opponent in a fight, and he would be forced to adapt his usual strategies in order to win.

Knowing that his first strike would likely set the trajectory for the entire battle, Varian used his superior speed to dart sideways around the first infernal. He dealt a mighty upward blow with Shalamayne as he moved, hacking through the hardened, flaming flesh of the demon's leg like it was nothing. The infernal bellowed in fury, swiping out with a mighty fist as it stumbled into the dirt. Varian danced backwards, only narrowly avoiding being struck in the chest in retaliation. He then used his momentum to spin to the left, twisting his wrists to bring Shalamayne back down and complete a perfect arcing strike. The sharpened steel bit true, and with a mighty effort, Varian was able to sheer straight through the infernal's arm.

"You'll have to do better than that, demon!" he roared, drawing Shalamayne back for a finishing blow.

With a reckless grin, Varian drove his blade straight through the demon's face, before dragging the greatsword up and to the right in order to free it from the demon's smouldering corpse. He felt tiny pinpricks of pain on his arms as he was showered with falling sparks of felfire, and he smelled the acrid scent of his own burning hair. He had little time for concern, however, as the second infernal had used its companion's demise to get in far closer than Varian would have liked. It struck at him now with massive fists, forcing him to dive sideways onto the ground.

Varian grit his teeth as he tumbled over and over through the dirt, hugging Shalamayne tight to his chest and staying only inches ahead of the demon's sweeping fists. Falling in combat was incredibly dangerous, and Varian knew he wouldn't last against the massive infernal for very long if he were unable to regain his footing. He had dodged several blows already, but he was far slower on his back than he was on his feet, and he knew he needed to think of a plan before he was pulverised.

The infernal roared and struck again, and through a haze of flame and dust, Varian saw his opportunity. He rolled to the side as the infernal's mighty fists once against crashed down beside his head, only this time, he reached out and clutched at the demon's arm. Fel flames buffeted at his hands and face, but he held on doggedly, and used the creature's own considerable strength against it. As it withdrew its hand for another blow, it pulled Varian with it, and he was hoisted unceremoniously back to his feet.

The demon paused, clearly confused by the puny human clinging to its fist, and it tried desperately to shake Varian off – which was exactly what the King of Stormwind wanted. Varian forced his muscles to relax, allowing the creature to throw him free and using the momentum of the throw to twist his body in the air. He staggered slightly as he landed, but without a moment's delay, he screamed a fearsome war cry and drove Shalamayne deep into the demon's back. The infernal struck out blindly at the annoyance at its back, but it was too slow to turn around. Varian hacked and slashed again and again, tearing through the infernal with furious efficiency. Finally, with one tremendous strike, he drove Shalamayne up through the demon's side, the blade neatly bisecting
the monstrous infernal from chest to shoulder. It howled ferociously as it collapsed, and Varian leapt backwards to avoid being injured by the infernal's death throes.

There was no time to celebrate his triumph, however, as more and more demons continued to pour from the demon portal. From what Varian could see, the Alliance appeared to have gained the upper hand, but if the shipyard were to be continuously invaded by an endless supply of demons, any victory would be short lived. If the portal were closed, however, the brave men and women of Lunarfall would be in with a fighting chance.

Varian left the two smoking infernal corpses behind as he charged down the hill towards the harbour, determined to reach the portal before any other demons came forth. He had no idea where Lieutenant Thorn was, having been separated from her when he had moved to engage the infernals. He could only hope that she was alive, but with the demon portal still active, he didn't have time to seek her out. He hit the portal at a dead run, beheading a snapping felhunter who had only just emerged into Draenor. He then skidded to a halt, leaping over the felhunter's corpse before driving Shalamayne deep into the heart of the portal's main structure. Varian was no expert in magic, and he knew there was probably a more elegant way to sever the portal's connection to the Twisting Nether, but he found there were very few things in the world that would continue to function properly after an encounter with the King of Stormwind's mighty blade.

Green fire raced down the finely wrought steel, and Varian had to grit his teeth as the electrified, alien energies raced up his arms. He held on doggedly, driving Shalamayne in up to the hilt, and was rewarded as the portal began to collapse inwards on itself. Unfortunately, Varian realised far too late that there was too much flowing energy to be contained, and he only just managed to withdraw Shalamayne and shield his face with his arm as the portal exploded. He was thrown back a good twenty feet in a hail of felfire and the flesh of dead demons, landing heavily facedown in the dirt.

Varian shook his head dazedly, groaning as he rolled onto his back. The portal had been destroyed, at least, though judging from the damage Varian realised he was rather lucky to have survived. As he blinked dirt and soot out of his eyes, two of his royal guards appeared out of nowhere and raced to his side, somehow managing to have found him amidst all the chaos. They downed a group of imps as they ran, leaving the area around Varian relatively clear of adversaries and allowing him to take advantage of the brief lull in the fighting to wipe the sweat and grit from his eyes as he clambered back to his feet.

"Don't look at me like that, Ridley," Varian growled, addressing the smaller female guard, who was looking up at him with stern disapproval. "I'm fine."

"Er… you're on fire, sir," she said, nodding pointedly to his right leg.

"What?" Varian exclaimed, following her line of sight. "Oh…"

He reached out with a gauntleted fist and firmly patted out the small green flames that threatened to engulf his leg. Luckily, he had been largely protected by his heavy pants, and he only felt the faintest press of heat against his skin.

"I'll live," he growled. "Report."

"Well, sir," Ridley said, frowning as she exchanged a look with her taller companion, a heavyset man named Hallewell, "You had us all very worried after we lost you in the initial attack. We thought you'd been killed, but then you reappeared out of nowhere."

"Commander Fenwild opened a portal and sent me back to Stormwind when the carrier exploded,"
Varian explained. "I decided to return with reinforcements."

"Er… you were in Stormwind? And you came back, sir?" Hallewell said, trying to keep the disapproval from his tone.

Varian knew he was not the easiest King to guard, and he at least had the good grace to look mildly abashed for his guards. Technically speaking, he probably should have stayed in Stormwind, but the temptation of joining the battle had been far too great.

"What, and let you lot have all the fun?" he smiled, hoping to make light of the situation.

"With all due respect, sir…" Ridley sighed.

"I know, I know," Varian said, holding up a hand. "I'm a very bad King. But I'm here now, and I'm not leaving, so you may as well give me your report."

"The attack was perpetrated by half a dozen warlocks," Ridley said quickly. "We killed two of them, but they were able to set up that portal before they died, and we were quickly overrun by the demons. The Commander teleported three of the other warlocks away before they could open another portal…"

"So where's the fourth?" Varian asked, abruptly cutting her off.

"What?"

"You said there were six warlocks. Two are dead, and if the Commander is fighting three…"

Varian trailed off, and looked towards the destroyed carrier where Auriana was fighting for her life. In the time he'd taken to kill the infernals, she had managed to kill one of the traitorous warlocks, but she was still struggling to contain the remaining two.

It was hard to tell who was winning, given the haze of smoke and felfire in the air, but it was clear that a hell of a lot of magic was being thrown around. Varian had seen Auriana fight in earnest only once before, during their misadventures in Tanaan Jungle, but this was completely different. Today, she was not a young woman hampered by exhaustion and injury, but rather a powerful mage at the height of her powers. She was cunning, graceful and vicious all at once, and to Varian's eyes, she appeared almost otherworldly as she doggedly held her own against the two talented warlocks.

Auriana was entirely consumed by the fast moving fight, however, and in her distraction, she failed to notice the fourth warlock climbing his way up the side of the carrier and towards the smoking remains of the deck. His gaze was fixed determinedly on her back, and he had already begun to call green fire to his fingertips as he silently leapt up and over the carrier's guard rail. Varian had no idea how the male warlock had found a path up through the debris, but he certainly knew that a surprise attack from a third party would spell doom for Auriana.

"Commander! Behind you!" Varian shouted desperately, taking several steps forward in agitation.

He shouted loudly, but across the battlefield, and with Auriana's damaged hearing, there was little chance of attracting her attention. Varian gnashed his teeth in frustration, looking around for a way to help the beleaguered mage, and his eyes fell on some of the crumpled steel that had once been part of the struts of the great carrier. He quickly stepped forward and reached for a long piece of metal piping that had been sheared off neatly when the carrier exploded and hefted the metal bar like a spear.
He took a few seconds to test the bar's weight and calculate the distance, then with a quick prayer to the Light, hurled it fully two hundred feet up and over towards the deck of the carrier. It was an impossible shot, but Varian was no ordinary man. The makeshift spear flew true, and impaled the warlock through the chest mere seconds before he unleashed his magic on the unsuspecting Auriana. His shout of surprise and shock finally drew her attention, and she whirled on the spot as the warlock died, a mere twenty feet away from where she now stood.

Auriana looked around frantically for the source of the spear, and she visibly recoiled in shock as her eyes found Varian. In saving her, however, Varian realised that he may have inadvertently created a greater problem. In the split second Auriana turned to face her ambusher, she was distracted, and she was hit in the back by a powerful bolt of chaos magic from one of the remaining two warlocks. She screamed in agony, and the visceral sound set Varian's teeth on edge.

"Auri!" he roared, his heart seizing painfully in his chest.

The force of the spell was enough to send her flying across the shattered deck like a ragdoll, and she finally came to rest face down against a pile of scrap metal. Varian expected her to move, to get up and keep fighting as she always did, but worryingly, her body remained limp and lifeless as the two warlocks advanced on her position.

"Come on, Auriana," he hollered, even though he knew she couldn't hear him. "Get up!"

Varian could feel his heartbeat thundering in his ears, and his palms were suddenly slippery with sweat. He took several steps forwards, only to realise that there was little point. If Auriana were badly injured or even dead, there was no way Varian could reach her in time to help; certainly not with two warlocks looming over her in any case. Instead, he was forced to watch as the two warlocks approached the downed Auriana cautiously, not willing to yet assume that she was completely incapacitated. The taller of the two prodded Auriana with her boot, and Varian danced on the balls of his feet in fear and agitation as Auriana's body flopped limply away from the kick.

After some deliberation, the smaller warlock eventually took the risk and reached down to touch her hand to Auriana's neck to check for a pulse. It turned out to be a rather crucial mistake, however, as Auriana's body almost seemed to explode with a powerful burst of purple light. Evidently, Auriana had been lying in wait, using her apparent injury to lure the two warlocks in so that she might strike.

The spell hit the smaller warlock in the chest with all the strength of a battering ram, and she went tumbling across the deck in a swirl of robes. She wasn't dead, not by a long shot, but her temporary incapacitation provided Auriana with the opportunity she needed to fight the second warlock one on one. She rolled to her feet, and with a staggering display of power, she used a swirl of arcane magic to yank the woman aloft, suspending her fifteen feet above the deck. Crackling purple lightning raced across the woman's body, slowly building in intensity, and with a sudden, violent hand gesture, Auriana quite literally tore the woman apart. Chunks of dead warlock spilled across the carrier deck, the raw flesh still smoking as it came to rest. The power of the spell forced Auriana to her knees, gasping down ragged breaths, but she now had what she wanted – the opportunity to fight the smaller warlock one on one.

"Ha!" Varian shouted, taking a breath for the first time since Auriana had fallen. "That's my girl!"

He beckoned to his guards, securing Shalamayne on his back as he began to run.

"Come on," he said urgently. "If that warlock found a way up onto that ship, then so can we."
He kept a firm eye on Auriana as he moved, noting the bright red blood on the side of her face, and the still smoking burn mark on her back. She seemed to be moving well enough, at least, and her face was set determinedly as she moved to reengage the last surviving warlock. Unfortunately, Varian was forced to lose sight of her as he ducked below the shadow of the listing carrier, looking desperately for a path or a handhold or anything that would allow him to make his way up onto the deck. Luckily, he soon spotted a potential path up through the debris; or more accurately, a loose collection of potential hand and footholds that Varian would be able to climb without little effort.

With nothing more than a brusque gesture to his guards, Varian leapt across a small gap in the broken steel, and began to scale the side of the ship. The twisted metal was often sharp, but fortunately Varian's hands were protected by the supple leather of his gloves, and he was able to make the ascent quickly. Varian was a powerful, heavily muscled man, and he was fuelled by a desperate need to aid Auriana. He soon left his two guards behind as he hauled his massive frame up the side of the ship, finally crawling up over the edge of the carrier's deck and creeping forward on silent feet.

Auriana stood about fifty feet away, now duelling the single remaining warlock once again. Both women had been entirely consumed by the fight, their faces screwed up in identical expressions of concentration, and neither immediately noticed Varian's approach. He didn't shout out, not wanting to distract Auriana for a second time, and instead drew Shalamayne as he snuck around to flank the warlock. Auriana's eyes widened as she finally caught sight of him, but she didn't give away her advantage. Instead, she used her magic to subtly force the warlock back towards Varian's position, where he waited behind a still-smoking sheet of metal in silent ambush.

"You've fought well, Commander, but you're injured," the warlock said, her sharp features drawn back in a nasty snarl. "You're a talented little thing, but even you aren't invincible."

"Oh, please," Auriana shot back, baring her teeth. "I could do this all day."

The warlock snarled and hurled a dark bolt of pure shadow energy at Auriana's head, which she dodged with uncharacteristic sluggishness. She stumbled to her knees, as if in pain, though Varian quickly realised the move was a feint. The warlock, however, was apparently convinced, and she took several steps sideways so that she might have a better opportunity to finish Auriana off.

"I've got you now," the warlock said, raising her hands to prepare a terrible death curse. "For what it's worth, I am sorry, Commander. I hope you realise this isn't personal."

The warlock unleashed her spell, but at the very last second, Auriana suddenly rolled to the side as the warlock struck, all her false gracelessness forgotten. The warlock gasped in surprise as Auriana suddenly blinked forwards, forcing the warlock to stagger backwards so that she stood within Varian's reach.

"Turn around," Auriana said, her voice deadly quiet.

"What?" the warlock said, surprised.

"Turn around," Varian growled, stepping forwards so that he could whisper right in her ear.

The warlock started violently at the sound of his voice, almost tripping over the hem of her robes as she whirled to face him. Varian grinned savagely, and backhanded her in the face. The blow was so powerful that she was actually lifted off her feet, thrown a clear ten feet across the deck before she crumpled into unconsciousness. At the same time, Varian's two guards clambered up over the side of the ship with their weapons drawn, stepping forward cautiously to watch.
"The kill is yours," Varian said, bowing to Auriana with an air of chivalry.

"Not yet," Auriana said coldly. "Er… with respect, my Lord, we should question her. There have been traitors in my house for too long. This ends today."

Frowning, she walked across the deck towards the fallen warlock, pausing only to kneel down by a smouldering piece of shrapnel to stain her fingers with charcoal. She walked cautiously over to the woman's side, and quickly drew a circle around her unconscious body. She then sketched a number of hasty runes on the outside of the circle, muttering some kind of incantation that made the circle flare blindingly white.

"What did you do?"

"Dampening field," she explained. "Not a very good one, but it will hold her for a little while. It's the best I can do without proper reagents or preparation."

Auriana stared hatefully down at the warlock, but Varian recognised that there was something far more complex in her expression than simple anger.

"You know her," he realised.

"I know all of them… or at least I thought I did…" Auriana frowned. "Her name is Ayana, Ayana Blackwood. She's… she's one of ours."

"One of ours?"

"You know how it goes, Varian," Auriana said darkly. "The Alliance army doesn't officially endorse the use of warlocks, but they have their uses, and we've worked with them in the past. Ayana's coven… they've fought for the Alliance for years."

She sighed, and brushed an agitated hand through her dishevelled hair.

"They came through in the second wave, after we'd established the garrison at Lunarfall. I… I requested her personally," she said, her voice strained. "She… her coven was working in Talador, with the draenei."

Auriana looked sideways at the bodies of the other three dead warlocks; one impaled through the chest, the second covered in blood and burns, and the third quite literally in pieces.

"What a waste," she said bitterly.

She then shook her head and knelt down beside Ayana Blackwood, slapping the warlock firmly on the cheek to rouse her from unconsciousness.

"Hey! Wake up!"

"That was a nasty trick, Commander," Ayana slurred, the right side of her face clearly damaged by Varian's mighty blow.

"Well, maybe you should of thought of that before you blew up my harbour," Auriana snapped. "You face Varian Wrynn, High King of the Alliance. Explain yourself."

The warlock looked to Varian, and her eyes widened ever so slightly as she inspected him from head to toe.

"The High King, indeed," she said slowly. "What is it that you would like me to say?
Her voice was unerringly calm, and she seemed about as concerned as she might have been having afternoon tea. There was no anger or hate in her eyes, only a sense of calm inevitability, and her expression chilled Varian to the bone.

"Are you working for the Legion? Or the Iron Horde? Or both?" Auriana demanded, without preamble.

"Legion, yes," Ayana said, not a trace of shame or contrition in her voice. "Iron Horde, no. Or at least... not directly."

"And yet you've been betraying vital garrison information to the Iron Horde for months," Auriana said softly.

"A means to an end. The orcs had fallen to the temptation of the demon blood once before, there's no reason to believe they wouldn't fall again, Garrosh Hellscream's interference notwithstanding. They merely require the proper motivation," Ayana explained, as if it were only so simple. "The citizens of Azeroth, however, have proven to be rather less corruptible. My masters decided that they would use the Iron Horde to destroy you, and then they would convert the victorious Horde to their cause."

Ayana shook her head bitterly, and stared up at Auriana with a curious expression halfway between intense dislike and grudging respect.

"Unfortunately, you started winning, and the Legion were forced to adapt their strategies," Ayana explained. "They recruited my coven, and I passed on whatever information I had that might give the Iron Horde an advantage... but all that is a moot point now. The plan has changed."

"Changed?" Varian repeated. "What do you mean, changed?"

"Do you really think Grommash Hellscream still controls the Iron Horde, Your Majesty?" she said sarcastically. "The elder Hellscream is a puppet, nothing more, as my masters predicted. The Iron Horde now belongs to the Legion. We will burn like a fire across this world, and then we will come for Azeroth."

Varian and Auriana exchanged a look, and Varian frowned. The thought of the Legion turning their might on Stormwind filled him with dread, and he felt a hot rage building inside his chest.

"Why now?" Auriana asked coldly. "You've fought the Legion before, and you weren't tempted. Why turn? What changed?"

"I grew up," Ayana snapped. "They just keep coming back. No matter where we go, or what we do, they just keep coming back. Why fight destiny?"

"So you're a coward, then," Auriana said, her voice cracking with barely controlled anger.

"Not at all, Commander. There comes a time in everyone's life when they must declare an allegiance. I'm not an idealist, Commander, I simply chose the winning side. I took advantage of the opportunity to survive this war with my life," Ayana said simply. "Do you honestly believe you can stand against the slow march of inevitability? Azeroth may have turned back the Legion before, and may do again, but the Legion will never stop. They will come for you over, and over, until there is naught but ashes. One way or another, you'll burn."

She tilted her head to one side, looking surprisingly thoughtful.

"Unless, of course, you were willing to pledge yourself to the Legion, as I did," she mused. "You're
powerful, Commander, and you're far from stupid. More than that, you're a survivor. Why continue to fight against fate? Why not join us?"

Auriana hesitated and bit her lip, and a strange expression crossed her face. Varian looked down at her with concern, knowing that magic was her greatest temptation, and for a second he genuinely wondered if she would ever cast her lot in with the Legion in exchange for unlimited power.

"I'd never join the Legion," she said finally, her voice wavering with emotion. "Because… because I'd rather have my soul than my life."

Her gaze flicked upwards towards Varian's, and he felt a hot rush of shame at the thought that he had ever doubted her.

"A pity," Ayana said, shrugging. "The Legion would love to get their hands on you. For what it's worth, you do worry them. My masters wanted you dead more than anything, after it was decided that it would be easier to kill you than to convert you."

"Kill me?" Auriana said, at the same time that Varian came to a horrible realisation.

"It was you," he said flatly, his blood surging with rage. "You sold her out to Blackhand."

"Not specifically," Ayana said, looking afraid for the first time since her interrogation had begun. "As I said, we only provided the Iron Horde with whatever intelligence we could steal. What they did with that information was their choice."

"Do you think she cared much for that distinction when she was bleeding out in Blackhand's torture chamber?" Varian roared, suddenly seeing red.

Auriana hid it well, but Varian knew better than anyone how she still suffered from her trauma at Blackrock Foundry. She still bore the physical scars, of course, most notably her poor hearing and the slight asymmetry of her face where her cheek had been broken, but more than anything, she suffered from a lingering psychological trauma. She'd woken Varian more than once in the grip of a terrible nightmare, and she still occasionally flinched when touched. Her torment hurt Varian like a physical blow, and now that he had the cause of her suffering right in front of him, he found that he had very little control over his actions.

Without even pausing to think, he reached down and grabbed the warlock by the throat. He hoisted her into the air with a single arm, and her feet kicked pathetically as he began to slowly choke the life from her.

"Your Majesty…" Auriana said quietly, her tone respectful but warning. "Stop."

Varian, however, was beyond listening, and continued to tighten his massive hand over the warlock's throat. Her sharp features were slowly turning a fascinating shade of blue, and Varian took a perverse pleasure in the way the tiny veins in her face began to pop under the pressure. You tried to take her away from me, he thought blindly. She nearly died because of you…

"Varian…" Auriana repeated urgently. "Stop."

"No," he snarled. "I… no."

"Varian," Auriana repeated, touching a gentle hand to his arm. "I need her to tell me where the rest of her coven are hiding. If they're still out there, Lunarfall is still at risk."
Varian growled in grudging acknowledgement, but he still refused to release the warlock. He knew Auriana's argument made sense, but it was hard to deny his fury. He hadn't had the opportunity to exact vengeance on Blackhand personally, and Ayana represented the next best means of slaking his rage.

"If... if you get the information, then I can kill her?" he asked raggedly.

"You can do whatever you want to her," Auriana said darkly, "But right now I need you to stop. Please."

"Very well," Varian said coldly, reluctantly releasing his grip and allowing Ayana to crumple back to the ground.

For a few long moments, no one spoke, and all that could be heard was a strained gasping as Ayana struggled to regain her breath. Her face was a blotchy mess, and Varian could clearly see the outline of his heavy fingers on her pale neck.

"I won't tell you where they are," she panted finally, her voice hoarse and barely audible. "What are you going to do, Commander? Torture me? You may be a hard woman, but you aren't cruel. You never have been."

Auriana opened her mouth to reply, but Varian cut her off. He had had more than enough of the warlock's arrogance, and the apparent unconcern with which she had betrayed the Alliance.

"She might not be cruel," he said flatly, "But I am."

With an otherwise casual gesture, he reached down and placed his long fingers around Ayana's wrist. He squeezed firmly, and with the right application of pressure he snapped the bone, making Ayana scream and writhe in agony beneath his powerful grip. Beside him, Auriana's eyes widened at the savagery of Varian's actions, but she wisely chose not to protest.

"Where?" he asked, his voice colder than ice. "I'm sure I don't need to tell you what will happen if I don't like the answer."

For a second, he thought that Ayana would refuse to answer, but when he looked deep into her dark eyes, he realise that she was now truly frightened. She would talk, and then Varian would have the satisfaction of ending her traitorous life.

"T... Talador. A forgotten draenei crypt, east of Auchindoun," she gasped. "S... south of a set of ogre ruins."

"How many?"

"My... my whole coven," Ayana confessed. "Minus those killed here today."

"Your entire coven? All of you turned to the Legion?" Auriana breathed. "You brought twenty warlocks through from Azeroth, not including yourself."

"Not all turned," Ayana admitted, her breathing still strained. "There were some who refused. They were executed."

"Believe or die," Auriana said flatly. "I see."

She suddenly looked very sad, and with a rueful sigh, she turned away. Varian never looked away from Ayana, but he could feel Auriana's anger and disappointment radiating off her body like heat.
"Get what you needed, Commander?" he growled.

"Yes, my Lord," Auriana said quietly.

"Good."

Varian released the warlock's wrist, and pulled Ayana roughly into a kneeling position. Scowling, he unhooked his wicked belt knife, and without even a second of hesitation or regret, reached forward and slit her warlock's throat. She crumpled instantly, her blood splashing over Varian's boots as she flopped to one side and drew her last, rattling breath. In the end, he had chosen to give the warlock a quick, clean death, but the violence of her demise still caused Auriana to wince ever so slightly, her blue eyes widening as she stared up at him.

"What?" Varian demanded, stepping aggressively towards her.

He took no pleasure in killing, but he would not shy away from what was necessary, and in this case he felt the warlock had truly deserved death. Auriana was his, and his alone, and woe betide any man, woman, or demon who thought they could take her away from him.

"I just… I just forget, sometimes," she said stammered, her gaze at once both fearful and contemplative, "How dangerous you are."

Varian turned to face her, his lips drawing into a thin line.

"Do you disapprove? She tried to have you killed," he said darkly. "She tried to take you away from me. She deserved a lot worse."

"Varian…"

"You don't want to know what I'd do for you, Auriana!" he snapped, turning away to disguise the shaking in his hands. "You don't want to know how far I'd go to keep you safe. I…"

Someone coughed sharply, and with a start Varian remembered that he and Auriana were not alone. In his anger, he had forgotten that two of his guards were standing nearby, and from the looks on their faces, they had heard everything he had said. Varian heard Auriana sigh, and he could perfectly picture the exasperated scowl she surely wore.

"Subtle," she muttered quietly.

Varian shot her a quick look, before fixing Ridley and Hallewell with his best kingly stare.

"Please return to the garrison," he ordered sharply. "Find Lieutenant Thorn, if she's still alive, and have her assemble whatever troops she can in the courtyard."

"Yes, sir," Ridley said quickly. "Er… my Lord…"

"I'm sure I can trust you both to be discrete in regards to the intelligence discussed here today," Varian said firmly, his stern impression implying that his orders applied to more than just what had been revealed by the traitorous warlock. "That will be all."

"I… yes, sir," Ridley conceded, clearly trying very hard not to look over at her companion.

"Er… allow me," Auriana said kindly, stepping forwards and opening a portal for the two guards, through which Varian could see the fountain at the heart of Lunarfall.

Fortunately, the two royal guards stepped through without further comment, though Ridley gave
Varian a very curious look in the brief second before she disappeared.

"Sorry," he said gruffly, once the guards had vanished. "I… I was angry."

"It's alright," Auriana said quietly, offering him a tentative smile. "Let's face it, our secret becomes less of a secret by the day."

"My royal guards are handpicked," Varian said, in a vain attempt to make her feel better. "They're trained to be discreet. They won't talk."

"Still…" Auriana said, sighing.

She turned away again, and Varian was starkly reminded that she'd been rather badly injured. There was a dark burn on her left shoulder blade, where a chaos bolt had smouldered clear through her robes and damaged her pale skin. She also bore a number of scratches and cuts along her arms, and there was blood trickling down from a nasty gash on her temple.

"Are you alright?" Varian asked, gingerly placing a hand on her shoulder.

She flinched at his touch, and Varian desperately wished he could offer her some kind of healing.

"I'll be fine," she said firmly, gritting her teeth. "Besides, we have bigger problems. Varian… if the Legion have taken over the Iron Horde… the Alliance is in for one hell of a fight in Tanaan. I really should speak to Khadgar. He's been hunting Gul'Dan ever since we crossed through the Dark Portal, perhaps he can provide more insight…"

"We," Varian corrected gently.

"What?"

"If you're going to see Khadgar, I'm coming with you," Varian said determinedly. "The Legion is a far greater threat than the Iron Horde, and it's my duty to see to the protection of the Alliance."

"Varian…" Auriana sighed. "I can't…. I can't guarantee your safety."

"There's no one in the world I trust more to protect my life," Varian said firmly. "Besides, is Zangarra not safe?"

"I thought Lunarfall was safe," she replied bitterly, waving her hands vaguely at the destroyed carrier, and the second destroyed ship sinking slowly into the harbour. "And look what happened…"

"I'm willing to take the risk," he said. "That's an order, Commander."

Auriana looked at him directly, her expression stern as she carefully studied his face. There were dark smudges of dirt and charcoal across her cheeks, but her eyes were as keen and sharp as ever. She looked tired, though it was clear that the revelation of traitors within Lunarfall weighed on her more heavily than the physical exhaustion of battle ever could. Her features softened the longer she stared into his eyes, however, and she finally agreed to his request with a curt nod.

"We should get back to the courtyard, my men are waiting. Did you… did you want to say something?" she asked quietly, her pale features set.

"No," Varian said firmly. "This is your garrison. They need to hear from you."

"Very well, then," she said, gesturing to the still open portal. "After you."
Varian stepped through the portal as invited, reappearing on the top set of the stairs leading up to the garrison town hall. As it turned out, Lieutenant Thorn was waiting for them, her fur bloodstained and singed from the battle, but her air of steely determination unaffected. She nodded respectfully to Varian as he reappeared, relief clearly evident in her dark, wolfish eyes as not-so-subtly checked him over for injuries. Her expression brightened even further as Auriana reappeared behind him, her loyalty to Commander abundantly clear.

"Good to see you alive, Thorn," Auriana said, the warmth in her voice genuine.

"And you, Commander," Thorn replied. "I... I thought we'd lost you for a moment there, ma'am."

"Don't worry yourself, Thorn," Auriana said drily. "I'm surprisingly difficult to kill."

She then turned looked out over the assembled soldiers and followers of Lunarfall garrison, all staring up herself and Varian with wildly differing expressions on their faces. Many were injured, too, though the worst had been taken away to the barracks for immediate healing. Varian saw Auriana's throat tighten at the sight of them, and he was starkly reminded how much she cared for her troops. Auriana was not a demonstrative person by nature, and could often appear cold, but Varian knew she felt things more deeply than she ever let on.

"I'd speak to them now, Thorn," she instructed, taking a slow, steadying breath and clearing her throat. "Thank you."

The worgen Lieutenant barked out a loud order, and the soldiers of Lunarfall swiftly snapped to attention before their Commander. No matter how tired or bloody they were, they somehow managed to stand as strong and valiant as if they had just come from parade, rather than a pitched battle in defense of their garrison. Varian's heart warmed with pride at the sight, and he stood a little straighter as Auriana began to speak.

"Men and women of Lunarfall!" she said, magically enhancing her voice so that it boomed out across the garrison courtyard. "Today we stand betrayed, forsaken by those who would call themselves our allies... and yet, we stand resolute! We may have lost two ships, but what is a ship but a means to an end? The strength of the Alliance lies not in crude steel, forged iron, or even raw magic. The strength of the Alliance is in us, within our courage, and our honour, and the way we fight for justice with every breath that we take. That is what it means to be a part of the Alliance, and that is what I see before me."

She looked briefly to Varian, and he nodded encouragingly.

"Our enemies lie revealed," she continued. "We now know what we face in Tanaan. The Iron Horde have been taken by the Burning Legion, but we will not be cowed. We have defeated the Legion before, and we will defeat them again."

Varian started as he felt Auriana's slender fingers abruptly close over his wrist, and she hoisted his arm up into the air in a gesture of victory.

"Your King stands strong! Shalamayne has tasted the blood of demons this day, and by the King's grace we are victorious! He fights for us, for the glory of Stormwind and the Alliance... and in return, we... we will give him everything. Lunarfall stands!"

Auriana lowered Varian's arm as the soldiers of Lunarfall broke out in thunderous applause and wild cheers, the barest hint of satisfaction playing about her features. She smiled grimly at their enthusiasm, and it was some time before she realised she was still holding Varian's wrist. She let him go, blushing slightly, and stepped slightly to the side to increase the distance between them.
"Well said, Commander," he murmured, so that only she could hear.

"Really?" she said doubtfully, her soft voice barely audible over the shouts of the crowd. "I'm not good on the spot. You don't think it was a bit… pompous?"

"No. I think it was moving… and exactly what your men needed to hear," Varian said honestly. "Look at them - after an attack like that, you would expect to see fear, or disquiet, or anger. And what do you see instead? Courage. Willingness to fight. Hope. You've inspired them, and that is the gift of a true leader."

Auriana flushed with embarrassment at his praise, but she was unable to prevent a small smile from gracing her features.

"You've come a long way," he added proudly.

"Thank you, my Lord," she murmured. "And yet… now I feel we've got so much further to go. We may have unearthed the traitors here in Lunarfall, but… I won't lie, the thought of the Iron Horde under Gul'Dan scares me a hell of a lot more than a Horde lead by Grom Hellscream. Hellscream's dangerous, to be sure, but he has some sense of honour. Gul'Dan… Gul'Dan's a monster."

"Then we best hope Khadgar has some way of defeating him," Varian said, squeezing her arm bracingly.

She nodded shortly, and with a determined frown, began to open a portal for the second time that day.

"Gather your guards, Your Majesty. We're going to Zangarra."
After gathering up the uninjured royal guards, Auriana quickly opened a portal to Zangarra, and ushered the small group through. They rematerialised on a small shelf away from the main tower, looking down over a small and fertile valley. It was a strange place, Varian thought, quickly assessing his surroundings. Mushrooms the size of houses grew all over the valley, and the whole area was blanketed in an eerily beautiful blue-green glow. Tiny sporebats flitted around the mushroom stems, and at the centre of it all, Khadgar's tower rose through the mist like a shining beacon of the arcane.

He didn't have much time for sightseeing, however, as Auriana pressed the group onwards through a permanent short range portal that delivered them straight to Khadgar's front door. Varian immediately ordered his guards to spread out and assume defensive positions, while he and Auriana made their way inside.

The mage tower was both sparsely furnished and sparsely staffed, and it wasn't until Varian and Auriana reached the door of Khadgar's study that they came across another person, in the form of Khadgar's personal guard.

"Cordana," Auriana said swiftly, "Is Khadgar in?"

"Commander!" she said, sounding surprisingly nervous. "He's here, but I… I don't think you want to go in there right now…"

"Why? Look, Cordana, it's rather urgent, and today is not the day to test my patience," Auriana said seriously, her tone allowing no room for argument. "We need to see the Archmage at once."

For a small woman, Auriana was certainly intimidating when she wanted to be, and Varian found himself rather impressed by the strength of her command presence. She neatly sidestepped the night elf warden and rapped sharply on Khadgar's door, pushing it open without waiting for a reply.

Unfortunately, Khadgar's bodyguard very much correct, and Varian saw very quickly why she had tried to prevent them from entering the room. As it turned out, Khadgar was most definitely not alone, and was accompanied by one of the last people in the world that Varian would have ever wanted to see.

"Auriana?"

"Khadgar!"

"Varian Wrynn…?"

"Zala'din…"

"Garona!"

A hot, surging anger rose uncontrollably in Varian's chest, and before anyone else could move, his fist closed over Shalamayne's hilt and he withdrew the blade. He hadn't even considered the possibility of running into Garona Halforcen on Draenor, and he was completely unprepared for the surprisingly powerful wave of emotion he felt at seeing her face.

"Varian, no!" Auriana shouted, darting forwards to stop him before he could do something
regrettable.

Of course, Auriana had as much chance of resisting Varian's furious bulk as she would have had of destroying Stormwind Keep with her bare hands. Instead, she ducked under Shalamayne used what little weight she had to cling to Varian's chest with all her might.

"Zal!" she squealed, her voice strangely high pitched. "Help me!"

Varian felt a second set of hands reach for him, and he found his sword arm suddenly pinned to the wall by a tall, powerful troll. For a second, he seriously considered throwing the troll clear across the room, but he was very cognizant of the fact that he would have to cause serious harm Auriana to do so.

"Get her out of here, Khadgar!" Auriana hollered, digging her nails into Varian's arm. "Now!"

Khadgar went pale and complied immediately, barrelling the half-orc traitor out the door ahead of him as Auriana and Zala'din struggled to hold Varian in check. Of course, small as she was, Auriana weight barely registered, though the troll was a much more significant problem.

"Get your hands off me, troll," Varian spat, fixing the Horde Commander with a terrifying glare. "I'm not some rabid animal, out of control."

"Ya sure about dat, Ya Majesty?" he said, looking skeptically up at Shalamayne.

"Let go," Varian repeated, his voice dangerously low. "Now."

There were few people in the world who would persist when Varian spoke to them like that, and the troll wisely chose to back away. He kept a watchful eye on Varian's sword, but no longer made any attempt to physically restrain him. Auriana, however, refused to let go, pressing against Varian's chest with quiet determination as he took several deep, steadying breaths.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Varian," she murmured. "I... are you alright?"

"I'm fine," he growled, not at all willing to have some kind of awkward emotional discussion in front of the troll commander.

Seeing Garona had been a shock, and his body had reacted long before his mind had taken control. Varian was somewhat surprised at the vehemence of his own reaction, but in that split second of pure rage, all he had been able to see was Garona standing over his father's bloody corpse. This time, however, he had the means to avenge Llane within his grasp, and he was forced to admit that if Auriana and Zala'din had not acted as quickly as they had, he may have done something rather stupid. Their intervention had been timely, and - Varian was ashamed to admit - necessary, but now that he had a moment to collect his thoughts, he quickly buried his rage, hurt and fear down deep. He somewhat reluctantly returned Shalamayne to its sheath, careful not to hit Auriana, and gently prised her off his chest.

"Really, Auriana..." he repeated, taking several steadying breaths. "I'm fine."

Auriana nodded and stepped back warily, the colour high in her cheeks. She watched him carefully for long time, waiting until she was satisfied that he was fully under control, before finally turning her attention to her Horde counterpart.

"What are you doing here, Zal?" she asked, crossing her arms and tilting her head to the side.

"Just updatin' the Archmage on a few tings. He been... helpful," Zala'din said cagily, clearly
unwilling to elaborate further. "Whatcha doin' here yaself? Ya King's a long way from Stormwind."

"It's… a long story," Auriana said distractedly, with a quick glance at Varian. "I need to speak to Khadgar, to find out what's been going on with Gar… er… his new… friend. Can I trust you two not to kill each other while I'm gone?"

"Go," Varian said bluntly, giving her a withering look.

On the other hand, Zala'din simply grinned, his long tusks spreading wide.

"I be keepin' a good eye on ya King, little lion," the troll drawled, "Ya needn't worry."

Varian shook his head, irritated beyond belief by the troll's jocular attitude, and perhaps more so by his apparent familiarity with Auriana. He rolled his eyes, but in the interests of the success of the war in Draenor, held his tongue. Zala'din had proven to be a useful ally so far, and Varian was now wise enough to realise that it wasn't worth ruining a tentative alliance in a fit of pique. Auriana looked very concerned, however, and it was with obvious reluctance that she finally swept from the room in search of Khadgar.

He watched the door for a long time after she'd gone, pointedly ignoring the troll commander. After everything that had happened today, Varian wasn't particularly in the mood to play nice with the Horde. He would keep a civil tongue in his head, of course, but he wasn't going to actively make an attempt at small talk, and it appeared that Zala'din felt the same. There was one question that weighed heavily on Varian's mind, however, and after a good quarter hour of awkward silence, his curiosity finally overcame his ill-tempered reticence.

"Why her?" he said, slowly prowling around the outside of the room like a caged animal.

"What?" the troll asked cautiously.

He was clearly surprised by Varian's attempt at conversation, and his facial expression hovered somewhere between genuine interest and confused wariness.

"Auriana. What's your interest in her?" Varian said flatly. "Your kind aren't exactly known for their love of humans."

"Ah, because ya people have always been so tolerant of other races," Zala'din shot back, rising to his full height and taking a step towards Varian.

The movement itself was casual enough, but Varian knew a challenge when he saw one. Zala'din was over a foot taller than Varian, but Varian matched his muscle and breadth of shoulders, and he refused to be cowed by the Horde Commander. He stood up straight, trying to resist the urge to draw Shalamayne again. While Varian was not as fanatically opposed to the Horde as he had once been, he didn't exactly trust them, either. It also didn't help that he was fiercely protective of Auriana, and he didn't like the thought of her life in the hands of some unknown troll. Even though Zala'din had proven to be honourable in the past, Varian still found it difficult to ignore the base, masculine energy building in his chest as he started the troll down.

"I think we can both acknowledge that the Alliance and the Horde have had problems with… tolerance… in the past," he said, gritting his teeth, "But my question stands."

Zala'din cocked his head curiously, clenching and unclenching his massive three-fingered hand. He seemed rather unsure of what to make of Varian, and he shifted with the skittish, dangerous energy of a fierce, wild animal encountering another predator.
"Look… I'm a simple troll, Ya Majesty. I like ta drink, I like ta fight, I like ta win," he said finally, shrugging. "I dun care where ya from, in my book, as long as ya can fight, ya alright wit me. Dat little mage of yours? She got a hell of a lotta fight. I respect dat."

"She does indeed," Varian murmured, both surprised and impressed by the troll's answer.

"And… I dunno," Zala'din added, seemingly encouraged by Varian's response. "She's... funny."

"Funny?"

"Ya ever seen her fight? Well… ya probably have, I suppose, she be your Commander…" Zala'din said, answering his own question. "But dere you have her, dis tiny little thing tearing apart orcs tree times her size like it be nothin', most of 'em dying with surprise on dere faces... it be funny ta watch."

_Troll humour_, Varian thought, snorting.

"She is impressive," he said diplomatically, not entirely sure how to respond to the troll's amusement.

"Dat's another ting," Zala'din added. "I'm here ta protect Azeroth, and send dese Iron Horde dogs back ta dere makers. I'm no fool, Ya Majesty, I know I stand a better chance of doin' dat with her, den without her."

The troll looked suddenly thoughtful, and he leaned in closer.

"Ya understand dat, right? Fightin' for home, and honour, and family?" he asked.

"Yes," Varian said honestly. "Despite the apparent handicap of my tiny human brain…"

Somewhat to his surprise, Zala'din suddenly roared with laughter, throwing his head back and slapping his thigh. His posture relaxed substantially, and the primal tension that had invaded the room lessened somewhat.

"Listen… Ya Majesty…" the troll said, his tone substantially warmer, "I just wanna win dis war and go home. For what it's worth, I got no intention of hurtin' ya girl… or gettin' her killed."

"She's not… she's not my girl," Varian muttered stiffly, trying to keep his expression neutral.

"Whatever ya say, Ya Majesty," Zala'din scoffed, shaking his head, "But I dun tink ya foolin' anyone there…"

A deafening silence fell over the room as Varian felt his muscles tense once more, troubled by the suggestion that Zala'din was aware of his most precious secret, and any sense of camaraderie between the troll and the human King vanished as quickly as it had arisen. He stood up straighter and cracked his knuckles irritably, forcing Zala'din to once again rise into a similarly defensive posture. At the same time, however, Varian heard a small voice in back of his mind that sounded uncannily like his son, and he found himself in an internal wrestling match with his own fierce sense of mistrust for the Horde.

_You have to be better than you are._

He sighed.

"Varian," he said quietly, forcing himself to relax.
"What?" Zala'din exclaimed, his clever eyes widening in clear confusion.

"I prefer... Varian," the King explained. "'Your Majesty' is... far too formal."

The troll grunted, clearly having some kind of internal struggle of his own, and Varian became concerned that his small, tentative peace offering had been ill received. A second later, however, the Horde Commander nodded and stood back, easing into the casually slouched posture his kind normally preferred.

"Zal," the troll said, nodding. "Ya can call me Zal, if ya like."

He gave Varian something that might have been a smile, though it was hard to tell between all the teeth and the tusks. In truth, it was a rather terrifying expression, and Varian wasn't quite sure if the troll was communicating friendship or an intent to eat his face off. Fortunately, he was saved from further awkwardness by Auriana's return. She paused slightly as she entered the room, her clever blue eyes clearly noting the scant distance between the King of Stormwind and the Commander of Frostwall, and a strange look crossed her face.

"Are you two done measuring?" she asked drily, putting her hands on her hips.

"What does that mean?" Zala'din asked, bemused.

"It means she thinks she's being funny," Varian growled, though if he were being honest, her sarcastic observation was not too far off the mark. "Careful, Commander."

"Yes, my Lord," Auriana said smoothly, biting back a grin, "My apologies. Ah... I came to inform you that Khadgar has a proposal for you."

"Does he now?" Varian asked, narrowing his eyes.

"Yes," she replied, "But you're not going to like it."

"You needn't worry, Commander," he said gruffly. "I'm sure I can find a way to contain myself."

"I... alright..." she said, looking as if she were going to argue with him, but thinking better of it at the last moment.

She walked over to the door, and invited Khadgar and Garona back inside. As she did, Varian felt a brief flicker of rage kindle within him once more, and was forced to clench his fists as brutally beat it down. Khadgar looked as calm and confident as always as he took up a stance near the door, while Garona awkwardly attempted to position herself as far away from Varian as possible. She watched him like a hunted animal, her eyes darting between his face and the door as if ready to flee at any moment.

"Auriana told me of the attack on Lunarfall," the Archmage started. "I'm sorry for your losses, Varian. If there is anything I can do to be of aid..."

"I appreciate your concern, Khadgar," Varian said stiffly, "But my Commander has things well in hand."

"Ya were attacked, little lion?" Zala'din asked worriedly. "At Lunarfall?"

Auriana hesitated before responding, with a sideways glance at Varian. He gave her a curt nod, indicating that she had his permission to give the Horde Commander an overview of the situation.
"A coven of warlocks who were unofficially working for the Alliance betrayed Lunarfall assaulted our shipyards earlier today," Auriana said slowly. "Upon interrogation, their leader revealed that the Iron Horde has been lost to the Burning Legion, and is now under Gul'Dan's control. That's why we're here. We came to inform the Archmage, and to seek his help."

"What?" the troll hissed, looking between Khadgar and Varian as if hoping they would contradict Auriana's words. "Dem damn orcs drank da blood again, didn't they? Fools."

He ground his tusks in anger and drummed his long fingers against his thighs.

"It appears so," Auriana said gravely. "Which means we no longer face the Iron Horde alone, but an Iron Horde bolstered by the power of the Burning Legion. I have no idea what we're going to find in that jungle."

"We've beaten da Legion before," Zala'din growled determinedly, cracking his knuckles menacingly. "We can do it again."

"I agree," Khadgar said smoothly. "To that end, Varian… I would like Auriana to incorporate Garona into her command at Lunarfall."

"Absolutely not," Varian roared, fresh anger rising in his chest. "She's was a traitor then, and she's a danger now. I won't have her slaughtering my… my Commander, like she slaughtered my father."

In his mind's eye, he suddenly saw his throne room in Stormwind, only this time, it was not his father bleeding out on the floor, but rather Auriana. Her blood looked impossibly red against her snow white skin, and despite the fact that the scene was a conjuring of his own imagination, he was unable to prevent a shiver from running up his spine.

"What would you prefer? That I put her down? She isn't a rabid dog," Khadgar said hotly, his heavy grey brows drawn.

Varian stepped forward aggressively, heat clouding his vision as he stood toe to toe with Khadgar. The Archmage and the King of Stormwind were both singularly impressive men, each over six feet tall, though Varian outclassed Khadgar in both height and bulk. The older man refused to back down, however, staring back at Varian with infuriating calm.

"You should," Varian said savagely.

"Auriana?" Khadgar said, never taking his eyes off Varian. "It's your garrison, you have a say in this matter."

"I… I have to respect the wishes of my king," Auriana muttered, her eyes shifting nervously towards Varian. "She killed Llane, Khadgar, she killed his father. And you expect me to just… bring her into an Alliance base?"

"She did not kill Llane," Khadgar said seriously, gesturing to where Garona now stood. "This is a different Draenor, a different Garona."

"I could well be saying the same to you. She," Auriana said, mimicking Khadgar's gesture, "Is not your friend. In this timeline, she is for all intents and purposes a stranger to you. She was also under the control of Gul'Dan. How can you be certain that her mind is her own? I've had enough problems with traitors as it is… I don't need to add to my problems."

"I am certain," Khadgar said curtly. "Garona is loyal. Do you doubt my magic?"
"Your magic is not in question," Auriana countered. "Her loyalty is."

"I'm standing right here..." Garona muttered, frowning. "I..."

"You don't get to speak," Varian snarled, thrusting a finger angrily in her direction.

"Varian, please," the Archmage argued forcefully, his forehead creasing with rarely seen frustration. "You have to understand that she is not the same Garona who betrayed Stormwind. She was Gul'Dan's foremost assassin, surely you can appreciate the kind of intelligence she could provide. You're about to send Auriana into Tanaan virtually blind - Garona could help with that. She could potentially make the difference between victory and defeat, and you know it."

Varian growled wordlessly and stepped away, trying to clear his head. He didn't appreciate Khadgar's unabashed attempt to guilt him over Auriana's safety, but he had to admit that the Archmage had a point. Now that it was clear that Gul'Dan ruled the Iron Horde, having access to one of the warlock's most trusted advisors would be invaluable.

And yet...

"I promise you, Highness, I live only to see the downfall of the Iron Horde," Garona said earnestly, her eyes bright. "Khadgar has told me much of my... my other self. I know what she did to your family... but she and I are not the same."

"If ya don't want her, we'll take her," Zala'din added. "Da Horde always be looking for willin' blades..."

Varian frowned darkly. He didn't necessarily want to give Garona asylum, but he didn't particularly want the Horde to take her, either. He looked over at Auriana, who met his gaze with soft, steady eyes. She shrugged slightly, but from her expression it was clear that whatever decision he made, she would support him without question.

"Your Majesty?" Khadgar prompted.

Varian sighed, his powerful distrust of Garona warring with his faith in Khadgar and the potential value of the intelligence Garona could provide. Deep down, he knew Khadgar was right, and he knew that Garona's intelligence might even one day make the difference between whether Auriana lived or died. Inside, however, the part of him that was still a frightened child yearned for vengeance, to strike out at the woman who had taken so very much from him.

Lost in thought, he took some time to realise that everyone in the room was watching him closely. Khadgar looked slightly troubled, while Zala'din looked simply curious. Garona herself looked rather nervous, and it was with no small amount of satisfaction that Varian watched her wither under his penetrating gaze as he finally reached a decision.

"I hate time travel," he muttered under his breath, with a bitter shake of his head.

Zala'din quickly stifled a grin at his words, but it appeared that the troll Commander had been the only one who had heard. Garona and Khadgar exchanged a brief look, while Auriana's expression remained unchanged.

"I'm sorry, my Lord?" she said. "I didn't quite catch that..."

"It's your garrison, Commander," Varian said heavily, speaking louder this time. "It's your choice."

Something strange and dangerous flickered behind Auriana's eyes, but outwardly she appeared
unfazed. She looked over at Garona, her eyes narrowing as if she could read into the half-orc's very soul. She then briefly looked to Varian, silently confirming that she did indeed have his permission. He nodded ever so slightly, still unsure as to whether he was making the right decision, and after a long sigh, Auriana spoke.

"Garona Halforcen… you would pledge yourself to my command?" she said quietly. "To Lunarfall?"

"I will do everything in my power to see Gul'Dan fall," Garona said seriously. "I won't betray you, Commander."

"No, you won't... because I won't ever give you that chance," Auriana said flatly. "I've had enough of betrayal to last a lifetime."

"Is that a threat?" Garona asked, unconsciously moving ever so slightly towards Khadgar.

"Yes, it is," Auriana said bluntly, her blue eyes icy cold. "I can certainly use a woman of your talents, Garona, but I won't tolerate duplicity. If I suspect your mind is no longer your own, I won't hesitate. I will put you down."

"I… I understand," Garona said seriously. "I… does that mean you'll have me?"

"Yes. You will accompany me back to Lunarfall after we're done here," Auriana ordered, her eyes sharp. "Though I should make one thing clear…"

Auriana turned on Garona with a predatory glare, moving so that she stood mere inches away from the half-orc assassin. Of course, while Garona was far taller and heavier, it was clear that it was Auriana who held all the power.

"You see that man?" she said bluntly, nodding towards Varian. "That's my King. I won't hold you responsible for the actions of another you in another time, but the fact remains - you were in Gul'Dan's control. If you so much as look at him in a way that I don't like… I'll pull your insides out through your nostrils and light them on fire while you watch."

"Auriana!" Khadgar snapped, looking thoroughly displeased.

"Please, Khadgar, it's alright," Garona said, waving him off. "Commander, I know that I have done little to earn your trust. Until Khadgar freed me, my life was not my own. I have been given back my life, and now I freely pledge it to you. I will serve you here on Draenor until my dying day. Point me at your enemies, and I will deliver unto them a swift and silent end."

"Well said," Auriana said seriously. "I'll hold you to that oath."

She then turned to face Zala'din, and eyed the troll commander thoughtfully.

"You have a harbour in Frostwall," she said slowly. "And a fleet."

Zala'din frowned, apparently surprised that she was aware of the existence of his fleet. He looked briefly in Varian's direction, his golden eyes sharp.

"How'd ya know dat, mon?" he said cautiously.

"Probably the same way you know the location of my guard positions around outer Lunarfall," she said drily. "Look, let's not pretend that we don't keep tabs on each other..."
"Alright…" Zala'din conceded. "Whatcha thinkin'?"

Auriana strode over to Khadgar's desk, drawing the small group's attention to a painstakingly drawn map of Draenor.

"We cannot assault Tanaan Jungle by sea from either the north or the south. Even if we could land our troops, it would be incredibly difficult to move an army up over the cliffs and through the jungle," she said quickly. "Which leaves us only two possible paths of assault."

She pointed out two points on the map as she spoke; namely the inlet leading towards the ruins of the Dark Portal, and the massive gates that guarded the entrance to Tanaan on the Talador side.

"Your Majesty," she said, looking up at Varian with bright eyes, "I propose that we once again consider the utility of a joint operation between the Alliance and the Horde, along with our new allies here on Draenor. We could have Yrel's draenei hit the Gates of Tanaan while we bring our fleets around on the Portal side and storm the beach."

"You wanna pincer da Iron Horde between da land and sea assaults?" Zala'din asked, moving swiftly to her side. "Not a bad idea. I betcha Durotan's Frostwolves'd be willing to join da overland assault."

He leant forward over the map, touching his hand to the parchment beside Auriana's own. They were a strange study in contrasts; the enormous, vibrant skinned troll and the tiny dark-haired mage. Zala'din absolutely towered over Auriana, and Varian couldn't help but to feel a surge of protectiveness. He didn't like how close the two Commanders were standing, but he forced himself to swallow his pride and consider the bigger picture.

"How soon could an invasion be prepared?" he asked. "We did lose two ships."

"That's true, my Lord, but the others were unharmed," Auriana countered. "I'm confident that we could have our fleet off the coast of Tanaan in a day or two, at the most."

"We'd take a bit longer," Zala'din said, tapping his long fingers against Khadgar's desk. "My fleet be ready ta launch, but it be a long sail between my garrison and Tanaan."

"How long?" Khadgar asked, scratching his chin.

"Five days," Zala'din suggested, after some careful thought. "Frostwall's not as well positioned ta assault Tanaan Jungle as Lunarfall."

Auriana nodded, but she looked displeased. She leant back against the wall, folding her arms across her chest with a slight frown.

"What is it?" Varian asked her, concerned.

"The longer we delay… the more time Gul'Dan has to build up his forces," she said quietly. "However… it may be for the best. Five days will give me a chance to contact the draenei, and…" 

She trailed off and looked over to Garona, who had thus far observed the conversation with a silent, nervous energy.

"You'll get your chance to prove yourself sooner than you might think," she said coolly. "Tomorrow, we're going hunting."

"Hunting?" Khadgar and Varian asked at the same time.
"I won't go into that Light-forsaken with a coven of traitorous warlocks at my back," Auriana said firmly. "I'm going to find them and exterminate them like the vermin they are, and then I'll turn my attention to Tanaan... and Gul'Dan."

"You won't be alone," Zala'din said savagely, rising back up to his full height. "Da Horde will do their part. Gul'Dan gonna face da full might of Azeroth, and he ain't gonna leave dat Tanaan alive."

Varian's eyes met Auriana's, and for the second time that day, they had a long, silent conversation. Tanaan Jungle was the last place on earth he wanted to send her, especially given that the Iron Horde were now controlled by Gul'Dan, but he had to put the Alliance first.

"You have my permission, Commander," he said finally. "The Alliance will support a joint operation with the Horde in order to establish a front in Tanaan."

"Thank you, Your Majesty," Auriana said quietly. "I will teleport you home to Stormwind, then Garona and I will return to Lunarfall. I will see to the preparation of our troops immediately."

"As will I," Zala'din said firmly. "Five days, little lion?"

"Five days," Auriana confirmed. "And stop calling me that."

Zala'din merely grinned in reply, clearly having no intention of ceasing his use of her nickname. Auriana sighed, but Varian knew her well enough to know that she was somewhat amused.

"You have my support, as well," Khadgar added. "I will continue my research into Gul'Dan's foul machinations, and if I can provide you with any magical aid, I will. The Burning Legion must not be allowed to gain a foothold on this world."

"Thank you, Khadgar," Auriana said gratefully, touching a small hand to her temples. "Well, if that's all, I should open a port..."

"Er... Commander? Could we have a word first?" Varian interrupted, not wanting to leave her quite yet.

All eyes turned toward him, and he tried his best to dissuade the unlikely group's curiosity with a stern glare.

"Alone," he added, with a pointed glance at Khadgar.

The Archmage nodded, apparently far quicker on the uptake than the others, and pushed Zala'din and Garona from the room ahead of him, leaving Varian and Auriana to speak in private.

"I'm sorry," Auriana said quickly, mere seconds after Khadgar had closed the door. "About Garona, I mean. I knew he was looking for her, but I didn't think he'd actually found her... I can't imagine what it would be like coming face to face with her unexpectedly..."

She looked up at him with sorrowful eyes, her face looking pale and drawn. Varian was starkly reminded that she was still badly injured from her earlier fight with the traitorous warlocks, and he realised it was something of a minor miracle that she was still standing.

"C'mere," he said softly, carefully drawing her into his arms so as not to harm her wounded back.

For a long moment, Varian simply held her close, resting his chin against her forehead and taking several slow breaths. Varian found that it was hard to keep his hands from shaking, and he began to suspect that the day's events had taken more of a toll on his emotions than he might have guessed.
He had genuinely believed, even if only for a second, that the woman he loved had been killed, and now he had come face to face with the woman who had betrayed and slaughtered his father. It may have been a different Garona, from another time, but Varian could picture the scene as if it were yesterday, and could remember the sick feeling of powerlessness that had engulfed him as he had watched his father die. He shivered involuntarily, and instinctively cradled Auriana closer.

"Are you alright?" she asked, her voice slightly muffled by his chest.

"I'm fine," Varian lied. "I'm always fine."

"Of course you are," Auriana said sarcastically, clearly not believing a word he had said.

"I'm more worried about you," Varian said quickly, changing the topic. "That was quite a hit you took."

"I'll be alright," she said, wincing slightly. "I'm just a little… singed."

"You'll get that look at before you go gallivanting off to Talador, won't you?" he said worriedly.

"I will. I know how to take care of myself, Varian," she said, the barest hint of irritation entering her voice.

"Could have fooled me," he said drily, placing a gentle kiss on the top of her head.

He then held her out at arm's length, staring down at her intently as he tried commit every precious line of her face to memory. Auriana's too-pale complexion was still stained with blood and soot from the earlier battle, and faint lines of concern marked the otherwise smooth skin of her forehead. Her enormous blue eyes were still bright, however, and her soft pink lips were practically begging to be kissed.

"Don't look at me like that," she said softly, frowning.

"Like what?"

"Like you're never going to see me again," she murmured, tucking her head back against her favourite spot on his chest.

"Sorry," he said gruffly. "If there's anyone who can survive Tanaan Jungle, it's you. I just…"

"I know," she said quickly. "You worry."

"Funnily enough, I've grown rather attached to you," Varian growled. "And… I'm not used to this. I'm used to being the one at war, the one who might not come home. It's odd, I can face down an orc or a demon without fear... but when it comes to waiting, to staying awake each night wondering if there will come a knock at the door and a message from Lunarfall informing me of your death… I will confess that I'm... afraid."

He shook his head, recalling the crippling chains of fear that had engulfed his heart when he had seen Auriana fall to the warlock's spell on the deck of the carrier. Varian was not a man who was ever afraid for himself, but for her… for his son...

"I hate it," he added, tightening his grip on her waist.

"Varian…" she said seriously, reaching up to run her hands through his unruly hair, "I promise I'll come home to you. I'll take on the entire Burning Legion myself, if that's what it takes, but I
will always come home to you.”

Varian growled deep in his throat, leaning longingly into her cool touch. She stared up at him with unflinching love and certainty, and he found he was no longer able to resist. He lowered his head to capture her lips in a fevered embrace, drawing her close and revelling in the sweetness of her kiss.

"I… I should send you back to Stormwind," she said breathlessly, after Varian reluctantly released her from his grasp. "Anduin and Greymane will be worrying after you."

"That's probably true," he admitted. "I left the city in something of a hurry."

"You came back to protect me," she said quietly, pressing her hand against his chest.

"I did," he said, smiling. "Well… mostly. I'll admit… I did enjoy the opportunity to throw myself into a good fight."

"Of course you did," she said, rolling her eyes. "I bet you wish you were coming to Tanaan, too."

"Always," he confessed. "There's nowhere I'd rather be than fighting by your side. Though… I realise that isn't exactly an option, as much as I'd like it to be."

"You wish I wasn't going," she said perceptively.

"That's true," he admitted, reaching out to touch her cheek.

She smiled and leaned into his touch, and Varian had to forcibly ignore the sudden tight sensation in his chest and the gnawing fear that she really might not come back.

"But I'd never ask you to stay," he added firmly, more to convince himself than her. "You're a fighter, Auri, and that's what I love about you. I could never ask you to give up that part of yourself. So… in that spirit… what I will say is simply this… good hunting, Commander."
It was mid-morning in Talador, and the gentle sunlight set the rich green and amber landscape aglow. On any other day, Auriana might have paused to admire the magnificent scenery, but today was not a normal day. Today was about cleaning house, about protecting the brave men and women of Lunarfall from those who would betray them… and more than anything, today was about vengeance.

Auriana felt hard, and tense, like a bomb waiting to explode. She bit her lip, trying not to let her discomfort show as she trekked through the plains of southern Talador with her handpicked strike force in tow. Chasing down the warlocks who had betrayed Lunarfall to the Burning Legion was a delicate operation, and Auriana had put a lot of thought into selecting the dozen or so soldiers that now walked at her side. Among their number were the draenei paladin Lieutenant, Hafela; Auriana's bodyguard Delvar Ironfist; and a handful of Lunarfall's most experienced trackers and assassins.

Auriana had teleported the small group to the outskirts of Auchindoun, where she had briefly conversed with some of her draenei allies before striking out into the wilds of Talador. The traitorous warlock Ayana Blackwood had provided Auriana with the approximate details of her coven's location before her death at Varian's hands, but without any more specific details, Auriana's group had been forced to coordinate an arduous search throughout the woods surrounding the draenei holy site. So far that morning they had cleared two empty draenei tombs without luck, and Auriana had begun to wonder whether the coven had been alerted to her presence and vanished, or whether Ayana had simply failed to tell the truth about their whereabouts.

It was with growing frustration that Auriana pressed on, leading her strike force through a thick copse of trees surrounding some crumbling ogre ruins. She had been especially vigilant for these sort of ruins, knowing that the tomb she sought was located somewhere nearby; though, in this part of Talador, remnants of ogre civilisation weren't exactly hard to find. Delvar Ironfist walked closely at her side, almost uncomfortably so, while the rest of her men fanned out, moving quickly and quietly through the trees. One of her druids had transformed into a sleek nightsaber in order to prowl ahead, while a second had taken the form of a stormcrow to patrol from above. The others - shaman, rogues, hunters - were all otherwise on foot, each sharply focused on the mission at hand.

Ironfist openly carried his axe in hand, and his grim eyes ceaselessly raking the treeline as if he expected the foliage itself to jump out and attack Auriana. He had been irritable and edgy ever since Auriana had recruited him for this particular mission, even more so than usual, and she decided to take advantage of the brief lull in activity to question him.

"So… are you going to tell me what's bothering you, Delvar?" she asked quietly, leaves crunching under her boots as she stepped over a small fallen log.

"Nothin' botherin' me, Commander," the dwarf said stiffly. "I'm here ta hunt warlocks, that's all."

"Don't make me order you," Auriana sighed.

The death knight gave her a strange look, and shifted his grip on his axe. His eerie, glowing eyes were nearly impossible to read, and Auriana felt distinctly unnerved as he stared her down.

"Ye shouldn't have been alone out there," Ironfist grumbled, so quietly that Auriana almost missed the words.
"What?"

"At the shipyard," he explained. "When the Legion attacked. What's the point of ye havin' a bodyguard if ye never let me do my job?"

"I didn't really have much of a choice, Delvar, we weren't anywhere near one another when the fighting broke out, and I wasn't exactly expecting to go to war in my own garrison," Auriana pointed out. "Should I have asked the demons to wait politely while I came to find you?"

"No," he conceded reluctantly. "I just… I don't want ta fail ye again."

The admission clearly cost the dour death knight something, and Auriana was surprised to hear genuine remorse in his gravelly voice.

"Fail me?" she repeated. "What do you mean?"

"Ye were kidnapped on my watch, Commander," Ironfist said seriously. "I refuse ta let that happen again, but I can't do that if ye don't keep me around."

Auriana had never directly spoken to anyone in her command about her experiences in Blackrock Foundry, and she somewhat ashamedly realised that she was not the only one who had suffered lasting consequences as a result of Blackhand's actions. Ironfist took his job as her bodyguard very seriously, and Auriana knew that her disappearance would have weighed heavily on his conscience.

"I'm sorry," she said sincerely. "And I hope you know that what happened with... with my kidnapping wasn't your fault. I know I'm not the easiest officer to guard, especially in a chaotic fight like the shipyard attack."

She smiled tentatively at her bodyguard, and was pleased to see that he looked slightly mollified.

"Besides, I had to see to the safety of the King, first and foremost," she added. "You know that."

"I do, lass," he said, his voice surprisingly gentle, "But you need to learn that your life is not as expendable as you seem to think it is."

He looked pointedly at her shoulder and raised an eyebrow, knowing full well that beneath her armour she had a swathe of bandages covering the burn wound she had sustained during the shipyard invasion. The wound didn't inhibit her movement overly much, and she was perfectly fit to be out in the field, but it was yet another reminder of the danger she regularly courted in her role as Commander of Lunarfall.

"Delvar, I..." she started, only to fall instantly quiet as she heard a sharp warning whistle from somewhere deeper into the forest.

As a part of the hunt, Auriana had brought along two of her best trackers, and had sent them on ahead to warn of any potential warlock or Legion activity. All thoughts of conversation instantly forgotten, she held up a hand, singling her troops to stop as she waited for a further signal. Another two quick whistles rang out, indicating possible enemy contact. There was a small ridge lined by crumbling ogre stonework about forty feet south of Auriana's position, and she indicated for her troops to take cover.

Auriana took point position, creeping forward as silently as she was able, before crouching down behind the remains of the stone wall. Her men rapidly moved in beside her, with Ironfist and Hafela taking up positions on her right, and Garona Halforcen on her left. Each of her soldiers wore
uncannily similar facial expressions, and each played nervously with their weapons as they awaited the scouting report.

There was a barely discernible rustling of leaves to the right, and Auriana turned her head to see two hunters in Lunarfall livery moving through the trees. The taller of the two was a rangy draenei with a crop of white blonde hair, while her companion was a pale, lilac-skinned night elf with a long, dark purple braid. Both were exceptionally good scouts and trackers, and had shown both skill and loyalty throughout the Draenor campaign.

"Report," Auriana whispered, as the two trackers joined her behind the cover of the wall.

"There's another tomb about half a mile south," Maev Battlesong said excitedly, tugging at her braid. "And this one is most definitely occupied."

"There are two entrances," Kuro added, her lilting draenei voice soft. "The back entrance is well concealed, and looks to be infrequently used, but it is serviceable. Perhaps an escape tunnel of some sort."

"Are we certain there are warlocks down there?" Hafela asked, scratching one of her horns thoughtfully.

Auriana cautiously poked her head up over the ruined ogre wall, and reached out with her magical senses. There was a small outcropping of rock to the south, as the scouts had indicated, where Auriana could make out the graceful, distinctive architecture of a draenei tomb entrance. Her hearing may have no longer been as acute as it once was, but her magical abilities were unimpaired, and she felt the distinct echo of surging magic emanating from the tomb entrance. Fel magic always seemed wrong to Auriana; a dark, twisted perversion of the majesty and wonder of what arcane magic should be, and it never failed to make her shiver.

"Yes," she murmured. "I'm sure. There's definitely something very dark going on down in that tomb."

She lowered her head and turned back to face her soldiers, her lips drawing into a thin, determined line.

"Alright, here's how it's going to go down. Ironfist, you take half of our forces around to the back entrance. Kuro will show you the way," she ordered. "Hafela, you'll take the rest straight in through the front door. We'll pincer them in between the front and rear assaults. We're sure there's no other way out?"

"Certain, ma'am," Maev confirmed.

"Good. They'll have nowhere to run," Auriana said grimly. "That said, be careful down there. There's a good chance they know we're coming. Garona, Maev and I will stay here to guard against the possibility of an ambush."

"Commander…" Ironfist began, clearly displeased with the fact that he would not be fighting at her side.

"You have your orders," Auriana said firmly, giving him a warning look. "Maev, I want you to find a vantage point with a good view of the entire area… including our current position. If anything goes wrong, I need you to get word to Lunarfall, understood?"

She gave Maev a significant look, hoping that the night elf hunter would comprehend her unspoken request. Having Maev take up the right scouting position would provide protection for the strike
force entering the tomb, of course, but it would also allow her to keep a close eye on Auriana and Garona. Auriana wanted to spend time alone with the half-orc rogue, to give her every possible chance of disrupting the mission. If Garona intended to betray Lunarfall, Auriana wanted to know sooner rather than later, and so had decided to use herself as bait. The Commander of Lunarfall was a very tempting target, and she very much doubted an assassin still within the control of Gul'Dan would be able to resist a prime opportunity like the one Auriana intended to provide. Of course, she wasn't stupid, and would have Maev in place as backup in the event that something went wrong - assuming, of course, that the hunter had understood her cryptic orders.

Fortunately, the night elf was very clever, and she appeared to have followed Auriana's train of thought. She gave a slow nod, her luminous eyes darting briefly to Garona, before she nocked an arrow and disappeared into the trees. For her part, Garona gave no indication that she had understood the silent exchange, and merely cast her gaze out towards the tomb. Auriana nodded and took a deep breath, before ordering her remaining soldiers to take up their positions in anticipation of the assault.

Auriana watched them go, leaning up against the ogre stonework and scanning the scene for the slightest sign of trouble. It was dangerous enough assaulting the tomb through a narrow ingress point, even with the advantage of the rear access tunnel, and Auriana didn't want to take any chances that her men might be boxed in from behind. The traitorous coven had proven to be clever and subtle opponents thus far, and Auriana would not pursue a needlessly reckless course of action in pursuit of their capture. Of course, she naturally itched to find herself at the front of the fight, but right now she needed to look at the bigger picture.

"Commander, we're... we're just going to watch?" Garona asked incredulously. "I thought you brought me here to fight."

"For now... yes, we are," Auriana said, more calmly than she actually felt.

"For now?"

"I can't rule out the possibility that this is a trap, at least not yet," Auriana explained curtly. "We'll join in the assault once I'm certain there aren't any nasty surprises lurking in these woods."

"Nasty surprises like me, you mean," Garona said, sighing. "You don't trust me."

"I'll trust you when you've shown me that you can be trusted," Auriana said shortly, pointedly keeping her eyes focused on the draenei tomb. "Though in this instance, I was referring to the warlock coven."

In the distance, she could just make out Ironfist's squad slowly moving towards the rear entrance of the tomb, while Hafela's group concealed themselves behind a rocky outcrop near the front. Although in position, Hafela's group paused, awaiting Ironfist's ready signal before launching their attack.

"He said you could be a hard ass," Garona muttered darkly, unable to keep a note of petulance from her voice.

"Gul'Dan called me... a hard ass?" Auriana asked, swinging her head around to look at Garona properly for the first time. "Really?"

"No," Garona said quickly, with a half-hearted snort. "Khadgar. Gul'Dan's descriptions of you were... considerably less complimentary."
Auriana grunted noncommittally. She was not especially interested in small talk at the best of times, least of all during a mission, and she didn't have any particular desire to make friends with Garona. Still, she supposed, in the event that Garona's desire to join Lunarfall was genuine, there was nothing to be gained by being unnecessarily surly.

"Khadgar thinks I'm a hard ass, huh?" she said lightly, turning her attention back to the tomb entrance. "Always such a flatterer."

"Actually, he thinks you're quite brilliant," Garona said hastily, as if afraid that Auriana might be offended. "If a little… single-minded."

"Well, 'single-minded' isn't the worst thing I've ever been called," Auriana admitted, smiling slightly despite herself.

"I'm sure it isn't. You know…" Garona said tentatively, "We aren't so different, you and I."

"How do you figure that?" Auriana asked, genuinely confused. "You barely know me."

Physically, the two women could not have been more different. Garona was tall, even for a woman of her ilk, and while she did not possess the heavy bulk of a full-blooded orc female, she certainly wasn't lacking for muscle. Moreover, Garona was a rogue by trade, a master of quick knives and deadly poison, and her fighting style was dramatically removed from the spectacularly unsubtle and explosive methods that Auriana typically preferred. She was smart and adaptive, from all accounts, but beyond a shared intelligence, Auriana couldn't possibly think of anything that they had in common.

"I know enough," Garona said simply. "I know we're both survivors. We're both lone wolves. And we were both born and bred for a single purpose - war."

Auriana kept her gaze fixed firmly forwards, mostly to hide the fact that Garona's observations had hit unnervingly close to the bone.

"You're a clever woman, Commander, and well born," Garona continued, apparently undeterred by Auriana's silence. "You had other options. Better options. You didn't have to be a soldier, and yet here we are... you feel the call of blood and iron as strongly as any orc. That's something I can understand."

The rogue was talking very quickly now, as if by speaking to Auriana's deepest flaws, she might also confess her own.

"They have a name for you, you know," she added, giving Auriana a wary sideways glance.

"They?"

"The orcs. They call you the 'pale demon'," Garona explained. "To the Iron Horde, you're a nightmare, a story told to frighten children."

"I don't kill children," Auriana murmured vaguely, somewhat surprised by the extent of her own notoriety amongst the Iron Horde. "I'm here to protect my people, nothing more. I have no interest in conquest - nor in genocide. I didn't start this war."

"No, but you intend to finish it," Garona countered, "By any means necessary. Speaking as one who knows - take care you don't lose yourself in the process, Commander."

Auriana coughed, finding herself with no real reply to Garona's warning. The half-orc woman's
comments had been alarmingly apt, and she'd somehow managed to tap into Auriana's own scarcely spoken fears. Auriana had already come perilously close to losing herself more than once during the Draenor campaign; firstly, against Garrosh Hellscream, then in Highmaul, and once more in Blackrock Foundry. Ever since the destruction of Lunarfall's shipyard and the ensuing battle, she had begun to wonder if taking Tanaan would take more than she had left to give, and whether defeating the Burning Legion would come at the cost of her own humanity. It was a fear that she'd barely acknowledged to herself, and the fact that Garona had read her so easily was disturbing, to say the least.

"That's enough," Auriana snapped, though she felt a strange surge of sympathy and kinship for the half-orc woman. "The attack will begin shortly. I need you to do your job, not... analyse my psyche. Keep an eye out for anything that looks suspicious."

Garona turned away, looking abashed, and Auriana shook her head as she forced herself to regain her shaken focus. Ironfist's group had now completely disappeared behind the rocky outcrop that concealed the tomb, and Auriana's muscles tensed as she waited for her men to move. The air felt both oddly still and incredibly charged at the same time, when the unnatural silence was broken by three quick, high whistles - the signal for attack.

Auriana watched the valley like a hawk as Hafela and her strike team struck like lightning, breaching the front entrance of the tomb using gnome-made smoke bombs. Brief sounds of struggle followed, before her men moved further underground to press their attack. Ironfist's group was still invisible, and Auriana could only assume that they had breached their own entrance in similar fashion.

Her fingers twitched involuntarily and she leaned forward, scanning the valley for any sign of coven forces or Burning Legion. If Auriana's soldiers had walked into a trap, it would make sense for the coven to wait until the Alliance had entered the tomb before surrounding and slaughtering them. The area around the tomb, however, remained quiet, and after several impossibly long minutes, no one else had appeared.

"I can't see anyone," Garona whispered, her eyes narrowed intently.

"Me either," Auriana said. "Which makes me think that if this is a trap... whatever they have in store for us is down there."

She cautiously rose to her feet, brushing the leaves off her robes as she gestured for Garona to do the same.

"Come on," she said. "Let's get moving, they're going to need our help."

Auriana and Garona leapt over the crumbling stone wall, and made their way swiftly down towards the tomb. With her much longer legs, Garona easily outpaced Auriana, and arrived at the tomb entrance first, her daggers flashing brightly in the sun as she charged. Auriana sighed and blinked forwards, catching up to Garona just as she hit the stairs.

Draenei tombs were all relatively similar, with long staircases leading down into a long central corridor with branching chambers. Together, Auriana and Garona raced down into the depths of the tomb, and quickly arrived at the main corridor. There was still thick white smoke in the air from the initial breach, and Auriana could hear the sounds of intense fighting on either side.

The nearby battle sent Auriana's adrenaline surging, and she quickly gathered her power. Her arms flared as she joined in the chaos, blasting away a pack of flaming imps that had charged out from one of the side chambers. Garona, too, seemed keen for a good fight, and she leapt at any demon
that moved with her twin daggers raised high. In her eagerness, however, she had failed to assess
the situation properly, and hadn't noticed the male warlock who had emerged from the far end of
the corridor, his fingers alive with the sickly green glow of fel energy.

"Get down!" Auriana shouted, tackling Garona out of the way as a massive explosion of fel energy
ripped through the corridor.

Both women sprawled face down as the heat of the spell washed over them, though Auriana was
quicker to recover. She used the momentum of her tackle to roll her feet in a single movement, and
she hurled a quick frostbolt at the offending warlock. The spell missed, but it was enough to force
the warlock to stagger away and disappear further down the corridor.

"I know you're eager to prove yourself, but keep your head," Auriana growled, yanking Garona
upright. "I'm here to kill warlocks, not to babysit rogues."

Garona nodded, a dark flush spreading across her gaunt cheeks.

"He ran that way, towards the main chamber," Auriana explained, pointing. "Can you stealth?"

"Of course," Garona said, vanishing almost before the words had left her mouth.

Auriana followed suit, casting a glamour of her own and rendering herself temporarily invisible.
The warlock who had attacked them had considerable power, and she was somewhat surprised that
he had cut and run so easily after forcing both her and Garona to the ground. His quick retreat had
made her instantly suspicious, and she decided that in this case, it was best to err on the side of
cautions and approach him while invisible.

As Auriana moved down the corridor, she could feel, rather than see, Garona at her side. The rogue
was very good, and if they hadn't been standing mere inches apart, Auriana might not have known
she was there. Together, they crept silently after the male warlock, and followed him along the
corridor and down a second set of stairs into some kind of large, ritual antechamber. The warlock
paused in the centre of the room, and began to cast a hurried summoning spell. He was alone in the
chamber, but of course powerful warlocks were never truly alone when they had the ability to call
forth a near endless tide of demons from the Twisting Nether.

His eyes widened in surprise as Auriana and Garona suddenly reappeared as if from nowhere, but
Auriana could tell that they were too late to stop his dark ritual. The air beside the warlock
suddenly split, as if cut open by a massive knife, and through the portal Auriana could see the
swirling, chaotic energies of the Twisting Nether. She gasped despite herself, and inadvertently
took a step backwards as a massive bound felguard stepped forth from the impossibly black depths
of the portal.

The foul creature bellowed and raised its monstrous axe, and stepped forward to protect the
warlock with a menacing snarl.

"Felguard's yours!" Auriana shouted to Garona, "I've got the warlock!"

Warlocks were extremely dangerous, and most non-casters were ill equipped to duel a master of
the fel arts one on one. Garona stood a far better chance of taking on the felguard, while Auriana
hoped to kill the warlock before he could summon through any more demons. The warlock made
an attempt to hide behind the bulk of his enslaved demon, to keep Auriana cornered while he
turned his magic against her, but she was having none of it. She blinked past the felguard, trusting
that Garona would have her back, and unleashed a powerful barrage of frost shards. The warlock
countered the wave of ice with a burst of green fire, before attempting to incinerate Auriana where
she stood. He was strong and well trained, a worthy challenge, and despite the seriousness of the situation, Auriana found herself grinning recklessly as she met him spell for spell.

As she fought, Auriana watched Garona from out of the corner of her eye. She was ducking and weaving around the felguard with considerable skill, and even Auriana had to admit that the half-orc rogue was one of the most formidable warriors she had ever seen. The felguard was big and powerful, but Garona was quick and clever, using her superior speed and agility to cut deep slashes across the felguard's muscular back and thighs.

Of course, Auriana didn't exactly have much time to watch, occupied as she was by her own battle with male warlock. He was clearly a master of destructive spells, but if he thought his anger and explosive power could match Auriana's own, he was sorely mistaken. Every sickly burst of green fire was countered with a flash of pure white frost, and Auriana could tell the warlock was getting frustrated by her stubborn refusal to simply lay down and die. He panted heavily as he increased his already frantic casting speed, and Auriana was forced to dive to the side to avoid a sudden volley of fel bolts. She grunted as she hit the cool stone floor, rolling twice before springing to her feet and blinking forwards. The warlock stumbled, thrown by her sudden proximity, and it afforded Auriana the opportunity to snare his legs with bonds of ice. Faster than blinking, she followed up the frost nova with a devastating frostbolt, propelling the warlock back ten feet and slamming the back of his head into the wall.

Auriana advanced forward ruthlessly, magic dancing at her fingertips as she prepared to finish him off, only to gasp in genuine surprise as she felt the spell fade away into nothingness. She flushed, unable to even remember the last time she had failed to cast a simple frostbolt successfully, and she frantically looked around for some kind of explanation.

Unhappily, she found the source of the interference almost immediately - a baying felhunter who had suddenly appeared in the chamber doorway. Somehow, the beast had made it through the chaos of the fighting upstairs, and had homed in on the most potent source of magic that it could find. Felhunters were trained by the Burning Legion for a single purpose - to hunt mortal spellcasters - and this one was clearly out for Auriana's blood.

The demon snarled, and Auriana scowled as she felt her once surging magical energy begin to drain slowly away. With a throaty growl to rival the demon's own, Auriana withdrew her belt knife, knowing that there was little point in casting spells against a creature who could quite literally devour magic from thin air. Unfortunately, she moved too slowly, and before she could adopt a defensive stance, the felhunter had set upon her in a flurry of spikes and snapping jaws.

Auriana cried out in pain as one of the creature's razor sharp feet slashed through the muscle of her upper arm, and she tumbled backwards. She landed hard on her backside, throwing aside her knife and just barely catching the demon by the jaws as it leapt onto her chest and tried its hardest to tear open her throat. The demon's dark, gaping maw was mere inches from her exposed neck, and it took all of Auriana's strength to keep the beast at bay. She was deceptively strong, despite her small size, but there was no way she could hold off a two hundred pound felhunter for very long. The beast's fetid breath was hot and wet against her face, and she whimpered as the gnashing teeth scraped against her soft, unprotected skin.

Auriana's stomach dropped as she realised that the felhunter's attack would likely mean her death, though curiously she felt only regret, not fear. Her magic was useless, and without any other weapons at her disposal, she had no way of fending off the raving demon. She closed her eyes and willed a quick, silent goodbye to Varian, wincing in disgust as hot, slimy demon saliva dripped down her neck. Abruptly, however, she felt the weight on her chest lessen, as something large and fast moving barrelled into the felhunter and tackled it six feet clear of her body. Auriana didn't
hesitate, rolling onto her stomach the moment she was free and scrabbling frantically for her knife.

Her rescuer turned out to be none other than Garona; who, having finally dispatched the felguard, had turned her deadly attentions to the felhunter. Shaking her head dazedly, Auriana dragged herself to her knees in an attempt to aid the rogue, only to realise that the warlock she had been fighting earlier was still alive, and was calling on a spell of devastating destruction that would mean the end of them both. If only to distract him, Auriana desperately hurled her knife at his chest. She was awkwardly sprawled on the ground, and wasn't at all trained at knife throwing, but she had a good eye, and she managed to take the warlock in the shoulder. It wasn't a serious wound, but it was enough to temporarily interrupt his spell casting, which is all that Auriana really needed.

The delay afforded Garona time to slaughter the felhunter, spilling its bubbling, viscous blood upon the ground as she slit its belly from throat to tail. With the demon's death, Auriana felt her magic surge, and she wasted no time calling icy death to her fingertips. The warlock made to reach for his own destructive magic, but Auriana was faster, and no longer encumbered by the felhunter's dampening magic. The warlock had barely raised a hand when she unleashed a brutal burst of frost, impaling him through the neck with a long spike of ice.

It was a quick death, and perhaps better than a traitor deserved, but at least he was dead. Auriana rolled onto her back and breathed a deep sigh of relief, her arm muscles trembling wildly from the effort of holding off the felhunter. Garona, fortunately, seemed unharmed, her long, loping stride uninhibited as she sheathed her twin daggers and moved to help Auriana back to her feet.

"You saved my life," Auriana said, unable to keep the tone of surprise from her voice. "Thank you."

"To be fair, you saved mine earlier. Besides…" Garona said, her forehead creasing slightly, "I told you, I'm here to serve Lunarfall. Letting you die would be a rather poor test of my loyalty, don't you think?"

"It probably wouldn't help," Auriana admitted, giving Garona a somewhat sarcastic grin.

Encouraged, Garona tentatively returned the smile, and a brief sense of comradeship flickered between the two women. It was hard not to form a bond with someone who had saved your life, and Auriana began to wonder if she really could trust Garona after all.

"You fought well," she added.

Auriana wasn't the type of person who was especially liberal with praise, but she felt it would be rather churlish to ignore Garona's efforts with the demons, particularly the felhunter.

"I appreciate that, Commander," Garona said earnestly, "But it's not over yet."

"Agreed," Auriana said, nodding grimly. "There's another chamber up ahead, and I have a feeling that whatever is down there isn't going to be pretty."

She moved to collect her dagger, only to feel her hand spasm reflexively open as she tried to grip the hilt.

"Commander…" Garona remarked, her eyes widening. "Your hands…"

Auriana looked down in surprise, and belatedly realised that the soft skin of her palms was shredded, sending bright red rivulets of blood running down her wrists. In the chaos of the fight, she hadn't even noticed, but it appeared that the felhunter's hide had been covered in scales sharp
enough to cut like knives.

"Guess I won't be grabbing on to anything anytime soon," she said ruefully, with a dark frown.

"You really should get them looked at before we keep fighting," Garona said, sounding for all the world like a disapproving mother, rather than a deadly assassin.

She strode over to Auriana's side, retrieved the spellblade, and tucked it back into Auriana's belt sheath with surprising gentleness. Auriana flinched at the unexpected touch nonetheless, stepping backwards quickly in an attempt to hide her discomfort.

"No time," she said stiffly, "I'll be fine. I'm always fine. I…"

She cut off abruptly as Garona's head suddenly whipped around as if yanked by an invisible force. A second later, she realised that the rogue must have heard something, though with her impaired hearing, Auriana was slower to react. She instantly raised her hands into a defensive position, only to relax a second later as the paladin Hafela tentatively stuck her head around the corner and gave the all clear signal.

"Upper chambers and corridors clear, Commander," the draenei said smartly, stepping into the room with Delvar Ironfist close on her heels. "Eight dead warlocks and their demons, as well as a number of Sargerei. All that remains is the main chamber, behind you."

"Good," Auriana said. "Any casualties?"

"Three wounded, no dead," Hafela reported. "I've evacuated those unable to fight back to Maev's position, but the rest of us are ready to press on. Um… what happened to your hands, ma'am?"

"I had a little disagreement with a felhunter," Auriana said dismissively, tucking her hands behind her back. "Are you ready to move? Someone down below is calling on an awful lot of magic, and I'm guessing that whatever they're using it for isn't good."

"Er... of course," Hafela said, exchanging a brief glance with Ironfist. "On your order."

"We need to be smart," Auriana said warningly, her eyes quickly sweeping over her soldiers. "Hafela, Ironfist, you take point. I'll do my best to keep you all protected from whatever's going on in that chamber. Garona, this spell is going to take a lot of my concentration, I need you to ensure that I'm not interrupted."

Garona looked surprised that she had been placed in a position of such trust, but she eagerly flipped her weapons and took up a protective position on Auriana's left flank. Ironfist shot her a dirty look, clearly unhappy with her decision to have Garona act as in a guard role yet again, but Auriana was in no mood to indulge his fierce territoriality. She needed her heavily armoured soldiers at the front to protect the rest of the strike team, and Garona had thus far proven herself a useful ally. The half-orc could have easily allowed Auriana to be devoured by the felhunter had she so desired, and so for the time being, Auriana decided to place her trust in the rogue.

"The rest of you," Auriana added, fixing Ironfist with an unblinking stare, "Kill anything that moves."

She needed to give no further instruction, and her men instantly formed up into a loose phalanx with the heavily armoured Hafela and Ironfist standing at the vanguard. Although it wasn't typically her preference to fight from the rear, Auriana took her place at the very back of the group, and quickly summoned a massive shield of arcane power to protect her men. The spell required considerable energy, not only because defensive magic was not Auriana's particular forte, but
because she had no idea what kind of foul energies they were rushing to face. Auriana didn't want to risk under powering the spell and leaving her strike team exposed, and so she threw up as powerful a shield as she could muster as the brave soldiers of Lunarfall charged down the stairs and into the deepest chamber.

It turned out to be a good idea, as the very second Auriana's group burst through the doorway, they were assaulted by a barrage of fel firebolts. Auriana's shield held, if barely, but it was difficult to distribute such concentrated power across such a wide area. There was no way in hell Auriana would allow more of her men to come to harm, however, and so she grit her teeth and poured more power into the spell.

At the same time, she cast her gaze out over the chamber, her mind racing as she tried to come up with a viable offensive strategy. This chamber was much larger than the others, and an unnatural air of wrongness pervaded the entire space. Three warlocks stood in the centre of the room, spaced evenly around a giant rune of summoning and binding, while a fourth guarded the entrance to the chamber with his powerful felfire. While not a warlock herself, Auriana knew enough to understand that the traitors were attempting to summon something big, though she had no idea what some of the darker and more esoteric symbols signified.

"Watch yourselves!" she hollered urgently, redirecting the strongest part of her shield in the direction of the warlock guard.

She shifted the shield just in time, and she grunted as she absorbed a second burst of dark power. Fortunately, Ironfist was very quick on the uptake, and he took advantage of Auriana's protective shield to hurl his axe at the offending warlock. The blade embedded itself deep in the man's chest and he crumpled instantly, the ghost of his last spell glinting on her fingertips as the life left his eyes.

With the guard dead, Auriana's strike force were free to move into the room, away from the dangerous choke point created by the chamber entrance. Without hesitation, they took up defensive positions around the three remaining warlocks, ready to engage at a moment's notice.

"The rest of your coven is dead," Auriana said coldly, eyeing each of the remaining warlocks in turn. "Surrender to me now, and I will spare your life. This is a one-time offer."

"You're too late, Commander," the tallest warlock snarled, her worgen features drawing back into a grim rictus. "The ritual is complete!"

Auriana frowned as she recognised the woman who had spoken, a once faithful servant of the Alliance named Ilena Morley. Dark energy danced around her form, and she no longer looked even remotely sane. She was only made distinguishable by a chunk missing from her left ear, an injury she had sustained while fighting for Lunarfall against the Warsong Clan in Nagrand.

"We were allies once, Ilena," Auriana said slowly. "Give this up now, and you may still have a chance to come back to the Light."

"Does that line ever work, Commander? Did you ask Ayana the same question before you murdered her?" Ilena scoffed. "Enough talking. It's well past time that you faced the wrath of the Legion."

She brought her hands together with ringing finality, and with a mighty, echoing crack, a massive portal appeared in the centre of the summoning circle. The portal's abrupt birth was enough to shake the foundations of entire room, and Auriana's strike force was sent reeling. Something on the other side let out a terrible, heart stopping wail that set Auriana's teeth on edge, and a second later a
dark, winged, and monstrous demon stepped through the portal.

*Doomguard,* Auriana thought, inhaling sharply.

The fel beast sniffed the air almost delicately, clearly excited by the prospect of waiting man flesh. Its eyes narrowed as it looked down upon Auriana, at the same time hefting its wicked falchion and spreading its massive wings threateningly.

"I am Azzanar of the Burning Legion!" it roared. "Bow down before my might, pitiful mortals!"

"Not bloody likely," Auriana muttered.

The doomguard bellowed, and without any further hesitation, struck out violently at the men and women of Lunarfall. Not for nothing, however, had Auriana chosen these particular soldiers. She hadn't only been searching for loyalty when she had assembled her strike team, but also experience. Each and every one of the soldiers in the room had considerable experience fighting the Burning Legion, and weren't at all liable to flinch in front of an onrushing ered'ruin.

Unfortunately, doomguards were relatively impervious to the effects of magic, and Auriana knew she would be of little use in a direct fight against the massive demon. Instead, she placed her trust in her troops and their ability to handle the doomguard, and concentrated her attention on the three warlocks, who had begun to summon hordes of lesser demons. The chamber rapidly dissolved into a scene of utter chaos as a tide of imps poured in from the Twisting Nether, throwing firebolts around the chamber with little regard for where they were aiming. Auriana instantly incinerated three of the little terrors with a wave of her hand as she advanced upon the warlocks, while Hafela, Ironfist and her the rest of her troops moved to deal with the rest of the rampaging demons.

Auriana's eyes narrowed as she focused in on the nearest warlock, a female gnome spitting green fire from her hands like a madwoman. It was hard to believe that someone so small could cause so much destruction, though Auriana supposed that she should knew better than anyone that size was no guarantee of power. She danced lightly to the side as the gnome threw a chaos bolt at her head, brutally kicking an impetuous imp out of the way as she prepared to unleash a spell of her own. Normally, duels against other casters were about cleverness and timing, but Auriana had just about run out of patience for anything even remotely resembling subtlety.

Snarling, she tapped into the deep reservoir of rage that boiled at the heart of her being, and used it to bolster her powers. Despite her recent experiences in Stormwind arena, Auriana was still unwilling to fully embrace her fury, but she had learned enough by now to be able to control the barest trickle of that tempting, seething madness. Oddly enough, Auriana had come to realise that she preferred fire when she was angry, the sweet burn of fire magic far more appealing to her fury than the cold precision of frost. She used that fire now, turning the gnome warlock into a pillar of pure flame with a mere wave of her hand. The gnome had been protected by her own enchanted armour, but in the end such enchantments had about as much power to resist Auriana as a leaf had of resisting a hurricane.

The gnome died screaming, but Auriana didn't care, having already turned her attention to the other warlock. He was a human, tall and powerful, with the same aura of fetid fervour that surrounded all the other traitors that Auriana had fought today. He might have even reminded Auriana of a younger Varian, if Varian had been a fel-crazed warlock, but his resemblance to the King would not save him from Auriana's wrath. She countered his quick shadowbolt with a firebolt of her own, followed by a quick ignite that overwhelmed the warlock's defenses. Auriana slaughtered another imp as she chased the male warlock down, combusting her spells to deal even more damage to the hapless man.
Like the gnome, the male warlock stood little chance against Auriana's power once she had truly unleashed, and he was soon reduced to nothing more than a smoking corpse. Auriana allowed herself the faintest smile of satisfaction as he died, before turning to face the now isolated Ilena. The soldiers of Lunarfall had managed to kill most of the imps and had now cornered the doomguard, leaving Auriana to deal with the last living traitor.

"Just you and me, Ilena," Auriana snarled, already channelling a spell as she advanced on the worgen warlock.

"You know, Commander, I always wondered what it would be like to duel you," Ilena admitted, charging a dark spell of her own. "Are you really as powerful as they say?"

Auriana blasted Ilena with a casual burst of fire, sending her reeling backwards. It wasn't anywhere near as powerful a spell as she was capable of casting, and from the look on Ilena's face, she knew it too.

"You tell me," Auriana said lightly.

The warlock frowned and visibly recoiled, and she looked afraid for the first time since Auriana's force had laid siege to the summoning chamber.

"Alright," Ilena panted. "I'll give you this - you hit like a battering ram, but that doesn't make you invincible."

Ilena's wrist twitched, and Auriana grunted as she felt the tendrils of some kind of leeching spell reach out to drain her energy. As a countermeasure, she split the flow of her power and poured some of it into the protective spells that ran through her armour, shrugging off the warlock's curse like it was nothing.

"Come on, Ilena, you can do better than that," she taunted.

The worgen howled and grit her teeth, and threw out her hands as she attempted to drain the life from Auriana with her twisted shadow magic. Auriana quickly cast a counter spell to protect herself, and at the same returned the favour with a massive firebolt of her own. Ilena made a move to resist, but she was entirely outmatched. She staggered, and Auriana pounced like a wolf after prey. She hurled three quick firebolts in rapid succession, burning through what remained of Ilena's defenses as if they weren't even there. Snarling, she finished the warlock off with a mighty pyroblast, sending Ilena tumbling fifteen feet across the room before she finally came to rest against one of the chamber walls.

The warlock was still alive, if barely, and she wouldn't be casting any spells any time soon. Auriana's rage crowed at her triumph, urging her to keep fighting, to keep killing, but she closed her eyes and forced herself to think of Varian. The thought of his face filled her with a sudden sense of calm, and after a few deep, steadying breaths, she was able to regain control.

She whirled, ready to join in the rest of the fight, only to see the demon Azzanar fall to a mighty blow of Hafela's hammer. The soldiers of Lunarfall cheered as he died, though Auriana herself did not join in the raucous victory cry. Her eyes swept the room, noting with some satisfaction that the floor was littered with the corpses of demons. Luckily, no one from Lunarfall had been killed, though Auriana could see that a number of her soldiers had sustained superficial injuries. Ironfist had taken a decent blow across his chest, while a shaman and a druid seemed to be sporting broken arms. Garona had a nasty slash across her cheek and a darkening burn mark on her thigh, but no one else looked critically injured, and most importantly, no one was dead.
Auriana breathed a sigh of relief, and turned back to where Ilena now lay. Two of Lunarfall's rogues had moved to the fallen warlock's side, ready to slit her throat and eliminate the last remaining threat to Lunarfall's safety.

"Don't kill her!" Auriana ordered, striding forwards with a grim scowl. "I want to speak to her first."

Although they were clearly confused, her soldiers nevertheless obeyed the order, holding the badly injured warlock fast while Auriana slowly made her way forwards. Thick, sluggish blood trickled down from a wound on the Ilena's forehead as she stared up at Auriana with hateful eyes, but despite the severity of her wounds, she looked entirely unafraid.

"Do you have a way to contact Gul'Dan?" Auriana asked quietly, folding her arms across her chest.

By way of response, Ilena spat viciously at Auriana's boots and gnashed her sharp teeth. Her defiance was admittedly somewhat impressive, but Auriana was tired, and had no interest in playing games.

"Really?" she sighed, rolling her eyes.

She knelt down beside the warlock, ignoring the pain her hands as she reached into the warlock's robes and fumbled around for the item that she sought. As she had suspected, Ilena was carrying a crude device that reminded Auriana vaguely of a hearthstone, albeit inscribed with different runes. In her haste and pain, Auriana nearly dropped the runestone as she pulled it from Ilena's robes, hastily thrusting it into the warlock's hands to cover her mistake.

"Activate it," she said coldly.

A flicker of surprise crossed Ilena's face, and she cocked her head to the side, her muzzle twitching.

"You're going to kill me," she slurred, struggling to lift her head.

"Of course," Auriana said, shrugging. "What did you think was going to happen? Alliance law only holds one punishment for traitors."

"So why would I help you?"

"Let's call it one last act of service to Lunarfall," Auriana said sarcastically. "For old time's sake."

Ilena scoffed, but after a moment of intense contemplation, she deliberately touched a series of runemarks on the small stone and set it aglow with green fire.

"What's the message?" she asked. "What do you want to say?"

Auriana bared her teeth, and leaned in close as she gave Ilena an unsettling smile. Ever since Auriana had been captured by Blackhand, she had felt like she was on the back foot, floundering as she tried to keep up with the ceaseless menace of the Iron Horde. In this chamber, however, with the traitors of Lunarfall lying dead all around her, she felt truly in control for the first time since her kidnapping.

"I want Gul'Dan to know that Lunarfall has been purged of traitors. Your coven tried to tear us down from the inside, but we stand together, unbroken. I don't care what kind of dark powers he has unleashed away in that damn jungle, he will not lay claim to this world. Tell him that the Alliance is coming. I'm coming," she murmured icily, her voice unnervingly calm. "And I'm coming for blood."
Five days after his surprising meeting with Khadgar, Auriana, and King Varian Wrynn in Zangarra, Zala'din found himself floating off the coast of Tanaan Jungle on board a mighty warship. He had roused the Horde almost immediately after his return to Frostwall, and after five days of hard sailing, the Horde had arrived in just in time to assist the Alliance in a combined assault on the eastern beaches of Tanaan. At the same time, in the far west of the jungle, soldiers of the draenei and Frostwolf clan prepared to tear down the forbidding iron gates that kept Tanaan hidden from the rest of the continent.

Zala'din had never had any particular affinity for the sea, and had spent most of the journey below decks trying not to be sick. His ship was named *Echo Hunter*, and while it was one of the finest Horde vessels ever crafted, its sturdy construction did nothing to ease Zala'din's churning stomach. He emerged only now as he felt the warship slow, stepping out onto the deck and stretching his stiff muscles. Surprisingly, he found that the ship was surrounded by a thick, cloying fog, which made it difficult to see more than fifteen or so yards in any direction.

"Dis ya doin', den, old friend?" Zala'din called up to the quarterdeck, lifting a hand to shield his eyes from the faint gleam of sunlight breaking through the fog.

"Not mine, but the shaman," Stormrunner rumbled, giving control of the helm over to his second. "I thought we could use the cover."

"Good idea, mon," Zala'din said, nodding approvingly. "Any trouble so far?"

Stormrunner shook his massive, shaggy head, and loped slowly across the deck towards Zala'din.

"Nothing," he said. "It's been quiet as a tomb out here. No fleet, no army… nothing."

"Do ya tink da Iron Horde know we're comin'?" Zala'din asked, his eyes scanning the choppy grey sea for the smallest sign of life.

"Unlikely," Stormrunner said, idly stroking the thick tufts of hair at the end of his chin. "The downside of this fog is that it limits visibility both ways," the tauren captain admitted, "But we have ways around that particular problem. Here."

He handed Zala'din a long, ensorcelled spyglass, and pointed in the direction of the beach.

"Have a look at their emplacements," he rumbled. "Those are standard guard towers, nothing more. They aren't equipped to fend off a seaborne invasion. Besides, if they knew we were coming, they would have mined the bay. I sent some goblin divers down earlier… there's nothing."

"Wonder where dey are den," Zala'din said, scratching irritably at his tusks.
Although he outwardly appeared to have a somewhat laissez faire attitude towards his command, he was actually a meticulous planner, and the thought of having no idea about the Iron Horde's whereabouts made him profoundly uncomfortable.

"My guess?" Stormrunner said. "They've taken the bulk of their forces to the western gate. There's a good chance the Frostwolves and the draenei were spotted moving through Talador, and the Iron Horde - or whatever they are now - have moved to repel the land invasion."

"Dat's gonna be dangerous for dem," Zala'din observed.

"Good for us, however," Stormrunner countered. "Based on our journey so far, I anticipate limited resistance."

He raised his nostrils to the breeze and scratched one of his long horns, before something to the south-east suddenly attracted his attention.

"What is it?" Zala'din asked, following his line of sight.

"Your girl's here," the tauren said, nodding.

"My girl?" Zala'din asked, genuinely confused. "I don't have a girl."

"Much to my eternal confusion. Why is that, Zal, a strapping young troll like you?" Stormrunner teased, his dark brown eyes sparking with gentle amusement. "I doubt that feisty little shaman of yours would say no."

"Te'Jaia?" Zala'din asked, subconsciously looking towards the north, where he knew his second in command waited aboard the deck of another ship. "Ya think?"

"She isn't exactly subtle about it, Zal," Stormrunner said drily. "But in this case, I was referring to her."

Stormrunner pointed, and Zala'din swung the spyglass to the left. In the distance, he saw bright blue sails moving through the shaman-made mist, and he knew the Alliance had arrived. Their fleet was lead by a magnificent battleship that cut a smooth path through the turbulent sea, its wide sails waving proudly in the breeze, and its name etched in shining gold on the front of its bow.

*Varian's Blade.*

Zala'din chuckled, wondering if Auriana had something to do with the name. He could actually see her now, or at least someone who looked very much like her, standing at the very front of the ship with her hands on her hips and her long hair flying out behind her in the wind of the ship's speed. As if sensing his gaze, she suddenly turned and lifted a hand to her eyes, but without the aid of a spyglass, it was unlikely that she could see him in turn. That said, Zala'din wasn't overly concerned - the Alliance were here, and that was all that mattered. Once the Alliance fleet was in position, the combined forces of Azeroth would be well placed to repel any opposition, and should be able to readily press the fight in towards the heart of Tanaan Jungle.

"We'll hold here until da full Alliance fleet sails in, den we'll make a run for da beach," Zala'din ordered. "Transports first, we need ta get boots on da ground while we have da protection of da fleet."

"If I'm going to land this fleet successfully, I'll need the Alliance to keep clear," the tauren captain said, eyeing the Horde ships with an air of paternal protectiveness.
"Don'tcha worry, da Commander knows her business," Zala'din assured him. "Our arrangement be simple. We stay outta their way, they stay outta ours. Da Iron Horde die."

Stormrunner nodded curtly, but there was clear hesitation in his dark brown eyes.

"What's wrong, mon?"

"Do you consider her a friend, Zal?" Stormrunner asked, his great brow creasing heavily.

Zala'din paused, thrown by the unexpected question, and having never really considered the idea himself. He and Auriana had worked together several times now, and the Commander of Lunarfall had proven herself to be a clever and steadfast ally. She was also surprisingly amusing, at least for a human, with the kind of dark, sarcastic wit that Zala'din found immensely appealing. She was far too serious, of course, but Zala'din suspected that her outward projection of cold efficiency was mostly a front. Had she been born into the Horde, he had no doubt that she would number amongst his friends, but as it stood… he was unsure.

"I dunno," Zala'din said truthfully. "Maybe."

Stormrunner scraped his hoof thoughtfully on the deck, but declined to press the issue further. Instead, he shifted his weight from hoof to hoof as he carefully approached a far more dangerous topic.

"You know, there's a rumour going around that you met the King of Stormwind in Zangarra," he said slowly, keeping his eyes firmly fixed on the sea as he spoke.

"I swear," Zala'din said, rolling his eyes, "Dere are only two tings certain in dis world. Death, and da efficiency of da Horde rumour mill."

"That isn't a denial, old friend," Stormrunner observed. "What's he like?"

Zala'din fixed the big brown tauren with a withering glare, though he knew he likely wouldn't get away without giving Stormrunner an answer. The tauren was as big as an oak and twice as stubborn, and he had an uncanny ability to get the answers he wanted without saying a word. Zala'din vaguely wondered how the captain had happened on news of the meeting in Zangarra, though he supposed it was something of a moot point now.

In all honesty, Zala'din hadn't quite known what to make of Wrynn. The King of Stormwind had a legendary reputation amongst the Horde, and attracted a variety of reactions ranging from grudging respect to outright hatred. That said, Zala'din had never been the kind to base his personal opinions on hearsay, and he had appreciated the opportunity to size up the man for himself.

Oddly enough, the meeting had reminded Zala'din of the first solo hunt he had ever completed as a young troll. He had been stalking a bull raptor through the jungle, and in his youthful overconfidence, had lost the clever beast in the lush foliage. He could still distinctly remember the moment that he had realised that he was in fact the prey, as the raptor had looped around and launched a terrifying attack at his flank. In the end, Zala'din had prevailed, but he had never forgotten the predatory gleam in the raptor's dark eyes as it had leapt for the kill. It was exactly the same expression he had seen in Wrynn's eyes the other day, when the wolf within had briefly consumed the otherwise calm statesman. Whatever else the man was, Wrynn was a warrior, first and foremost, and Zala'din had been a soldier long enough to know real power when he saw it. Not that he intended to start a fight with the King of Stormwind anytime soon, of course, but it was worth remembering that Wrynn was a dangerous opponent, and one that was worthy of respect.
"He be tall," Zala'din said finally, shooting Stormrunner a wry grin.

The big tauren snorted in amusement, while Zala'din shook his head and turned his gaze back to the ocean. Auriana's flagship had faded back into the thick mist, and was now only identifiable by the shadowy outline of its billowing sails. Nevertheless, Zala'din could still see well enough to notice when the battleship abruptly veered south and gathered speed, and he leant forward against the ship's guardrail in sudden alarm.

"Kova," he said urgently, lifting the spyglass once again. "Alliance are on da move."

Zala'din squinted, his attention caught by the waving of a bright red signal flag from the deck of Varian's Blade. The Alliance and Horde navies generally used different signals, of course, but there was no mistaking what that particular flag meant.

Danger.

"There's something else out on the water. Not Alliance," Stormrunner breathed, looking back over his shoulder towards the quarterdeck. "Bring her around hard to starboard! And signal a warning to the rest of the fleet."

"Aye, Captain!" the blood elf helmsmen shouted back, complying with the orders immediately.

"Clear the fog!" Zala'din added, waving down the nearest shaman.

Although the Horde fleet had thus far travelled without incident, Zala'din began to suspect that their safe passage was merely a ruse, and that he had seriously miscalculated the level of Iron Horde resistance.

"Can ya see anytin', Kova?" he asked, leaning forward over the railing and peering down into the choppy waters. "What's got da Alliance so spooked?"

"No idea," Stormrunner muttered, "But there's definitely something moving around down there."

No sooner had the words left his mouth than there came a sudden burst of cannon fire from the south, and the loud shouting of Alliance sailors. Zala'din and Stormrunner both instantly went for their weapons, exchanging a concerned glance as they looked for the source of the disturbance.

"The Alliance are firing on us!" an excitable young orc howled, beating a large green hand against his chest and flexing his muscles menacingly.

"They are not," Stormrunner snapped, fixing the eager young warrior with a stern look. "Calm yourself, orcling, or I'll toss you overboard myself."

"Keep ya focus on da real enemy," Zala'din added warningly. "Da Alliance dun have it out for us, but sometin' else in dese waters does."

One of the Alliance ships let off another cannon barrage, and Zala'din heard more shouts echoing through the air. Several Horde shaman were now working frantically to clear the spells of concealment which they themselves had wrought, and as the fog cleared, Zala'din finally realised what had caused the Alliance to go to a war footing. Hundreds of small, fast moving skiffs were racing towards the Horde and Alliance fleets, each full to the brim with slavering orcs. The Iron Horde had clearly realised that they could not hope to challenge the combined forces of Azeroth ship to ship, and had instead decided to use the Horde's fog cover to launch a wave of boarding parties. The Horde and the Alliance cannons were designed to hit other battleships, not something as small and fast as one of the Iron Horde skiffs, and in this, the Iron Horde had the advantage.
"Looks like we're goin' hand ta hand!" Zala'din shouted, as loudly as he was able. "Ta arms, soldiers of da Horde!"

No sooner had he given the order, when a grappling hook flew up and over the side of the ship and lodged against the ship's rail. Zala'din cut the line immediately with a single swing from one of his swords, but the moment he disentangled one hook, five more took its place. Realising that he could not hope to remove all of the lines before being overwhelmed, Zala'din backed up and raised his swords in preparation for a fight.

"Get us on ta dat beach, Captain!" he ordered. "Now."

"Aye aye, Commander," Stormrunner yelled, already moving to take personal control of the helm.

Despite having been raised on the landlocked plains of Mulgore, Stormrunner was one of the best ship captains in the entire Horde, on Draenor or otherwise. If there was anyone who could get the landing party to the beach, it was Stormrunner, and he would have all the help that Zala'din could provide.

The Iron Horde orcs howled as they clambered up the sides of the Echo Hunter in a foul tide, weapons at the ready as they leapt the guardrail and moved to attack. Zala'din answered with a ferocious battle cry of his own, and lifted his twin blades with a flourish. A massive, axe-wielding orc charged at his left side, forcing Zala'din to leap out of the way. As he stepped back, Zala'din slashed downwards with one of his blades, neatly cutting through the orc's heavy thigh and sending the brute staggering. Trolls were naturally lighter than orcs, but they were also faster and more agile, and Zala'din had the advantage as he whirled to face the orc and struck out with his second blade. He took the orc in the back, slicing through heavy muscle and sinew as if it was nothing, before spinning to face a second onrushing orc.

Zala'din ducked under a swing from a crudely formed mace, and punished the orc for his over aggressive swing with a punch to the face. The steel of Zala'din's gauntlets grated horribly against bone as the orc's cheek broke and his nose exploded in a spray of blood, staining Zala'din's once shining armour. The big orc howled in agony and clutched at his ruined face, which gave Zala'din more than enough time to drive both his swords clean through the brute's neck.

There was no time to dwell on his two quick victories, however, as the deck of the Echo Hunter was now crawling with Iron Horde orcs. It looked as if Zala'din had sorely underestimated the number of orcs that had been sent to prevent the invasion of Tanaan, and his soldiers clearly had their hands full. Stormrunner now had the entire Horde fleet racing swiftly across the water for the shallows of the bay, but having the ships reach the beach would all be for nought if Zala'din was unable to repel the Iron Horde in time to salvage the bulk of his forces.

The Alliance, too, were having just as many problems as the Horde. With the shaman-made fog now cleared, Zala'din could clearly see that blue-sailed fleet was inundated with Iron Horde orcs, and was similarly attempting to make a run for the relative safety of shore. A great plume of fire suddenly burst from the deck of one of the Alliance ships, incinerating an entire boatload of orcs, and Zala'din vaguely wondered Auriana was the source.

He hoped she was alive and fighting, not least because her powerful presence would be of as much of a benefit to the Horde as it was to the Alliance. In his preoccupation with the Alliance fleet however, he failed to notice a nearby orc taking a swing at his head. He twisted awkwardly, only just managing to catch the axe with his heavy plate pauldron instead of his exposed neck. Grunting in pain and anger, Zala'din pushed the orc off and raised his swords defensively, only to watch the orc stiffen as his skin crackled with sudden energy. The orc fell forward, dead, and Zala'din looked around to see a goblin shaman with the glow of lightning fading from her hands. She nodded
respectfully in Zala'din's direction, before turning her elemental powers on another group of orcs.

For his part, Zala'din cursed and threw himself back into the fight, decapitating two orcs in quick succession. It was damnably difficult to fight on the heaving deck of the Echo Hunter, and despite his extraordinary agility, Zala'din nearly tripped and fell more than once. Of course, the attacking orcs were similarly encumbered, and Zala'din was eventually able to turn the unpredictable terrain to his advantage. The deck around him was soon slick with blood and piled high with bodies, and it became hard to move in and amongst the carnage. Nevertheless, it seemed as if Zala'din's warriors were turning back the tide, and the number of Iron Horde reinforcements were dwindling.

Zala'din let out a cry of triumph as he dispatched yet another orc, his blood running hot with the thrill of battle. His cry was soon drowned out, however, by an even louder boom from somewhere to the west. With a horrible sinking feeling in his stomach, Zala'din leapt over the corpse of the orc he had most recently killed, and raced back towards the front of the ship.

The Echo Hunter was closing in on the beach, and Zala'din needed no spyglass to see the fate that awaited the brave soldiers of the Horde. His stomach twisted as he realised that the attacking Iron Horde skiffs had merely been a means of buying time while the Iron Horde brought their main defenses into play. He could see them now, a line of fearsome heavy cannons rolling down the hill towards the beach, and his heart leapt into his throat. The Horde and Alliance fleets had now crossed into the mouth of the shallow bay, and in these close quarters, they would be easy prey for the cannons.

As if Zala'din's realisation had been prophetic, two of the cannons boomed in unison, and sent a deadly salvo towards the Horde fleet. The explosive cannonballs flew true, and Zala'din could do little but watch in horror as they arced towards the ship floating just off the Echo Hunter's starboard side. The cannonballs hit the ship square in the middle of the deck and detonated, wrecking the once proud destroyer in a single, devastating strike.

The Echo Hunter reeled from the nearby explosion, and Zala'din was forced to hit the deck as burning shrapnel rained down from above. He was nearly decapitated by a large chunk of iron that landed only inches from his head, and he wasn't quick enough to dodge the large splinter that embedded itself in his right calf. His ears were ringing from the force of the explosion, but over the sounds of panicked sailors and the whine of flying cannonballs, he could hear the booming, authoritative voice of Kova Stormrunner as the tauren captain shouted order after order.

The tauren's fighting spirit was nevertheless cold comfort as the Iron Horde cannons boomed once again, and a second Horde ship was caught in the line of fire. Zala'din's stomach twisted as he thought of all the Horde soldiers who had lost their lives in a matter of minutes, and his blood surged with furious adrenaline as he staggered back to his feet. His calf and shoulder both stung badly, but he could not afford to focus on his own pain when there were still Iron Horde to kill. With a low growl, he hurled himself once again into the fray, muttering a quick prayer to the loa that his ship would reach the beach before the entire invasion came to utter ruin.
Auriana

From the moment Auriana had sighted the first Iron Horde skiff racing across the bay, she had known that the invasion was going to go badly. Her fleet had encountered no resistance in the relatively short journey from Lunarfall to Tanaan, and Auriana had allowed her guard to drop ever so slightly as a result. The successful raid on the warlock coven in Talador had also given her a newfound confidence, and during the journey to Tanaan, she had actually begun to believe that her fleet might have a chance of landing without incident.

*When have any of your plans ever come off without incident, Auri?* she groaned inwardly, as she ducked under the heavy swing of a mace-wielding orc.

The Alliance fleet was crawling with Iron Horde orcs, and it was almost impossible to see the decks of nearby ships through the crush of bodies. *Varian's Blade*, in particular, was one of the worst affected, and Auriana barely had room to move, let alone cast spells as freely as she would have liked.

Both Delvar Ironfist and Garona Halforcen fought at her side, and oddly enough seemed to be engaged in a fierce, bitter battle for the rights to her protection. More than once, the rogue and the death knight nearly fell over each other trying to dispatch one of Auriana's foes. On another day, their competitiveness might have been amusing, but with limited time and space, Auriana found it merely frustrating. She blinked sideways to avoid another attack from a second orc, and nearly tumbled to the ground as her left foot slid out from underneath her. Snarling in both irritation and disgust at the blood that now covered her boots, she channelled her rage into a vicious blast of frost, sending three orcs tumbling off the side of the ship and down into the churning seas.

She was just about to turn her power on another pair of Iron Horde attackers, when she heard a strange, high pitched whistling noise, and *Varian's Blade* was suddenly rocked by a massive wave.

"Dammit!" she yelled, looking around wildly for the target of the artillery barrage.

Her eyes fell on the closest Horde ship, which had been reduced to a flaming wreckage that was slowly sinking beneath the waterline. Auriana leapt over the corpse of an Iron Horde orc and rushed to the side railing, trying to get a better view of the beleaguered vessel.

"Zal…" she breathed, finding herself surprisingly concerned for the Horde Commander's life.

Auriana fervently hoped that he had not been on board the ship as it had exploded, but she had no time to dwell on the troll's fate. Mere moments after the Horde ship had fallen prey to the Iron Horde artillery, she heard a second loud whistling noise, and turned in horror to see two large cannonballs streaking towards *Varian's Blade*.

"Cover!" she yelled, magically enhancing her voice as she threw up the most powerful shield she could muster.

Her magic was enough to slow the first cannonball, but not enough to stop its momentum entirely. It slammed into the main mast of *Varian's Blade* with a deafening crack, barrelling straight through the heavy wood and out the other side. Auriana was forced to hit the deck as the mast cracked and collapsed, covering her head with her hands as splinters rained down on her position. The second cannonball, however, appeared to have hit the port side of the ship, just above the waterline, and
the great vessel swayed wildly with the impact.

"Get us to that beach, Captain!" Auriana yelled up towards the helm, where a large sailor named Randolf Hayes was fighting desperately with the ship's wheel.

"No use, Commander!" the swarthy worgen called back. "Steering's gone, and we're most definitely taking on water. I strongly suggest we abandon ship, ma'am."

Auriana bit her lip in anger as she scrambled to her feet, though she knew the captain was right.

"Alright," she said. "But there's no time to do this the usual way. Get all our men to the centre of the deck! Hurry!"

The soldiers of Lunarfall were extremely well trained, and her orders were quickly relayed amongst the crew both above and below decks. Soon the deck was crowded with Alliance sailors and soldiers, each looking towards Auriana for further orders. Fortunately, all the Iron Horde had either been killed or had jumped overboard when the cannonballs had started to fall, and all Auriana had to contend with now was her own people.

"What's the plan, Commander?" Garona asked, swiftly moving towards Auriana's side.

Naturally, she was followed closely by Delvar Ironfist, who shot the half-orc rogue a dirty look as they both awkwardly jostled for the position nearest to Auriana.

"I'm going to teleport us all off the ship before we get hit again… or before the ship explodes," Auriana said grimly, pointedly ignoring their silent but bitter struggle.

Her gaze swept out over the water, before settling upon an Alliance transport which had somehow managed to get within striking range of the beach. Opening up a portal to an unknown location was difficult, of course, but it was a great deal easier when the target was within line of sight. Auriana reached out for her power, trying to ignore the roiling sea, the smell of fire, and the chaos all around her as she tore open a gap in reality. Mercifully, the portal shimmered to life almost immediately, and Auriana prayed that Varian's Blade would stay afloat long enough for all her men to escape.

"Get moving, soldiers!" she hollered. "Fast as you can!"

Without needing any further encouragement, her men filed through the portal in a quick but orderly line, while Garona and Ironfist took up defensive positions around Auriana, in case any Iron Horde showed up to prevent the evacuation. Within minutes, they were the only three people remaining on deck, and Auriana nodded to indicate that they should follow along with the rest of the men.

"Go," she ordered.

"We're not leavin' ya here alone, lass," Ironfist said firmly.

"Come on, Delvar, we don't have time for this argument! I have to hold the portal open from this side," Auriana explained, her voice slightly strained from effort. "Move. I'll be right behind you, I promise."

The death knight looked extremely reluctant, but he and Garona nevertheless obeyed her order and moved swiftly through the portal. Auriana let out a sigh of relief, and had just stepped forwards herself when she heard the unmistakable whine of a cannonball for the third time that day. She looked upwards, and with a sharp intake of breath, realised that the deadly projectile was heading straight for her position at fantastic speed.
Auriana quickly calculated the odds, and realised there was no way she would make it through the portal before the cannonball hit the centre of the deck. With few other options available, she cancelled the spell and threw herself down the stairs towards the lower decks of the ship, hoping to avoid the brunt of the artillery strike. She grunted in pain as she tumbled down the stairwell, whacking her arms and back painfully on the solid wood. She ended up on her hands and knees just outside the captain's cabin, but her stop was only temporary as the cannonball slammed into the middle of the deck above.

For what felt like an eternity, Auriana was buffeted in a haze of flame and smoke and falling wood, before she finally came to a rest against a wooden barrel. She groaned in pain, her every muscle twitching in protest at the violence of her fall, and her head swimming in a haze of disorientation. Her vision was cloudy, but after a brief pause she was eventually able to lift her head, and with growing trepidation, she slowly began to realise where she was.

"Oh dear…" she breathed. "This is going to be very bad."

The structural damage to Varian's Blade was significant, and as luck would have it, Auriana had ended up sprawled face down in the powder magazine. Unfortunately, there were already several small fires burning below decks, and she knew that one more artillery hit would likely ignite the magazine and spell doom for the ailing battleship, along with Auriana herself. She had the ability to teleport, of course, but with no reference point or line of sight, such a thing was risky, as she had learned the last time she had been in Tanaan Jungle. Still, possible death from a poorly cast teleport certainly beat guaranteed death by explosion, and Auriana decided to take her chances. She heard the terrifying boom of the cannons once again, and knew that her time was nearly up. She took a deep breath and hastily gathered her power, desperately releasing the spell at the exact moment the Iron Horde cannonball hit the ship and detonated hard.

For a moment, Auriana saw nothing but white, and her ears rang from the force of the explosion. As her awareness returned, she soon realised that she was, in fact, underwater, and would likely stay that way if she was unable to free herself from her robes. She could swim, but it would have been difficult to stay afloat in the choppy seas at the best of times, let alone when she was weighed down by armour. The loose fabric of her robes tangled around her legs, and made it nearly impossible to stay above the surface.

Auriana forced herself to remain calm, and tried to fight off the primal feeling of panic that rose in her throat. The pressure of the water against her chest was frighteningly oppressive, but she somehow managed to close her hands around her belt knife, and began to use it to hurriedly cut away her robes. Her lungs began to burn as she tore into the spellwoven material, frantically kicking it away as she fought to stay afloat. Last of all, she cut into the straps securing her heavy shoulder plates, and finally kicked her way free to the surface clad only in her thin breeches and her tight, cropped undershirt.

She greedily gulped down air as she broke the surface, finding it much easier to float without the encumbrance of her heavy robes. The oxygen deprivation made dark spots dance across her vision, but at least she was no longer fighting to stay afloat. From the looks of it, she was quite some distance from the Alliance fleet, but had at the very least managed not to kill herself in the process of teleporting away.

Her relief was short-lived, however, as a large hand suddenly closed around her ankle and pulled down hard. She was barely able to let out a high pitched shriek of surprise before her head dropped below the water, and her lungs began to burn for air once more. Auriana opened her eyes in the briny water, trying to figure out what had grabbed her, and was horrified to see that she had been...
ensnared by a massive Iron Horde orc, who was now doing his level best to drown her.

Although they were both struggling to stay afloat in the wild seas, the orc's superior size and strength gave him a clear advantage. He was able to force Auriana beneath the surface with relative ease, his scarred and tattooed maw spitting into a savage grin as he moved his impossibly strong grip to her shoulders. Auriana tried to summon her magic, but the lack of oxygen was beginning to seriously affect her ability to function, and she was unable to do much more than summon a brief spark of power to her fingertips. With few other options, she struck out at whatever part of the orc she could reach with both her belt knife and her fists, only to realise that the orc would likely drown her long before she could do any real damage.

Biting back her terror, she desperately tried to focus her attention long enough to come up with a plan. Trying to struggle upwards against the orc's bulk was entirely useless, and he seemed remarkably impervious to her futile melee strikes. As the world started to fade and her vision darkened even further, Auriana finally understood that she only had one option. While she may not be able to push her way up, she could go down.

She forced her body to go entirely limp, hoping that the orc would mistake her sudden lack of fight for her death. As she suspected, he released his grip almost immediately, and she allowed herself to slowly sink downwards into the murky depths. The moment she was sure the orc could no longer reach her, Auriana used the last reserves of her energy to thrust her dagger upwards as hard as she could, driving it into the tender meat of the orc's inner thigh. She tried her best to hit an artery, and judging from the sudden warmth of the water around her and the acrid taste of blood against her lips, she was successful.

The orc thrashed violently above her, and she used his distraction and pain as a means to escape. Auriana curled up and pressed her feet hard against the orc's chest in order to send herself Rocketing backwards through the water, and finally managed to breach the surface several yards away. She breathed in deeply, her dagger at the ready as she greedily gulped down as much air as she could. The Iron Horde orc was still alive, swearing wildly in orcish as he haemorrhaged badly from the wound in his thigh. He was trying to swim towards her still, and while there was no chance he would survive, he was clearly determined to take Auriana with him into death.

This time, however, it was Auriana who had the advantage. The orc was badly wounded, and would be unable to take her by surprise again. She warily treaded water as she waited for the orc to approach, knowing that she would likely only get one chance. The moment he drew within range, the orc kicked powerfully and drove himself towards her in a terrifying frenzy, his hands reaching once again for her neck. Auriana was still unable to summon enough energy to use her magic, but she was able to raise her dagger, and with a sudden surge of adrenaline she dived forwards under the orc's swinging fists to thrust her blade deep into his throat.

The brute gargled horrifically as the heavy blood loss began to take its toll, and Auriana was able to free her knife and kick his corpse away. She closed her eyes as the orc bobbed lifelessly in the strong current, still breathing heavily and trying to control the adrenaline tremors in her hands. With a steadying sigh, Auriana then turned to look towards the shoreline, trying to judge if she could swim that far in her current condition. As she did, however, she realised with a sinking heart that she was not out of danger yet.

"Oh, you've got to be kidding me," she said, her voice strained and husky from her near-drowning.

About thirty yards to the south, she could see the distinctive triangular fin of a shark racing through the water towards her. It had obviously been attracted by the blood of the dead orc, and had come in search of easy prey. The sleek predator was absolutely enormous, and Auriana didn't
dare move a muscle as it began to swim in slow, lazy circles around her. The shark took an experimental bite out of the dead orc, and Auriana let out an involuntary gasp as she noted the size of the animal's teeth. Her inadvertent movement, however, even small as it was, was enough to startle the shark away from the dead orc, and it turned its pitiless attention back to Auriana.

"I am not lunch," she said warningly, keeping a careful eye on the creature as it took up its ominous circular patrol once more.

Utterly unperturbed by her warning, the shark suddenly accelerated and dived beneath the surface, and Auriana's heart leapt into her throat. While no sailor herself, Auriana had heard enough stories from her father to know that most sharks preferred to assault their prey from below. If the shark had dived, then it was more than likely that an attack was imminent. Auriana gathered her remaining strength, already severely taxed by the day's fighting and her ordeal with the orc, and prepared to fire a blast of whatever arcane energy she could down into the water below. For her counterattack, timing was critical - too early and she would be defenceless against the shark's actual attack; too late and she'd already be dead.

It didn't help that it was nearly impossible to see anything in the darkened water, and Auriana knew she would have to rely on instinct alone. She forced herself to take three deep, steadying breaths as the power racing through her body surged in eager anticipation. Auriana then felt, rather than saw, a burst of movement below her, and with a savage unleashing of her will, she channelled every ounce of magic that she possessed into a spell of explosive destruction.

A great geyser of water erupted as Auriana forced her power downwards, hoping that her aim was true. The force of the spell was enough to send her flying in the opposite direction, and for a moment the sea and sky blurred into an indistinguishable haze as she tumbled through the air. She flew a good ten feet above the waterline, before finally landing on her back with a massive splash. Bloody chunks of dead shark rained down around her, and she grimaced in disgust as she made a futile attempt to slough the blood from her arms and remove the shark flesh from her hair.

Auriana shook her head, trying to fight off a wave of dizziness, but she found it was nearly impossible to keep her eyes open. In destroying the shark, she'd also done some injury to her already damaged body with the raw, untempered power of her magical blast. Between the fighting, the near-drowning, and the shark attack, she was utterly exhausted, and she began to suspect that she wouldn't be able to remain conscious for much longer.

Using what little energy she had left, Auriana swam slowly towards a nearby piece of driftwood that had evidently been dislodged when one of the ships had exploded. Groaning, she managed to drag most of her body out of the water, and fortunately her weight was not enough to sink the makeshift life raft. In the near distance, she could see a ship moving rapidly towards her, though she was too far gone to tell if it was Alliance or Horde. She lifted her left arm limply, hoping to catch someone's attention, but her strength finally gave out and she collapsed, floating dull and lifeless in the endless sea as the world around her faded to black.
By some minor miracle, the Horde managed to land the majority of their fleet on the northern side of the bay, and had disgorged hundreds of soldiers onto the beach. While the Iron Horde were outnumbered, Zala'din knew a ground invasion would stand little chance against the Iron Horde artillery, and so he ordered goblin sappers to disable what cannons they could while his forces fled for the relative safety of Tanaan's thick jungle, and the remainder of the fleet retreated to safer waters.

Zala'din was determined to be the last to leave, and stood in defense of his troops as they raced for the treeline. The Horde had suffered fairly heavy losses during the invasion, and he had no desire to add to the death toll. He had asked Te'Jaia to lead the charge, while he and a number of other warriors stayed behind to cover the retreat.

Although she was clearly reluctant to leave Zala'din alone, Te'Jaia was an excellent leader when under pressure, and she did a marvellous job of organising the scattered troops of the Horde. Zala'din grunted with satisfaction as he saw the last of his soldiers disappear into the trees, and with a wave of his hand ordered the vanguard to follow suit.

He dispatched a number of Iron Horde soldiers as he ran, leaping over the bodies of slain enemies and allies alike. Fortunately, it seemed that the Iron Horde losses had been as severe as those of the Horde and the Alliance, and with the artillery disabled, Zala'din doubted that they would follow his men into the dense jungle without some kind of advantage. The sun was also beginning to fade behind the horizon as the battle raged on, and like any soldier, Zala'din knew that there was little benefit to fighting in the dark for either side.

The troll Commander was just inside the treeline, when something out on the beach caught his attention. He stopped abruptly, much to the consternation of Kova Stormrunner, who nearly ran straight up his backside. The tauren had been forced to abandon his ship during the sea assault, and had begrudgingly followed Zala'din onto the shore to aid the ground invasion in whatever way he could. Stormrunner had trained as a shaman before taking up the call of the sea, and he was still rather handy in a fight.

"By the Earthmother, Zala'din, a little warning would be nice," the big tauren grumbled.

"Sorry," Zala'din said quickly. "It be just… dere's someone out dere, on da sand a further north. I tink dey were movin'."

"Zal…" Stormrunner said slowly, not bothering to hide the exasperation in his voice.

"I dun leave people behind," Zala'din said firmly. "Ya know dat better den anyone. If someone's still alive out dere, I can't leave dem."

Stormrunner frowned, but held his tongue as he and Zala'din crept slowly back towards the beach. As Zala'din had suspected, whatever had washed up on the shore was something living, rather than a piece of stray driftwood or debris from the earlier sea battle. Zala'din paused at the edge of the treeline, looking around carefully for any sign of the Iron Horde, but from all appearances they appeared to be very busy chasing the Alliance and the Horde forces into the dense Tanaan jungle. Zala'din signalled Stormrunner to take care, and together they stepped out onto the soft sand.

Zala'din let out a soft gasp as he crept slowly forwards, certain that he now recognised the small figure that lay face down in front of him.
"Auriana…" he breathed.

There were few humans he knew as small as she was, and if her size wasn't enough of a giveaway, her pale skin and her dark hair certainly confirmed her identity. Curiously, she wasn't wearing her usual armour, but rather only a set of soaking wet underclothes. There were deep scratches on her arms, and from this distance Zala'din couldn't be sure that she was still alive.

"Keep watch," he ordered Stormrunner. "I'm gonna go ta her."

"She's likely dead, Commander," Stormrunner said warningly. "As we will be, should we tarry here overlong."

"I'll not be leavin' til I know for sure. I swear I saw her move, mon," Zala'din shot back, his voice sharp. "I'll just be a minute."

He loped forwards on long legs, crouching down in the sand beside Auriana and gently rolled her onto her back. Zala'din winced as he noted more cuts along her arms and a darkening bruise on the fair skin of her neck. With a surprising amount of trepidation, he pressed his large fingers to her neck, and let out a genuine sigh of relief as he felt her faint but steady pulse.

"Little lion?" he asked, shaking her shoulders ever so gently.

Unfortunately, she remained deathly still, save for the barely discernible rise and fall of her chest, and Zala'din cursed his lack of healing abilities. He shook her again, harder this time, and after a few impossibly long minutes, she finally twitched and began to stir. Her eyelids fluttered for a few brief moments, before she finally stared up at Zala'din with a thoroughly dazed expression.

Auriana started in surprise as her bright blue eyes raked over his lean, muscled frame and his long tusks, and she twitched away from him violently until her gaze fell upon the stark red and black of his tunic.

"H… Horde? Ah… throm'ka," she said hoarsely, slurring the words as she struggled to sit upright up. "Er… ag zaga ogg ko rega. Ag gi gezzno zaga nogu moguna."

"Ya accent be terrible, little lion," Zala'din said lightly, his tusks twitching in amusement and a surprising amount of relief.

He placed a steadying hand on her back, and a glimmer of faint recognition crossed her face.

"Zal? I… is… is that you?" she asked, switching back to Common.

With considerable effort, she dragged herself into a seated position, though she leant heavily on his arm for support.

"Easy. Ya be safe here," he told her. "At least for da moment. I didn't know ya spoke orcish."

"Not very well, apparently," Auriana said drily, wincing as she touched a hand to her head. "Urgh. Where are we?"

"In da jungle on da northern side of da bay," Zala'din explained. "We found ya washed up unconscious on da beach. Saw ya as we were retreatin' into da jungle, and thought I'd see if ya were still alive before dis position was overrun by da Iron Horde."

"We?" Auriana asked, looking over her shoulder towards Zala'din's tauren companion.
"Oh. Commander Auriana Fenwild, dis be Captain Kova Stormrunner," he said offhandedly, by way of introduction.

The tiny human woman and the enormous tauren eyed one another warily for a moment, before Stormrunner nodded his shaggy head, and Auriana returned the gesture in kind.

"Pleased to meet you, Captain," she said slowly, though her eyes remained locked on Zala'din's face. "I… you deviated... to rescue me?"

"Ya woulda done da same for me," Zala'din said, though it was perhaps more of a question than a statement.

Auriana cocked her head slightly to the side, and gave him a swift, penetrating look.

"That's true," she said quietly. "I would have."

A brief moment of awkward silence passed, and Auriana looked down at her bloodied hands.

"Ah… not that I'm ungrateful for the rescue," she added, "But… would you happen to know where my people are?"

"From what I saw, dey landed on da south beach," Zala'din explained, pointing. "Unfortunately, it appears neither of us came prepared ta fight an artillery line. I tink dey retreated into da jungle, like da rest of my troops."

Auriana nodded vaguely, her eyes still somewhat unfocused.

"What happened to you?" he asked.

"Orc tried to strangle me. Shark tried to eat me," she said, with surprising nonchalance. "You know. The usual."

"Ya need healin' den," Zala'din said firmly. "Can ya teleport back to da Alliance?"

"Not if I don't know where they are. I could head back to Lunarfall, I suppose, but Light knows how long it would take me to get back out here and find my troops in this damn jungle," she growled. "Mind you, this is all something of a moot point, as I don't think I could summon enough power to light a candle at this point."

"Looks like ya stuck with us, den," Zala'din said, with a sideways glance at Stormrunner.

"What are you going to do with me?" Auriana asked, the barest hint of a nervous tremor in her voice.

"It gonna be nightfall soon," Zala'din said, tilting his head back to look at the rapidly darkening sky. "We need ta catch up with da rest of da Horde. I dun wanna be stuck out here fightin' guerilla warfare in da dark."

He looked down at Auriana in concern, wondering if his decision to save her would be the right one. Oddly enough, he considered her something of a friend, and Zala'din was not the kind of troll to leave a friend behind. That said, he still had a responsibility to the Horde, and he knew that taking Auriana under his protection would not be a popular decision. Nevertheless, Zala'din felt that he owed her, and he resolved to do whatever he could to see her safely back into the hands of the Alliance.
"Can ya walk?" he asked, looping his arm carefully beneath her shoulders and pulling her to her feet. "We gonna join up with da rest of my army, and see about gettin' ya some healin'."

Auriana nodded, and leaned willingly into his arms as she tried to find her balance. Zalad'in could feel her shivering slightly from her wet hair and wet clothes, and could smell the distinct, unpleasant combination of blood and seawater on her skin.

"I'd appreciate that..." she said faintly, when she suddenly swayed wildly and her legs collapsed beneath her.

Luckily, Zalad'in had exceptionally fast reflexes, and was able to catch her before she hit the ground. She was light as a feather, and Zalad'in thought he probably could have lifted her with one hand. He touched a hand to her cheek, and frowned as he felt her cold, blued skin. She was completely unconscious once again, and Zalad'in began to suspect that she would remain that way until he could get her some help.

"Guess we doin' dis da hard way, den," he sighed, preparing to lift Auriana over his shoulders, when Stormrunner suddenly interrupted.

"I'll take her."

"What?" Zalad'in asked, genuinely surprised by the Captain's offer.

"You're a far defter hand with a sword than I, old friend," the tauren reminded him. "If we run into trouble, you're better equipped to defend us."

"Ya sure?" Zalad'in asked skeptically.

"I am," Stormrunner confirmed, holding out his large, three-fingered hands to take Auriana's limp body.

Zalad'in gave her over with some reluctance, and watched carefully as Stormrunner lifted her with surprising reverence. Her weight was almost nothing to the enormous tauren, and he easily slung her over his broad shoulders and settled her into position.

"By the Earthmother, she's light," he muttered. "How does she not simply float away in a strong breeze?"


Without any further preamble, Zalad'in and Stormrunner raced into the jungle after the majority of the Horde. Stormrunner was barely hampered by Auriana's weight, and they made good time as they sprinted amongst the trees. Zalad'in kept a wary eye out for an Iron Horde ambush, whilst also looking for the bright fletching of raptor feathers that he knew Te'Jaia would have left to mark the path of the Horde's flight.

While there was no further sign of the Iron Horde as they ran deeper into the trees, Zalad'in felt a distinct sense of unease wash over him. He had been born and raised in the jungle, and usually felt more at home there than anywhere else, but the interior of Tanaan simply made him feel uneasy. Everything about the place seemed wrong, as if the trees themselves were crying out in horror. Stormrunner, too, seemed to be affected; flaring his nostrils nervously and tossing his heavy head as he wove through the jungle with surprising agility.

Despite their speed, however, it was well after sundown when Zalad'in and Stormrunner finally caught up with the rest of the Horde, and he was highly relieved to once again be amongst others.
The unearthly aura of the jungle at night had unnerved him to an uncomfortable degree, and he was looking forward to the primal comfort of a good fire. Fortunately, Te'Jaia had the Horde hard at work setting up a temporary camp in a large clearing, and there were already several tents set up, along with large pots of bubbling stew. An army marched on its stomach, and after a hard day's fighting, Zala'din knew his men would need the sustenance.

He and Stormrunner slowed as they entered the makeshift camp, and were almost instantly approached by a stern looking Te'Jaia.

"Where did ya get to?" she demanded, placing her hands on her hips. "I was just about ta send out a search party."

Her eyes travelled critically up and down Zala'din's body as if checking for any sign of injury, and she huffed with irritated relief as she found him unharmed. She then looked over to Stormrunner, only to do a double take as she realised who the tauren carried on his back.

"Wait… what she be doin' here?"

Te'Jaia's high pitched exclamation drew the attention of some nearby orcs, and soon an excited muttering had broken out over the entire camp as all focus suddenly turned to Zala'din and his unlikely guest.

"She be under my protection," he said, loudly enough that anyone nearby could hear. "Anyone got a problem with dat, I'll be sendin' ya back to da Warchief in pieces. Am I clear?"

Te'Jaia looked furious, but she declined to argue with him further. Instead, she pointed coldly towards a dark red tent at the back of the camp, before turning quickly away to attend to her duties.

"You're in trouble there," Stormrunner teased, moving off in the direction the troll shaman had indicated.

"Shut up," Zala'din muttered, trying to ignore the curious glances that followed in their wake as they carried Auriana through the camp.

The healing tent was well appointed and already busy, having likely been the first thing set up when the Horde had settled into their camp. Once inside, Zala'din gave Auriana over to the attentions of a talented blood elf priest named Lialdra Dawnshadow. The slender elf's eyes widened in surprise as she took in the identify of her new charge, but she was far too dedicated a healer to turn away someone in need. She began to work right away, her hands glowing blossoming with the Light as she gently touched her hands to Auriana's sorely abused throat.

"I'm trustin' that she be safe in ya care?" Zala'din said firmly.

"Of course," Lialdra assured him, her lyrical voice slightly clipped, as if offended by the suggestion that she would perform poorly. "I swore an oath to save all those that I could. Even if they should be Alliance."

"Good. I'll hold ya to dat," Zala'din said, nodding to her curtly as he followed Stormrunner back outside into the hustle and bustle of the main camp.

Despite her frustration with Zala'din's decision to rescue Auriana, Te'Jaia had done excellent work in coordinating the camp. It was noisy, but Zala'din doubted the Iron Horde would give them any trouble tonight, not least after the violent battle that day, and he allowed himself to relax for the first time since setting sail from Frostfire Ridge. Te'Jaia had seen to it that the clearing was well...
defended by a roster of guards, while the rest of the troops were well fed and watered as reward for their fierce fighting earlier that day. For his part, Zala'din also made a beeline for the food, barely pausing for air as he wolfed down the rich stew and a hearty chunk of bread. After he had eaten his fill, he took a long walk around the camp, checking in with various soldiers and taking count of casualties, before he finally returned to check on Auriana about two hours after he had left her in Lialdra's care.

To his relief, the human mage was once again conscious, and the damage to her arms and throat was almost gone. She looked rather nervous to be sitting alone amongst the many soldiers of the Horde, but her expression brightened considerably as her eyes met Zala'din's own.

"How ya feelin?" he asked, crossing his arms against his chest.

"Good… great, even," Auriana said quickly, her voice once again strong and vital. "You have excellent healers."

The beautiful blood elf paused briefly before offering Auriana an elegant nod, as if she were unsure if the compliment was genuine. Auriana smiled tentatively, and the blood elf briefly returned the expression before turning away to tend to other patients.

"Ya up ta walkin'?" Zala'din asked, extending a hand to help her to her feet.

"Absolutely," she said, allowing him to pull her upright. "What do you want with me? Where are we?"

"No idea," Zala'din said honestly. "Somewhere in da interior. Sun went down a few hours ago now, so we set up camp. No point fightin' in da dark. As for what I want from you… I was about ta hold a small war council ta work out our strategy for tomorrow."

"And… you want me there?" she asked skeptically. "Really?"

"I'd appreciate ya input," he said. "You be an excellent tactician, and ya might see something dat we don't."

"If you're sure," she said dubiously, though she nevertheless clambered to her feet and followed Zala'din back to his temporary command tent.

Te'Jaia had already assembled a half dozen of Zala'din's most trusted lieutenants and squad leaders, who all looked up as he pushed aside the tent flap and walked inside. Zala'din saw several faces darken as Auriana followed him in, though she somehow managed to keep an air of confidence about her as she took up a place slightly behind him.

"She's here ta help," Zala'din said, holding up a hand before anyone could argue. "Report."

Te'Jaia took a deep breath and shot Auriana a dirty look, but she nevertheless began to give Zala'din a detailed report of the day's fighting. Other soldiers chimed in with information of their own, and after they had fully relayed their reports, the discussion turned to planning the further invasion of Tanaan.

Auriana listened quietly off to one side for most of the conversation, her face expressionless as she ignored the variety of curious or hostile looks that were frequently aimed in her direction. Te'Jaia, in particular, seemed quite disturbed by her presence, and did nothing to hide her growing displeasure as the war council wore on into the night.

"If I may?" Auriana said quietly, finally speaking up after Zala'din expressed his frustration at their
lack of knowledge of the Tanaan Jungle region. "I think I might be of help."

Te'Jaia twitched violently at the human mage's soft words, but managed to hold her tongue as Zala'din invited Auriana to speak with a wave of his hand.

"The Alliance were able to establish a small scouting post in Tanaan for some time. Unfortunately, we lost the base in a surprise ambush after we were betrayed by one of our own, but we were able to gather some useful intelligence before we were forced to retreat," Auriana explained, her voice low and urgent. "From what we could tell, the coastal areas are lined heavily with jungle, though there seems to be a large open space in the middle of the interior. I'd bet you good gold that we'll find the Iron Horde's base of operations."

She rapped her fingers thoughtfully on Zala'din's makeshift map as he nodded approvingly, indicating where she thought Gul'Dan and his orcish Horde might be hiding.

"I also think…" she started, only to be abruptly cut off by Te'Jaia, whose patience had apparently worn thin.

"What?" the troll shaman snapped. "What do ya think? Ya have no voice here, human."

"Te'Jaia…" Zala'din growled warningly, with a stern shake of his head.

"With respect, Commander, the Lieutenant is right," an orc sergeant named Goras Tusksplitter said firmly, his naturally hoarse voice thick with contempt. "She's not one of us."

The sergeant was one of Zala'din's most promising young soldiers, though he had a reputation for brash arrogance and a quick temper that he would need to outgrow if he wished to rise through the ranks of the Horde.

"Perhaps not, but she is an experienced warrior and strategist," Zala'din said calmly.

"She be a soldier of da Alliance," Te'Jaia added darkly.

"A soldier of da Alliance dat has been willin' ta work with us in da past," Zala'din pointed out, with a quick sideways glance at Auriana. "She's never betrayed us."

Thus far the human Commander had remained stoic, but he could see hot anger kindling behind her blazing blue eyes as Tusksplitter and Te'Jaia continued to argue the point.

"She's no warrior, either," Tusksplitter growled. "Look at her, I could snap her in half with one hand. What use is she in a time of war?"

"I seem to recall killing Blackhand," Auriana interjected fiercely. "Not to mention hundreds of orcs since the Draenor campaign began. Tell me, what more could I do to prove myself?"

Tusksplitter broke into an unsettling grin; his expression setting Zala'din's teeth on edge.

"I'm glad you asked," he said coldly, staring down at Auriana with an air of unabashed superiority. "I challenge you to mak'kagor."

At his words, the tension in the command tent suddenly intensified tenfold, and everyone save for Zala'din and Auriana erupted in fevered argument. Zala'din shook his head in disappointment, and looked over towards Auriana, who merely looked confused.

"What on earth is a mak'kagor?" she whispered, leaning in close to Zala'din so that they could
speak in relative privacy.

"It be an orcish rite of initiation," Zala'din replied in hushed tones, keeping one eye on the heated argument. "In order ta be considered a warrior of da tribe, a young orc must prove his worth by challengin' an older orc ta battle."

Auriana bit her lip and eyed Tusksplitter appraisingly, clearly noting the orc's size and impressive musculature.

"By issuin' a challenge, he be implyin' dat ya not worthy ta be considered a warrior of da Horde," Zala'din added. "Or ta speak on matters of war."

"I got that, thank you," Auriana said stiffly, rolling her eyes ever so slightly. "What are the rules?"

"It not be like a mak'gora, ya don't fight ta da death," Zala'din explained. "Rather, da victor is whoever draws first blood. If da challenger wins, he be considered worthy ta represent da tribe. If he loses, he be considered unfit for battle."

"No magic of any kind, I'm assuming?" she asked thoughtfully.

"I know dat look," Zala'din said, raising a finger warningly in her direction. "Don'tcha even tink about it, little lion."

"And yet… here we are…" she said quietly.

"Are ya crazy? I know ya apparently like ta pride yourself on ya recklessness, but ya can't go up against him without magic," Zala'din insisted. "Not ta mention ya nearly drowned today."

"I'm fine," she said dismissively. "Fighting fit, I promise you."

"I can't protect ya out dere, little lion," he warned her.

"I know. I wouldn't ask you to," she said. "You've already done far more for me today that I have any right to ask. You're a Commander, the Horde comes first. If I do this, I know that I do it on my own."

"Still…" Zala'din sighed. "Ya know he's gonna try ta beat ya down, ta humiliate you. For all I know, he gonna try ta kill you and make it look like an accident."

"Do I really have a choice here?" she countered. "If I refuse, I look like a coward, and I show disrespect towards the Horde and its traditions. If I fight, even if I lose, I can at least show that I'm an honourable opponent, and that I'm willing to work with your people."

Zala'din ground his teeth, knowing there was little chance of changing her mind once it was made up. Auriana may have been tiny, but she had a will of iron, and would not easily be dissuaded.

"I accept your challenge," she announced loudly to tent at large, which fell silent almost immediately.

Tusksplitter's eyes gleamed with sudden bloodlust, while Auriana merely looked contemplative. Te'Jaia looked rather eager, and it was clear to Zala'din that there was no way he could prevent the ill-advised duel from proceeding.

He sighed.

"As ya wish," he said reluctantly. "Dere is a clearing in da centre of da camp. It will make do for an
Word of the duel raced around the camp like wildfire, and nearly every soldier capable of still standing jostled for position around the makeshift battle area. Someone had used magic to mark out a deep furrow in the dirt to mark the boundaries of the arena, and already Zala'din saw money changing hands as the crowd eagerly waited for the fight to begin.

Tusksplitter and Auriana stood at opposite ends of the small space, each staring at each other without blinking. The orc warrior looked cocky, a vicious smile playing about his harsh features. Auriana, on the other hand, looked unnervingly calm, her chin lifted imperiously as she stared her opponent down.

Zala'din took his place at off to one side of the arena, where he could clearly see both combatants, and raised his hand for quiet. Despite the fact that he was not orcish himself, Zala'din had seen the ritual performed many times, and as the ranking officer present, it was within his rights to conduct the formalities of the duel. He would also act as adjudicator, ruling on the outcome of the fight and preventing any underhanded tactics from being used.

"Auriana Fenwild, do ya accept dis challenge of ya own free will?" Zala'din asked formally.

"I do," she said coldly.

"And what weapon do ya choose?" he said, gesturing to a selection of daggers that had been hastily prepared for the occasion.

Auriana turned her head, and quickly made her choice. She chose one of the larger weapons, which would have been a regular dagger in the hands of an orc, but compared to her, was almost a half sword. She briefly tested the weapon's weight, before settling into a surprisingly confident backhanded grip.

"And you, Goras Tusksplitter?" Zala'din continued. "Do you wish to withdraw your challenge?"

"No," the orc said proudly. "And I have no need of a weapon. I will beat this Alliance interloper with my bare hands, and prove to all that she has no right to stand amongst the good people of the Horde!"

There was a fair bit of patriotic shouting at his declaration, though Zala'din noted that many of his troops remained silent. It was no coincidence that those who were quieter were among those who had fought at Blackrock Foundry, and had seen what Auriana was willing to do for both the Alliance and the Horde.

"Very well, den," Zala'din sighed, stepping backwards out of the makeshift arena. "Fight!"

Zala'din knew instantly that allowing the fight had been a mistake, as Tusksplitter roared and charged Auriana at full speed. To her credit, she didn't flinch, though moved slightly to the side to avoid his rapid onrush. Unfortunately, she dodged slightly too slowly, and Tusksplitter dealt her a mighty crack across the face. The orc had very deliberately chosen to use an open hand, so as not to prematurely draw blood, apparently deciding that he wanted to have his fun with the mage before ending the fight.

Auriana went flying, tumbling head over heels through the dirt. Tusksplitter seized on his advantage, and chased hungrily after her. His massive fist found her slender ankle, and he hurled her though the air so that she landed heavily on her back. She grunted in pain, clinging tightly to her dagger as the orc fell upon her once again. He grinned savagely as he dealt two heavy kicks to
her rib cage, visibly forcing the air from her lungs.

Zala'din winced, and found it hard to keep watching. He knew that Auriana could take a hit, and he knew she'd kill him if he intervened, but it was hard to watch her being so thoroughly beaten. Regrettably, things got even worse a moment later as Tusksplitter's right fist closed over Auriana's throat and he hauled her into the air, while his left hand squeezed her wrist so tightly that she was forced to drop her dagger into the dirt. The orc laughed raucously as she struggled futilely against his mighty grip, and Zala'din knew he had read the brash young soldier's intentions correctly. Tusksplitter fully intended to beat Auriana, humiliate her, before at long last drawing blood as the final indignity.

To Zala'din's surprise, however, Auriana looked neither frightened nor furious, but rather impossibly determined. With a choked snarl, she unleashed one of the most savage kicks Zala'din had ever seen in his life, catching Tusksplitter square in his manhood. More than one male in the crowd winced in sympathy, while Tusksplitter roared in agony and reflexively released Auriana from his iron grip. She tumbled backwards, rolling as her shoulder hit the dirt so that she could collect her dagger and return to her feet in a single, swift movement.

Tusksplitter bellowed, enraged by her defiance, though of course she hadn't actually broken any rules. Auriana crouched low in anticipation of retaliation, and once again Tusksplitter began to charge. This time, however, Auriana launched herself forwards and charged right back at him. It looked almost comical, the monstrous orc bearing down upon the slender human, but Zala'din knew Auriana well enough to know that while she was reckless, she always had a plan.

His intuition proved to be correct as Auriana paused ever so slightly at the last minute, throwing herself to the ground so that she might slide beneath Tusksplitter's raging charge. As she skidded along the dirt, she lashed out with the dagger, striking hard at Tusksplitter's exposed ankles. The big orc stumbled, but somehow managed to stay on his feet, and turned back to Auriana with a furious growl. In answer, she scrambled to her feet and lifted her dagger high above her head so that everyone assembled could see the dark red blood staining the blade. The orc twitched in pure frustration and roared in anger at her unexpected victory, but he would never disgrace himself by breaking the rules of an honour duel.

The camp abruptly fell into an impossible silence, and all that could be heard were the heavy breathing of the two combatants, as well as the ambient sounds of Tanaan's nocturnal wildlife. Zala'din's men seemed entirely stunned and incapable of speech, though there was one person in the camp who still had a voice.

"By the laws of your own people, I have earned the right to stand as a warrior amongst the Horde," Auriana shouted. "Is there anyone among you who would dispute that right?"

Zala'din looked around the dumbstruck throng of soldiers, trying to gauge their response. Privately, he doubted anyone would contest Auriana's victory. Tradition was of utmost importance among the Horde, and to challenge the outcome of a fair fight would be considered the height of dishonour. As he expected, the crowd remained unnaturally quiet, watching Auriana with expressions ranging from outright dislike to thoughtful, grudging respect.

"That's what I thought," she muttered.

Auriana gave Zala'din a pointed look, and threw her dagger point downwards into the soft jungle floor. She then nodded sharply at Goras Tusksplitter, before turning on her heel and stalking away without another word.
In the wake of Auriana's triumph in the *mak'kagor*, it took some time for the volatile camp to calm down for the night. Zala'din kept a watchful eye over his men, looking for any signs of discontent, but eventually even the most excitable young soldiers returned to their bed rolls to sleep ahead of another day of battle tomorrow.

Zala'din, too, was about to settle down and get some rest, when he realised that Auriana had not yet returned to camp. Concerned, he made another casual-seeming loop of the camp, until he was certain that Auriana had indeed disappeared. Eventually, he made his way to one of the guard positions at the camp entrance, and questioned to two Pandaren stationed on duty. From their information, he determined that Auriana had disappeared down a heavily beaten game trail and out into the jungle.

With a sigh, he decided to follow her, in case she passed out or stumbled across something dangerous. Although Auriana was an extremely capable mage, she had to have been exhausted from the day's fighting, her near-drowning, and her later battle in the makeshift arena. It was also likely that she would need further healing after her beating at Tusksplitter's hands, but at least she had been still able to move.

After about five minutes of loping through the dense foliage, Zala'din finally found her waist deep in a dark pool of water, her eyes closed as she stood beneath a small, cascading waterfall. She had stripped down to her underwear, leaving most of her pale skin bare and her long hair trailing down her back. Zala'din didn't find her remotely attractive, of course, but he could appreciate the beauty in her glossy tresses and her warrior's build. He could see dark patches on her ribs and cheek already forming, though thankfully her movement appeared otherwise unencumbered.

He watched her in silence for several minutes, before her eyes suddenly opened and she staggered in shock as she realised that she was not alone.

"Zal!" she gasped, her brow furrowed as she peered towards him through the darkness. "I… you… how long have you been standing there?"

"Not long," he said. "Maybe a minute or two."

"Ah..." Auriana said, awkwardly looking anywhere but at his face. "I don't know how you do things in the Horde, but in the Alliance, watching a woman bathe without her knowledge is generally considered… um… creepy."

"Easy, little lion," Zala'din said, grinning up at her with mild amusement. "Don't worry yourself, ya not my type."

Auriana blushed furiously, though he could see that she was trying not to smile as she turned away and dunked her head once more beneath the waterfall.

"Whatcha doin'? Ya alright?" Zala'din asked, settling himself down on a moss covered rock and dangling his feet into the water.

She turned back to face him, and with a strangely intense expression, dived down beneath the inky water. Even with her pale skin, the water was so dark that Zala'din couldn't see her beneath the surface, and was somewhat startled when she reappeared at the side of the pool right in front of him. He offered her a hand, which she gratefully accepted to clamber up the rocks to take a seat at his side.

"I'm fine, though I might go have another chat to that blood elf priest of yours," she admitted, touching a hand to her badly bruised ribs. "My main problem, however, was that I reeked of sweaty
orc. And dead fish, and seaweed, and dirt. Not exactly the most alluring smell."

"Suppose it depends on whatcha tryin' to lure," Zala'din said philosophically.

Auriana chuckled at that, and with a start Zala'din realised it was the first time he'd ever heard her genuinely laugh. It was a pretty sound, though unusually deep for a woman of her size.

"I thought ya might be tryin' ta escape," he said carefully.

"Where on earth would I go?" Auriana asked wryly, gesturing to the heady jungle all around them. "Besides, I'm not a prisoner… am I?"

"No. Of course not," he reassured her. "If anytin', after dat mak'kagor… ya fought very well. I suppose ya could even say ya been initiated into da Horde."

"Just what I always wanted," she said sarcastically, though the sparkle in her eyes told him that she spoke in jest.

The stars of Draenor burned brightly overhead, and the twin moons cast a pale reflection over the small clearing. If not for the eerie, pervasive sense of evil that hung about the trees, Zala'din might have even found the place beautiful.

"Ya look different since I saw ya last," he told her, as she made a half-hearted attempt to comb the tangles from her wet hair with her fingers.

"How so?" she asked, cocking her head to one side. "It's only been a few days since Zangarra."

"Just… different," he said, shrugging as he drew lazy circles in the water with his toes. "Ya spirit seems… calmer."

Auriana frowned, and paused in her ablutions.

"I found the traitors who attacked my garrison," she said quietly. "I feel like I don't have to look over my shoulder every second lest I get stabbed in the back. Make of that what you will."

"I dunno, I'm not a shadow hunter," Zala'din said, shrugging. "I only know what I can see."

Auriana nodded, and resumed her attempt at returning some sense of neatness to her damp hair.

"I'm sorry for all the trouble I've caused you," she said, smiling sadly. "Particularly with your second."

"I apologise for her behaviour," Zala'din said, shaking his head. "Humans aren't exactly… popular… amongst da Horde, but I thought I could count on Jaia at least ta keep a civil tongue in her head."

"Ah, well, in her case I think that has less to do with the fact that I'm human and more to do with the fact that I'm female," Auriana said lightly.

"What?"

"Isn't it obvious?" she said, fighting back a smile. "She's attracted to you."

"Ya tink?" he asked, thoroughly nonplussed.

Te'Jaia was feisty, clever, and beautiful, all the things that Zala'din found desirable in a mate, and
yet strangely enough he'd never considered her in that light. He was not inexperienced with
women, having considerable status within the Horde, but he supposed he had been too focused on
the mission in Draenor to consider pursuing any kind of relationship - physical, romantic or
otherwise.

"By the Light, Zal, I'm the most emotionally oblivious person on this planet and even I figured that
out," Auriana said drily. "You should... I don't know, talk to her about it."

"Trolls don't... ask," Zal said absentmindedly.

"Zal!" she protested, looking thoroughly revolted with him.

"Not like dat," he said quickly. "I'd never take a woman against her will. I mean... if trolls wanna
mate, dey challenge each other to a duel first."

"Really?" Auriana said interestingly, raising an eyebrow.

"How else do ya know if someone be worthy ta take as ya mate?" he asked seriously. "How is it
any worse den what ya humans call courtship? How does throwin' flowers at some pretty face
show 'em ya worth?"

"Fair point," Auriana said, grinning. "I suppose I've never thought of it that way."

"If she wants me, she'll challenge me," Zala'din said, shrugging. "And loa-willin', I'll impress her."

"Well, I'm sure you're very impressive, as trolls go," she said lightly. "Any woman would be lucky
to have you"

"Dat so?" he asked good naturedly, giving her his best smile.

"Oh, Light, Zal," Auriana growled, slapping him firmly on the arm. "I don't want to mate with
you."

"No, I suppose you don't," he said, forcing his expression into one of pure innocence. "Da way I
hear it, ya tastes are a little more high-minded den a simple commander."

Auriana's eyes narrowed, and her feet stilled in the water. All her earlier playfulness vanished in an
instant, and she turned to face him with a scowl.

"What's that supposed to mean?" she said warily.

"Rumour has it dat you and da King of Stormwind..." he said carefully, only to stop immediately at
the furious look on Auriana's face.

"I see the Horde are just as fond of wild stories and baseless accusations as the Alliance," she
huffed irritably.

"Ya have no idea, believe me," Zala'din admitted, idly scratching his nose. "Dat said... I wouldn't
consider dis baseless. I not be one for idle gossip myself... but after seein' da two of you in
Zangarra..."

He once again trailed off as Auriana's face went from anger to ashen, and she abruptly turned
away. Her pale fingers rapped a nervous staccato on her bare thighs, and her breath quickened ever
so slightly.

"I be a simple troll at heart, Auriana," he added gently, as the silence between them soon became
oppressive. "I might not know much, but even I know what it means when a man looks at a woman like dat."

Auriana leant her head back to look up at the starry sky, before closing her eyes as she let out a long, resigned sigh. Without ever meeting his gaze, she gave a short, sharp nod; which Zala'din figured was as much of an admission as he was ever going to get.

"Why it be such a big secret?" he prodded curiously, wondering if she'd actually answer the question.

She remained silent for a long time, and then to his surprise, finally gave a rather unladylike snort and shook her head ruefully.

"Do you know…" she said slowly, "I'm not even sure anymore. I had reasons… good reasons… but somehow they seem less important by the day."

Zala'din could see that the admission had cost her something, and she visibly retreated into her own thoughts. He let her brood in silence for as long as she needed, for it seemed like she rather desperately needed the time to think.

"We should be getting back," she said finally, rising to her feet and quickly tying her long hair into a loose knot at the base of her neck.

She walked over to her discarded clothes and boots, frowning delicately as she put the dirty and bloody garments back on. It was clear that she would have dearly loved a change of clothes, though Zala'din doubted he had anything back in the camp that would possibly fit her. She was probably a shade too big for anything that would fit a goblin, but far too small for blood elf or orcish garments.

"Ya probably right," he agreed. "Bwonsamdi knows what lurks out here in dis jungle at night."

"Speakin' of which…" he added. "Ya should probably sleep with me tonight."

Auriana turned around very slowly, her expression torn somewhere between anger, confusion, and outright disbelief.

"Excuse me?" she said archly.

"Ah… in my tent, I mean," Zala'din said quickly, realising that his words had held a rather unfortunate double entendre. "It be easily big enough for da two of us, 'specially when one of us is as tiny as you."

"You don't trust your men to leave me alone," Auriana said shrewdly.

"Ya got more respect amongst da Horde than most of your people could ever hope ta claim…” Zala'din said quietly. "But in this case… no, I dun trust 'em."

It wasn't the sort of thing he'd readily admit to anything else, but Zala'din knew that Auriana was not the type of person to betray a confidence. She nodded thoughtfully, her expression softening slightly as she considered his offer.

"Our forces were greatly diminished after all dat business with Garrosh Hellscream and da Siege of Orgrimmar, and a war dis soon after hasn't helped," Zala'din confessed. "As a consequence, most of my men are young, and hot-headed, and might see your victory tonight as a threat ta dere honour."
"That wasn't my intention," Auriana said, irritably brushing a strand of hair from her eyes.

"I know dat," he assured her. "But I wouldn't put it past one of da stupider ones ta get it into his thick skull dat killing an Alliance Commander would win him fame and glory. And as amusing as it would be ta watch dem try...

"It would be preferable if I kept my head," Auriana finished grimly.

"Exactly. Ya surprisingly useful for a human, ya know," Zala'din said, grinning.

She returned his smile with a small quirk of her lips, and eventually nodded her somewhat reluctant consent.

"This is going to create quite the stir, you know," she told him, turning away to make the short trek back to the Horde camp. "I'm certainly not going to be popular with your shaman friend."

"Ah, let 'em talk," Zala'din said, waving a hand dismissively as he followed her up the path. "And don'tcha worry about Jaia, either, her bark be worse den her bite. You just gotta worry about gettin' healed up and gettin' some rest. We got a lot of Iron Horde ta kill tomorrow, ya know."

"Indeed we do, Commander," she agreed, looking over her shoulder to grin determinedly at him as they strode back into the dark embrace of the jungle.
It was nearly midnight in Stormwind, and yet Varian found himself still hard at work in his study. There was always much for a king to do during wartime, even if he were not fighting on the front lines. There were troops and supplies to account for, endless reports to read, and various missions to approve. Luckily, both Auriana and Lieutenant Thorn were excellent administrators, and they made Varian's job much easier than it might have otherwise been.

Of course, Varian also had to contend with all the usual business of running his kingdom. While he certainly preferred to lead his people from the front of the vanguard in a heated battle, he didn't really mind working late. Both Stormwind and the Alliance as a whole had been through trying times of late, and he felt he owed it to his people to give as much of himself as he was able. Varian had been raised to see kingship as a position of service and sacrifice, not one of mastery and self-glorification, and his only ambition for his reign was to ensure the ongoing safety and prosperity of his people.

Despite his best intentions, however, Varian was finding it damnably difficult to concentrate on the task at hand. As he sat, safe and warm in his keep, Auriana and the other brave soldiers of Lunarfall were laying siege to the jungles of Tanaan. He knew the attack had been planned for around midday, and given that time on Draenor ran ahead of that on Azeroth, he had rather expected to have heard word of the assault by now. When it came to war, no news generally meant bad news, and for the last hour or so he had been entirely distracted by a sick sense of anxiety that had settled deep in the pit of his stomach.

He sighed, and stretched out his long legs beneath his desk. The candle that sat near his right hand was burning low, though Varian had no particular desire to retire for the evening. In truth, he was working late at least in part to provide himself with an alternative to brooding, though his efforts were growing more futile by the minute.

Varian had just decided to give up in favour of a stiff drink, when there came a quiet knock at the outer door of his chambers.

"Yes?" he called loudly, his heartbeat quickening dramatically. "What is it?"

"Royal Messenger Blakely to see you, sire," one of his night shift guards replied. "Shall I send him in?"

"Please," Varian said, rising to his feet with a fresh sense of urgency.

He hastily straightened his rumpled tunic and pulled on his coat and boots in a mostly unsuccessful attempt to look kingly, having earlier removed his outer garments for comfort. He heard the soft voices of his guards and the creak of wood as his door opened, and moments later a finely liveried messenger entered his study.

Varian knew instantly that something was wrong, judging from the look on the man's face. His cheeks were flushed brilliant red, and Varian wondered if he had run all the way to the top of Stormwind Keep to present the news as quickly as possible.

"Report," Varian said gravely.

"I have been sent by Lieutenant Thorn of Lunarfall, my Lord," Blakely said quickly. "The Alliance fleet travelled to Tanaan Jungle without incident, but were ambushed by the Iron Horde as they
approached the designated landing zone. Several ships were sunk during the attack, but we managed to get the majority of our troops to shore. Several skirmishes were fought throughout the afternoon, but the Alliance were able to move into the jungle by nightfall, and are currently camped out in southern Tanaan ahead of making further inroads in the morning. It seems the Azerothian Horde were placed in a similar position. We lost track of them after the initial attack, but they too seem to have sought the protection of the jungle."

"And… Auri… Commander Fenwild?" Varian asked slowly.

Blakely swallowed, and looked just about everywhere save for Varian's face.

"She… she's missing, sire… presumed… ah… dead," he said quietly, his voice barely louder than a whisper. "Lieutenant Hafela has assumed temporary command of the Tanaan invasion force, and has officially declared the Commander missing in action."

At those chilling words, Varian's entire world stopped, and he could hear nothing but the furious pounding of his heart in his ears. His mind clouded over as if afflicted by a dense black fog, and all of a sudden he could see nothing but the bodies of all those he had loved and lost… his father, Bolvar, Tiffin… and now Auriana's pale corpse lay alongside them. His fingers and toes went icy cold, while feeling of choking panic rose in his throat.

"What evidence is there of this?" he demanded, clenching his fists so hard that his nails dug painfully into the flesh of his palms.

The royal messenger's eyes widened, and he knotted his hands nervously behind his back.

"Her… her flagship was destroyed in an artillery strike, my Lord," he stammered. "The Commander managed to teleport the crew away to the safety of another ship, but she was the last to leave. No one saw her escape the explosion."

"That doesn't mean she's dead!" Varian bellowed, irrationally hoping that by saying the words out loud he might make them true.

"Of… of course, my Lord," Blakely muttered nervously. "However… several pieces of her armour were recovered from the shoreline during the retreat. It would appear… that perhaps she was unable to escape the ship in time, and perished in the ocean."

Varian roared wordlessly, and slammed his fist so hard into his desk so hard that it actually splintered. Pain lanced up his arm, but it was nothing compared to the cold tendrils of agony that had ensnared his heart. The messenger looked plainly terrified by his reaction, but Varian found that he simply didn't care.

"Not again," he thought desperately. I can't do this again...

"Did it occur to anyone to look for her?" he snapped, fighting against the urge to hurl his writing desk across the room, as if it might ease his rage.

"Of course, Your Majesty," the messenger insisted, a slight note of pleading entering his voice, "But our men were under heavy fire. They were forced to retreat into the jungle, and Lieutenant Hafela had to call of the search for the time being. She advised that she would resume searching as soon as the Alliance has established a stable base of operations."

"That could take weeks!" Varian roared, his voice booming off the walls, even though his rational mind knew the draenei Lieutenant was entirely justified in her actions. "She is your Commander! And you abandoned her!"
"No, no, my Lord… I promise, from all accounts, the garrison troops did all they could, but…"

The messenger's rapidly spoken protest was cut off by a second knock at the door, and Varian threw up his hands in pure frustration.

"What is it now?" he snarled.

He heard the outer doors open once again, and to his surprise Anduin suddenly poked his head through the study entrance.

"Er… Father?" he said quietly, his clever eyes quickly sweeping over of the frightened messenger, the smashed desk, and Varian's shaking hands. "What's going on? I can hear you shouting from my rooms."

Varian took a deep breath, and forcefully choked down his anger and fear. He hated to show his temper in front of Anduin, and for his son's sake alone, he would try to remain calm.

"I expect that you'll update me immediately if anything changes," he said curtly to the messenger. 
"You're dismissed."

Blakely spun on his heel the second the order had been given, and didn't even manage to bow or salute in his eagerness to escape the King of Stormwind's legendary wrath. Varian swallowed guiltily, and dimly made a mental note to apologise to the man at some later date.

"Father?" Anduin repeated, once he was sure they were alone. "What's wrong?"

"Leave me be, Anduin, I am not in any kind of mood for conversation," Varian said darkly, wanting nothing more than to be left alone to his grim thoughts.

"No, you're clearly in the mood for… destroying the furniture," the prince murmured, raising a golden eyebrow.

Varian shook his head and cracked his knuckles ferociously, as if the repetitive action might provide some relief for his seething heart. Frowning, Anduin stepped closer, studying his father carefully, and a slow understanding bloomed across his features.

"Wait a minute…" he said slowly. "The attack on Tanaan was today. Did something happen? Did… did something happen to Auriana?"

"She…" Varian started, barely able to form the words, "She's been declared missing in action. Presumed… presumed dead."

Anduin's face fell, and ran a disbelieving hand through his hair.

"I… I'm so sorry, Father," he whispered. "Are… are they sure?"

"The ship she was travelling on was destroyed," Varian said dully. "They recovered some of her armour, and she hasn't been seen since."

"Father… I… I'm so sorry. For what it's worth, I know how you feel, I know this must be hard…" Anduin said consolingly, reaching for Varian's arm, but it was the last thing in the world that the King of Stormwind wanted to hear.

"You have no idea how I feel," he snapped irritably. "You're a child, you know nothing of love."

Varian regretted the words even before they had even left his mouth, but it was of course too late.
Anduin took an involuntary step backwards, his face paling with both shock and hurt. He looked as if he would have dearly liked to say something in retort, but decided to remain quiet. Instead, he turned and made his way towards the door, and Varian sighed with regret. He knew his relationship with Anduin had improved significantly in the past few years, but somehow he still managed to always say precisely the wrong thing.

"Anduin…" Varian started, though he found he didn't know what else to say.

Anduin ignored him pointedly as he made his way to the study door, though paused at the last second, his hand resting lighting on the wooden frame. He seemed to be wrestling with something within himself, and to Varian's surprise, he finally stepped back into the room and made his way to Varian's desk drawer to retrieve, of all things, a deck of playing cards.

"What… what are you doing?" Varian asked, thoroughly nonplussed.

"Sit down, Father," Anduin replied, his voice unnaturally calm.

After a pause, Varian complied, though it was more out of confusion than any particular desire to sit down. His powerful muscles were twitching with nervous energy and the overwhelming need to do something, and he found it nearly impossible to sit still. For his part, Anduin dragged a chair over from the corner of the room and took a seat opposite his father, staring down at his hands as he began to carefully shuffle the cards.

"Anduin…" Varian tried again, a note of desperation entering his voice. "I'm sorry. I…"

"You think I know nothing of love?" Anduin said quietly, holding up a hand to silence Varian's awkward apology. "I knew the love of my mother. I may not remember our time together, but the love she had for me lingers on. I know love for Bolvar, and for Jaina… and for you, more than anyone… when you're not being a cantankerous ass."

Varian rankled slightly at Anduin's hard words, but for once managed to hold his tongue.

"The bond between us is an important one, Father, and I would ask that you not cheapen it by suggesting that I know nothing of what it is to love and be loved," Anduin continued firmly, though he was still unable to meet Varian's eyes.

"I… I'm sorry," Varian repeated raggedly, running a shaky hand through his hair. "Really, I…"

"I know," Anduin said softly. "Believe me, I know. I may have been young when my mother died, but in later years… I saw what it did to you. I saw how it changed you, how it hardened you. I saw you forget how to smile. I saw you forget how to see beauty in the world."

Varian's breath hitched, and he felt an incredible weight settle into his chest.

"Anduin…"

"I don't blame you in the slightest," the prince said quickly, as if reading Varian's mind. "What happened wasn't fair. You should have had a long and happy life together. I… I should have had a mother… but life isn't fair."

Anduin suddenly looked incredibly sad, and Varian's protective instincts surged. By silent, mutual agreement, he and Anduin rarely spoke of their shared loss of Tiffin, but every now and then Varian was so strongly reminded of the tragedy of Anduin's motherless childhood that it caused him physical pain.
"I'm sorry," Anduin said. "I'm rambling a bit, aren't I? What I'm trying to say is this… if you love Auri even half as much as you loved my mother… you must be terrified right now. Not only of losing another woman you love, but of losing yourself. Again. For a man like you… a man who fears nothing else…"

Anduin trailed off, and finally looked up from his hands. His youthful features radiated endless love and compassion, and Varian felt even guiltier about his earlier outburst. It had been an outburst borne of his own soul-eating fear and frustration, but it was certainly far less than Anduin deserved.

"I wish I could fix this for you, Father," the prince said earnestly, his blue eyes very bright. "I know you do," Varian said quietly. "You'd fix the whole world if you could. Maybe one day you will."

Anduin's eyes warmed at the praise, and he tentatively reached out to touch his father's forearm. Varian flinched reflexively, but permitted the gentle contact with a small, awkward jerk of his head.

"Why do you love her?" Anduin asked, leaning forwards. "Auriana, I mean."

The question was unexpected, and Varian hesitated. Not because he didn't know the answer, of course, but rather because he'd never really tried to put his feelings into words. He wasn't particularly open at the best of times, and after Tiffin's death, he had very deliberately closed himself off to any possibility of affection, let alone love, as a way of protecting his shattered heart. It was illogical, perhaps, but a dim and distant part of his mind believed that if he kept his love for Auriana close to his chest, it would prevent her from being lost to him.

"Because... because she has a brave heart, and an extraordinary spirit. Because she's smart, and funny, and kind… and because she sees me as a man," he said finally, his voice barely more than a hoarse whisper. "All of me. She knows Varian and Lo'Gosh… she understands them… she loves them both. Not that I can for the life of me figure out why."

Anduin looked at Varian with heartbreaking compassion, and for a second he was the spitting image of his mother. Varian's heart twisted slightly, both in mourning for his lost wife, and for his pride in his son, who reminded Varian more of Tiffin each and every day. It was a bittersweet feeling, sad as he was over what he had lost, but more grateful than he could say for the life of his son.

"Love is what it is," Anduin said simply. "And I would think that any woman strong enough to be a match for you would be capable of surviving almost anything."

"I'm that bad, eh?" Varian said drily, raising an eyebrow.

The briefest of smiles flickered across Anduin's face, and some of the tension in his shoulders dissipated.

"That's not what I meant, and you know it," he said gently. "She's a survivor. You both are. Somehow, it seems as if no matter how hard you get beaten down, you both have an uncanny ability to just get right back up again and keep fighting. She's strong, and you know she'd move heaven and earth - quite literally - to find a way home to you."

Anduin met his gaze levelly, though Varian found it difficult to truly believe what his son was saying. He was far more of a realist, perhaps a pessimist, and even at the best of times, he found it
difficult to understand Anduin's persistent, boundless optimism.

"Do you know something…" the King started stiffly, trying to give voice to something he had been trying very hard to avoid saying out loud for most of his adult life, "Sometimes… sometimes I think that perhaps it's my lot in life to be alone. I lost my father. I lost your mother, my… my wife. I've nearly lost you more times than I can count, either due to actions of war or to my own obstreperousness. And now… perhaps her, too. I thought she might be different, I thought I could…"

He sighed, and pulled away from Anduin's touch to bury his head in his hands.

"Maybe she was right. She didn't want to get involved, you know, at first. Maybe if I had stayed away, if I hadn't pursued her… she'd be spared my… curse."

Anduin's eyes softened entirely, his overwhelmingly empathetic nature washing away any earlier hurt from Varian's harsh words, and Varian felt incredibly awkward. He wasn't prone to verbosity, nor maudlin discussion of his feelings, and he all of a sudden felt rather embarrassed to have voiced such weakness in front of his own son.

"You aren't cursed, Father," Anduin insisted, his voice intense. "You aren't. What happened to my grandfather was betrayal. What happened to my mother was a freak accident, and as for Auriana… she's a soldier, she chose her own path in life. She knows what the risks are every time she steps outside her garrison. None of these things are your fault. I know you think you can control the world, and perhaps that's a natural consequence of being born a king, but… you can't, as much as that hurts sometimes. The best you can do… the best any of us can do… is to make the most of the time we're given. To love as hard as we can, not despite the pain, but because of it."

He took a deep breath as he finished his speech, and looked up at Varian nervously, as if afraid that he would perhaps be displeased.

"When did you get so wise?" Varian asked, only partially in jest.

"I watch. I listen," Anduin said calmly. "And I've been lucky enough to count some of the most extraordinary people in Azeroth as my friends and family. Standing on the shoulders of giants, as it were."

He smiled ever so slightly, and held out his hands in a gesture of gentle encouragement.

"Father… Auriana is one of the most powerful sorcerers alive. If anyone can survive in that jungle, it's her," Anduin said firmly, as if it were only so simple. "The Light will keep her safe, I promise you."

Varian's gaze bored once again into Anduin's own, and for a long time they stared at each other in silence. He wasn't entirely sure what he was looking for, and indeed part of him felt ridiculous, a grown man looking for comfort from his barely adult son. And yet… Anduin had a way of making those around him feel hopeful, like a shining light in the darkness."

"How can you be so sure?" he whispered.

"It's called faith, Father," Anduin replied.

"I'm no priest," Varian said drily, "As I'm sure you're well aware."

"No, you aren't," Anduin said, with a short, wry chuckle. "Which is why I'll just have to have faith enough for both of us. You… you aren't the only one who cares for her, you know."
For a brief moment, Varian saw genuine fear behind his son's eyes, but it vanished almost as quickly as it had appeared. Anduin then placed the shuffled deck of cards pointedly on the table between them, and looked up at Varian expectantly.

"Cards?" Varian asked skeptically.

"We used to play when I was little, do you remember?" Anduin said brightly. "If I had a nightmare, I'd come into your room and we'd play together until I was too tired to keep going."

"I remember…" Varian said fondly, "Though I don't see how…"

"I figured you weren't going to get much sleep tonight, so you may as well do something more productive than pacing up and down your room and growling," the prince explained, shrugging.

"I don't… growl…" Varian mumbled, frowning heavily.

Anduin didn't say a word, but his disbelief was written in every line of his face, and Varian was reluctantly forced to concede the point with a wry tilt of his head. It also occurred to him that he was not the only one in need of comfort that night, and that perhaps pain could only ever truly be eased when shared.

"Alright," he said finally, pushing the cards back across the table towards Anduin. "Your deal."
Exhausted as she was from the day's fighting and her later duel, Auriana fell asleep almost as soon her head hit the pillow. While Zala'din was correct in saying that his tent was ample enough for the both of them, she still felt horribly self-conscious at the thought of sleeping alongside him. Fortunately for them both, however, it seemed that her exhaustion outweighed her embarrassment, and she was dead to the world long before she could overthink the situation too much.

When she awoke early the next morning, her troll companion was already gone, and she could hear the distinctive sounds of the war camp packing up in preparation to press the invasion further inland. Irritated by the fact that she had slept through, though secretly glad that she hadn't had to face Zala'din in the bed beside her, Auriana quickly tied her long hair back into a messy but functional braid, and pulled herself upright into a sitting position. She was just about to pull on her boots and venture outside, when Zala'din suddenly poked his head in through the tent flap and stepped inside. He was already fully armoured, and he looked wide awake despite the early hour.

"Mornin', little lion," he drawled.

"Morning," Auriana replied. "Why didn't you wake me?"

"I thought ya could use da sleep," the troll said, shrugging. "Ya snore like a Stranglethorn tiger, ya know."

"What are you, my father?" Auriana said sarcastically, pointedly ignoring the second part of his statement.

Zala'din gave her a strange look, then peered in closer so that they were standing almost nose to nose.

"Funny. there not be really much of a family resemblance," he quipped, deadpan, and Auriana was forced to grin.

The more time she spent with Zala'din, the more she realised how much she actually enjoyed his company. There were few people in the world that Auriana felt a sense of genuine friendship with, and much to her eternal surprise, Zala'din was fast becoming one of those people. Despite hailing from a fierce and bloodthirsty people, he was amiable and open, and was nearly impossible to dislike.

"What time is it?" Auriana asked, putting her hands on her hips.

"Bout an hour after dawn," he replied. "We were just gettin' ready to move out. Scouts already seen da Iron Horde movin' troops inta da jungle ta engage us. Ya good ta fight?"

"Always," Auriana said determinedly, cracking her knuckles.

"Stay near me today," Zala'din added quietly. "Ya seem ta have a bad habit of gettin' inta trouble, and I dun particularly want ta have ta tell Varian Wrynn dat I got his mate killed."

"I'm not his mate," Auriana grumbled. "And I'm not that much trouble."

"Ya more trouble den anyone I ever met. I tink it be why I like ya," Zala'din said, giving her a bizarre yet affectionate pat on the head.
Auriana made a face, and realised that she had absolutely no idea what to say. He had touched her in much the same way that an older sibling might pat a younger, though there had been nothing patronising in the gesture.

"Oh, and I bought ya dese," Zala'din said, bringing her back to reality. "Dey're sized for blood elves, but I had 'em modified a bit. Figured ya can't really go runnin' around da jungle with nothin' on."

"I… I'm not wearing nothing," Auriana protested, though she had to admit he had a point. Her undershirt was long sleeved, but cropped, and it left her slender waist and stomach bare. She'd also had to get rid of her shoulder plates and gauntlets in the water, and her tight breeches would do little to protect her legs from a blade.

Zala'din gave her a stern glare, and handed her a thick leather jerkin and a pair of gauntlets, as well as a heavy leather belt that had long flaps to protect her thighs. Auriana accepted them gratefully, and quickly went about securing them to her slim frame. The gauntlets and belt fit surprisingly well, though she could see where a leatherworker had poked several extra buckle holes into the belt leather to make it fit. The jerkin was unfortunately rather large in the waist, but with some judicious tightening of the leather straps on the side, it fit near enough to be functional. It also appeared that blood elves tended to be more flat chested than humans, judging from the way the jerkin compressed her breasts, but Auriana would always happily forgo comfort in favour of protection.

"Thanks," she said, offering the troll a genuine smile.

"It not be much, but it be better den nothin'," Zala'din said, returning her smile with a toothy grin of his own. "Don't particularly wanna return ya to Varian Wrynn in a box."

"Alive would be preferable," Auriana agreed, pulling on her boots. "For both of us. If I show up dead, he's going to kill me all over again. Then he'll kill you."

Zala'din roared with laughter, and slapped her on the back, hard enough to make her stagger. "Ready?"

"Ready."

Despite the physical toll of the invasion and her duel the day before, Auriana was feeling fresh and eager, and she wanted nothing more than to get into the fight. She ducked her head and followed Vol'jin outside the tent, and was surprised to see that the sky was almost pitch black. There was a spark of urgency in the air, and the dark, threatening clouds looked ready to erupt at any moment.

"We're going to be fighting in the rain, aren't we?" Auriana said distastefully.

"Looks like," Zala'din replied, turning his gaze upwards to the sky. "It gonna be a bad one, too."

As if his words had been prophetic, the skies suddenly opened, and they were greeted by a torrential downpour. Within half a minute, they were absolutely soaked, and Auriana grimaced as she felt cold tendrils of rain running down her back beneath her jerkin. Zala'din looked like a sad, wet dog, and he ground his tusks in what she had come to understand was an expression of frustration. A great fork of lightning briefly turned the jungle blinding white, and the great boom of thunder that followed after sounded for all the world like the shout of an angry god.

"This is your fault, you know," she told Zala'din drily. "You just had to go and say something…"
"I know," he agreed, sighing. "Come on."

Together they moved off through the bustling camp, each pointedly ignoring the mud that rapidly clumped around their feet. As could be expected, Auriana drew a lot of attention from the crowd, but today there was distinctly less hostility in the air. Many of the Horde soldiers looked on with curiosity, rather than enmity, and they appeared to have more or less accepted her as a member of the war band.

Zala'din lead Auriana through the throng to the front of the massing lines, and looked out over his troops approvingly. The Horde had a different energy than the Alliance, she mused, though it was clear that they knew the business of war well. A shared, primal sense of bloodlust hummed throughout the group, and despite herself, Auriana felt her own blood surge in response.

"Soldiers of da Horde!" Zala'din yelled suddenly, raising his gauntleted fist high. "Today we claim Tanaan in da name of da Warchief! Azeroth will not fall ta da Iron Horde while we stand strong!"

His eyes narrowed, and he let out a bestial roar. The Horde answered him with wild howls of their own, and Auriana found herself adding her own fierce voice to the war cry. The flashing lightning and crashing thunder only served to fuel the rage of the Horde war machine, and Auriana couldn't help but to be swept up in the incomparable thrill of war.

"I want ya ta make 'em bleed," Zala'din growled darkly. "Move out."

The Horde war band trekked through the dense jungle for what seemed like hours as they hunted the Iron Horde, their weapons free against the first sign of trouble. The rain was still falling heavily as the soldiers beat a path through the thick foliage, and Auriana was soon caked in mud up to her knees. The looming thunderclouds leant an ominous air to the already oppressive jungle, and it was hard to see more than a few feet ahead. Auriana stayed close to Zala'din, trusting the natural surefootedness of the jungle troll more than her own feet. It also helped that his bright mane of hair was easy to see, even in the darkness, and she found it relatively easy to navigate the maze snarling vines and fallen trees so long as she followed in his footsteps.

Auriana was rapidly growing frustrated with the lack of action when there came a sudden whistle from far to the west, followed by an answering call from somewhere else in the war band. She wasn't familiar with the specific war calls of the Horde, but she knew enough to know a scouting cry when she heard one. It appeared that the forward scouts had made contact with the Iron Horde, and the battle was liable to begin at any moment.

About damn time… she thought, reaching for her magic in readiness for the fight, but stopping just shy of truly summoning her power.

As a result of her torture in Blackrock Foundry, it was now rather unfortunately obvious whenever Auriana was preparing to cast, thanks to the magical scars burned into the pale skin of her arms. In the dark forest, the bright glow of her power would be particularly visible, and she had no desire to give away her position unless absolutely necessary, and so she held herself ever so slightly back as she awaited the signal to engage.

Another whistle pierced the jungle, sounding far more urgent this time, and Zala'din stilled. He raised a hand, calling the war band to a halt, and his long ears twitched as he listened for any further warnings from his scouts. Auriana, too, strained with all her senses, but with her damaged hearing she couldn't hear much beyond the crash of thunder and the heavy patter of rain on leaves.

Zala'din abruptly tensed, and a second later the jungle practically came alive with warriors of the
Iron Horde. Auriana was forced to duck as a monstrous sword came flying towards her head, only to punish the attacking orc immediately with a devastating frostbolt. The Horde roared as they raced to meet the challenge, and soon the entire jungle had exploded with the sounds of steel on steel and screaming orcs.

Auriana fought back to back with Zala'din, effortlessly bringing down orc after orc with her relentless magic. Despite everything that the war in Draenor had cost her, Auriana had to admit that this was where she was born to be, and she allowed herself to fall into the familiar and strangely comforting rhythm of the fight. She may have been soaking wet, covered in blood and mud and Light knew what else, but right then, there was nowhere else in the world that she would have rather been.

Unfortunately, Auriana's battle reverie was cut short as she suddenly heard an eerie, high-pitched shriek wail through the jungle. For a second, she was thrown, until she remembered that she had heard such a sound once before, on the deck of Varian's Blade right before the ship had been sunk.

"Zala'din!" Auriana shouted, point to the west. "Cannons!"

Zala'din cursed in Zandali, and immediately ordered his troops to destroyed the Iron Horde war machines as soon as possible. Unfortunately, the cannons were well defended, and would likely be able to do significant damage to the war band before they were disabled.

As if the Iron Horde had read her mind, a second shrieking iron star struck a tree few feet to Auriana's right, splintering right through the thick trunk like it was nothing. Auriana flinched away to protect her vulnerable head and hands from splinters, only to feel the sudden press of cool plate against her back as Zala'din shielded her with his own body.

"Can ya do anythin' about dem cannons?" he rasped, his mouth close to her ear.

"Not from here," she told him, her mind racing with possibilities. "But I think I have a way to protect your men while they get close."

"Alright, little lion," Zala'din agreed, casually slaughtering a nearby orc as he spoke. "Do what ya gotta do."

Auriana nodded darkly and drew on even more of her power, the strength of her magic burning through the darkened jungle like a bolt of lightning from above. She turned her eyes skywards, trusting Zala'din to provide her with protection as she wrought her spells, and focused on the nearest incoming projectile. She focused her attention sharply and let out a slow breath, then called upon the powers of the arcane to simply unmake the weapon, reducing it to nothing more than its base components.

It was a spell she had seen Khadgar once before, during the initial rush through the Dark Portal and into Draenor, and while she had never tried to cast such magic before, her raw power was enough to overcome her lack of finesse. The flying iron star came apart at her command, shattering apart into harmless chunks of iron, before raining down through the jungle canopy. It wasn't a perfect solution by any means, and she couldn't hope to catch every single artillery blast aimed at the Horde, but it was far better than nothing.

Somewhat surprised at her success, Auriana grit her teeth determinedly as she turned her power on the next iron star, and the next, shredding them out of the sky with as much speed as she could muster. Unfortunately, the spell required the use of arcane magic, and Auriana was far weaker with the arcane than she was with either fire or frost. Keeping the Horde protected from the spheres of flame and death flying overhead was immensely taxing, and after barely half an hour of spell work,
Auriana began to feel her magical reserves begin to falter.

"I can't do this forever, Zal!" Auriana hollered, hoping that the troll Commander could hear her over the roaring din of battle.

"Hold on!" he shouted back, all the while fighting off any orcs that dared to come within range of his slashing swords. "Dey're close, dey just need a little more time!"

Auriana winced in pain and irritation, but nodded grimly and continued to pull the iron stars from the sky. Her rate of casting had slowed significantly, but the less iron stars that fell, the better, and she bit her lip doggedly as the Horde closed in on the artillery lines. Her spells quickly began to blur into one another, and Auriana felt oddly removed from the passage of time as she lost herself in the endless stream of her own magic.

Eventually, however, she saw a sudden burst of fire blaze between the trees, followed by a second, then a third, and with great sigh of relief she realised that the Horde had finally reached the cannons and destroyed them.

"Ha!" Zala'din bellowed excitedly. "Artillery's done for! Soldiers of da Horde, fight on!"

A great rallying cry answered his words, and Auriana watched in a mild daze as the Horde pressed further into the jungle. For her part, however, she simply remained still, swaying slightly as Zala'din moved up to stand behind her.

"Nice work, little lion," he said. "Dat's gonna make our job here a lot easier."

Auriana nodded vaguely, only to feel her knees buckle as she was overcome by a wave of dizziness. She fell to her hands and knees on the soft jungle floor, and belatedly realised that her nose was bleeding rather heavily from the strain.

"Healer!" Zala'din shouted, crouching down in the mud beside her so that they were eye to eye. "Ta me!"

A young tauren druid rushed over immediately, carefully laying her hands on Auriana's head and back without a second thought. In battle, it seemed, there was no time to quibble over whether or not a human deserved healing, and Auriana soon felt the nourishing rush of druidic magic flow through her. It wouldn't be enough to fully replenish her deepest reserves of magical energy, of course – only time could do that – but it would keep her up and fighting for the rest of the day.

"Thank you," Auriana said sincerely, to both the tauren druid and to Zala'din himself. She accepted the troll's hand as she clambered back to her feet, and turned her gaze to the west. Although the jungle made it difficult to see, she could tell that the Horde were widely scattered, fighting isolated skirmishes here and there amongst the trees.

"With dem damn machines down, we can press da fight further in," Zala'din said. "Da Iron Horde seem to be fallin' back towards the centre."

"I suppose we better follow them then," Auriana said, elbowing him in a comradely fashion. "Come on."

Together, she and Zala'din strode swiftly into the jungle, mercilessly cutting down any resistance they faced. Auriana enjoyed fighting with warriors, perhaps even more than she enjoyed fighting with other mages, preferring as she did the aggressive, straightforward approach of a melee fighter to the more protective and passive style of combat often favoured by her magical brethren.
As they moved into a large clearing, however, Auriana abruptly stopped, something to the south having caught her eye. Zala'din nearly ran straight up the back of her heels, and hopped awkwardly as he tried to avoid knocking her over.

"What's wrong?" he asked, raising his blades defensively as he followed her line of sight.

"You have got to be kidding me," Auriana breathed. "I know that orc."

"Da big, dumb lookin' one with da hammer?" Zala'din asked. "How?"

"His name is Borak Crushfist," she snarled, her eyes narrowing. "And... well, long story short, he broke my leg, and he nearly killed Varian."

"I know dat look," Zala'din said warily. "Ya gonna do something stupid, little lion?"

"No," she said calmly, "I'm going to do something fun."

Auriana gathered her magic and began to move in Crushfist's direction, heedless of the battle raging all around her. She distinctly heard Zala'din sigh in what might have been exasperation, but he nevertheless followed hot on her heels as she closed in on her prey.

Crushfist was right in the thick of it, swinging his massive hammer back and forth with savage abandon. The head of the great weapon was covered in blood and gore, and it was clear from the array of dead bodies at his feet that he had been having great success in the battle so far.

_Not for much longer_, Auriana thought grimly, squeezing her hands into fists.

"Crushfist!" she roared, magically enhancing her voice so that it drowned out both the sounds of fighting and the pouring rain.

She had come to a stop about thirty feet away from him, and the orc's head whipped around violently at the sound of her voice. His heavy chest was bare and covered with gruesome black tattoos, and his muscles glistened in the rain. One of his allies moved to intercept Auriana, but the Crushfist waved his subordinate off. He took several steps towards her through the mud, his face twisted into an ugly scowl.

"You..." the monstrous orc hissed, his eyes widening with savage glee. "I know you."

Zala'din moved up behind Auriana and rested his arm on her left shoulder, champing his tusks thoughtfully.

"He appears ta have remembered ya too, little lion," the troll mused, his tone so casual as to be almost lazy.

"I know you," Crushfist repeated, his thick fingers tightening eagerly on his hammer. "You're Varian Wrynn's bitch."

"I have a name, you know," Auriana said drily, rolling her eyes.

"Why do you think that I would care?" Crushfist snarled, spitting on the ground at his feet.

"Orcs dese days," Zala'din said, ignoring Crushfist with extreme disdain. "No manners."

"I know," Auriana said, deliberately playing along. "No common courtesy."

Orcs were not especially known for their even tempers, and Auriana knew that her banter with
Zala'din would likely infuriate the bloodthirsty Crushfist. She was tired, magically speaking, and of course Crushfist had the clear advantage when it came to sheer physical size and strength. While rage would make him stronger, it would also make him hasty and stupid, and Auriana had a lifetime of experience taking advantage of hasty and stupid opponents.

"Will you stop blathering?" Crushfist snapped. "I've known newly whelped wolf pups to whine less than you two."

The massive orc gnashed his teeth in frustration, and shifted his weight furiously from foot to foot. He puffed his chest out, trying to stand as tall and as wide as possible, but Auriana responded to his display with about as much concern as she would show a fly.

"Was that supposed to be intimidating?" she asked lightly. "You're about as frightening as a mudback calf."

"Blood and ashes you've got a smart mouth," Crushfist growled. "It's about damn time someone put a muzzle on you, you little bitch."

"Blackhand tried. Ask him how that turned out," Auriana retorted coldly. "Now, Crushfist, do you want to fight, or shall I take this up with your mother instead? At least she might be able to provide me with some entertainment before I killed her."

The orc bellowed in fury, and crashed his hammer into the ground in front of him, kicking up a spray of mud and water. He looked positively unhinged, the blood on his hands and the dark thunderclouds overhead only serving to add to the effect.

"Ya need my help?" Zala'din asked quietly. "Ya did collapse earlier, ya know, and ya had a rough time yesterday."

"No," Auriana said determinedly, her eyes flaring as she gathered her power close. "This one's all mine. Just keep the rest of them off me."

"Suit yaself, little lion," he replied. "Spirits be with ya."

He stared at Crushfist with cold eyes, but stepped back to allow Auriana her fight. It seemed that the orcs around Crushfist, too, understood that this was single combat, and had moved off to leave the orc warrior and the human mage room to settle their mutual grudge.

Crushfist beat a hand against his breast, and charged her without any need for further provocation. Auriana held her ground, and she saw a glimmer of surprise flicker in the orc's eyes when she failed to flinch before his charge. At the last second, she flicked her wrists, and the mud beneath Crushfist's feet became a slick of ice. He fell heavily on his backside, howling in fury as he slid clear past Auriana and crashed into the base of a tree.

Auriana laughed coldly, not because it was especially funny, but rather because she knew it would enrage the orc even further. As he came on once more, she tormented him with powerful blasts of frost, tripping up his feet and driving him into a further frenzy. She knew full well that he was being reckless, given her weariness, but her desire to punish and humiliate Crushfist was overriding her common sense.

It was clear that Crushfist had some experience in fighting casters, most likely warlocks, but he was still easy prey for Auriana's vicious magic. Try as he might, he could not reach Auriana through the storm of snow and ice that she sent in his direction, and she allowed herself a small smile of satisfaction as the orc beat furiously at the ice that ensnared his legs.
Abruptly, however, his left hand suddenly whipped out like lightning, and Auriana only narrowly managed to duck beneath the orcish hunting dagger that came flying at her head. Crushfist used her distraction to rush forwards, drawing back his hammer in a wild swing that would undoubtedly kill her were it to make contact.

Startled, Auriana blinked sideways, but weakened as she was by her earlier efforts in protecting the Horde, she cast the spell as second too late. She screamed as Crushfist's hammer dealt a glancing blow across her rib cage, and she was sent flying into the air. Carried by both the force of the hammer and the power of her spell, she landed and rolled painfully across the jungle floor, before finally coming to rest a good eighty feet from where she had started.

Crushfist roared in satisfaction at having brought her down, and hefted the heavy weapon gleefully as he began to close the distance between them. He walked slowly, savouring the moment, and from the look in his eyes it was abundantly clear that he had no intention of giving her a swift death.

"Got to get rid of that hammer..." Auriana thought grimly.

She dragged herself to one knee, doggedly ignoring the pain in her side, and focused not on Crushfist himself, but rather on his weapon. She channelled a burst of molten flame into the hammer itself, heating the iron to such a degree that it made it impossible for Crushfist to maintain a grip with his ungloved hands. Howling in pain, he threw the weapon to one side, his eyes darkening with rage as he bore down upon her.

"Do you think I need a hammer to kill you; you insolent little witch?" he roared. "I will tear out your throat with my tusks, and rip your still-beating heart from your chest with my bare hands!"

"Promises, promises," Auriana hissed, hoping to bait him into another charge. "Come and get me."

She was drained and injured, but she'd still wager her smarts against that of an orc like Crushfist any day. Tapping into what remained of her magical reserves, she waited until Crushfist was mere feet away, before blinking away to reappear near the orc's discarded hammer. He howled in frustration as his charge was cut short, sliding wildly in the mud as he tried to match her superior manoeuvrability. He quickly gathered speed once more, however, and Auriana crouched low in anticipation of his attack. Her adrenaline hummed, as she knew very well that she would only get one shot, and her timing would have to be perfect.

Once again she was forced to wait until the orc was practically on top of her, but at the last second she twisted backwards to grab the war hammer with both hands. Letting out an incoherent war cry of her own, Auriana swung the weapon upwards in a smooth arc, directly at Crushfist's head. The hammer crashed into the orc's chin with fantastic force, and Auriana distinctly felt the precise moment that his jaw shattered beneath the power of the blow. The head of the weapon then continued further upwards, driving splinters of bone up into Crushfist's brain, and with an odd grunt of surprise, he collapsed into a pathetic heap on the ground before her.

Auriana let out a strangled gasp of relief at the orc's demise, and leant heavily on the stolen hammer as a crutch as she dragged herself upright. Her hands were shaking, both from effort and from cold, but despite the dull ache in her ribs, she was unable to deny the savage sense of triumph that rolled through her bones.

"Varian Wrynn sends his regards," she spat, staring down on Crushfist's corpse with an air of grim satisfaction.

For a moment longer, nothing existed save for Auriana and her fallen enemy, but the sounds of
battle raging on around her soon brought her back to reality. Dimly, she thought she heard someone call her name, but it was hard to tell amidst the all shouting, fighting, and the roaring rain. From what she could see, the Iron Horde had started to fall into a proper retreat, but they were still determined to claim as many lives as they could as they fled back to their fortress.

Auriana could no longer see Zala'din amongst the combatants, but she was confident that he was alive and still fighting, even without her help. While the troll couldn't hold a candle to Varian's skill, he was still one of the finer warriors that Auriana had fought alongside, and she knew it would take more than a few soldiers of the Iron Horde to take him down.

Moreover, right now Auriana had her own problems to contend with in the aftermath of the duel. Her ribs were almost certainly broken, and providing a defense against the Iron Horde artillery had severely taxed her reserves. Despite the fact that she doubted whether she would still have it in her to cast so much as a single spell more, however, Auriana itched to re-join the fight, even as her wiser mind urged her to fall back and seek healing.

She eventually decided to make a reluctant retreat to the Horde's auxiliary lines, where their healers would surely be waiting, when she was certain that she once again heard someone call her name. The shout was closer this time, and made with greater urgency, but Auriana couldn't see for the life of her who might be calling. At best, she could determine that the sound came from somewhere behind her and she turned, having time enough only to gasp in horror as a heavy iron mace came rushing towards her face.
Auriana

For the longest while Auriana saw nothing but black, and felt nothing but a dull tingling in her limbs. The sensation was strange, almost as if she were floating in a sea of endless night, and she warred against the urge to simply surrender to the current and drift away. She was tired, more tired than she had ever been in her life, and the temptation to sleep forever was almost overwhelming.

So overwhelming, in fact, that she might have surrendered to the darkness, if not for a dim and distant voice that echoed through the deepest parts of her subconscious.

*Get up! If you don't get up, you're going to die.*

The temptation of ceaseless nothingness was strong, but that small, stubborn voice was stronger, and she was pulled screaming back into reality. In a panic, she sat bolt upright, ignoring the dull ache in her ribs and the burning in her temples. Auriana blinked frantically as she tried to make sense of her surroundings, her still-waking mind unable to determine whether she was alive or dead.

She was not, as she might have suspected, lying on the floor of the jungle, but rather in a surprisingly comfortable bed roll beneath a large red tent. Her makeshift armour had been removed, along with her boots, and it seemed that someone had at least attempted to clean away the copious amounts of mud on her skin. It was also no longer raining, judging from the pale sunlight that filtered in from outside and leant a gentle orange glow to everything in sight.

Thoroughly confused, Auriana tried to struggle to her feet, when a pair of soft golden hands touched her shoulders, and gently pressed her back down to the floor.

"Careful," a cool voice said. "You took quite a knock to the head, I wouldn't be trying to stand just yet."

Auriana blinked once more and looked up, faintly recognising the blood elf priestess who had tended to her after her near-drowning during the invasion of Tanaan.

"I… where am I?" she asked faintly. "I'm not… dead?"

Her voice was hoarse and raspy, and she felt strangely nauseated, as if she had spun around in a circle several times in quick succession. It also seemed as if her pain was returning as rapidly as her awareness, and Auriana felt like a troll war drum was pounding right behind her eyes. She raised a hand to her throbbing temple, and was surprised to feel a thick swathe of antiseptic bandages covering most of her head.

"You're in the in the temporary infirmary in Vol'mar," the priestess said, her soft, lilting voice a stark contrast to the harsh grate of Auriana's own laboured words. "And you're very lucky to be alive."

"Vol'mar?" Auriana repeated, struggling to form the words. "I… I've never… heard of a place called Vol'mar… certainly not on Draenor."

"Unsurprising," the blood elf replied, "Considering it has only recently been founded. It is our new base of operations in Tanaan Jungle."

"Hold on…" Auriana said, certain she must have misheard. "A Horde base? How… how long have I been un… unconscious?"
"Four days. Our Commander was quite concerned," the blood elf said lightly, busying herself with checking Auriana's bandages.

"Four days? I've been... unconscious for four days?" Auriana repeated, hardly able to believe that she'd been injured so seriously. "What... what happened?"

Varian's going to have a fit, she thought dimly.

"You took a mace to the head. As I said, you're very lucky. It could have been a lot worse," the blood elf informed her primly. "You were only dealt a glancing blow. According to Commander Zala'din, if you'd been slower to dodge by another half a second, you'd be dead."

"I'd... I'd be dead...," Auriana repeated dully. "I suppose that... that explains the headache."

"Indeed it does," the priestess said, kneeling down at Auriana's bedside with impossible grace. "Here. Focus on my finger."

The blood elf then began to conduct a series of quick medical checks, checking Auriana's reflexes, her sensitivity to light, and her pulse, among other things. She seemed satisfied, if not precisely pleased with Auriana's condition, though she worked with an odd sense of irritability in her posture. Auriana supposed that the priestess might have been unhappy to have been forced to practice her craft on an Alliance Commander, though there was something else in her expression that Auriana couldn't quite place.

"What's your name?" she asked tentatively. "Zal... Zala'din didn't say."

The blood elf paused, her long, elegant eyebrows lifting slightly at the corners as her mouth drew into a thin line. She seemed suddenly nervous, as if by answering the simple question she might be giving too much away.

"Lialdra Dawnshadow," she said finally. "My name means 'clear water' in Thalassian."

"I'm Auriana. It means... ah... 'crowned in glory'. It's an old family name though... I don't... I don't know where it came from."

"I know who you are, Commander," Lialdra said stiffly, turning away under the pretence of organising her medical supplies. "You have a rather auspicious name. It carries high expectations."

"Well, it makes sense... if... if you knew my grandfather..." Auriana said vaguely.

Lialdra sighed, and shot a sidelong glance Auriana's direction. Once again, she had a strange look on her face, and it seemed to Auriana as if she were working very hard not to voice her thoughts out loud.

"I know that... healing a human must be... off-putting, at best," she said slowly, "But I am grateful. Really."

"I'm not bothered by the fact that you are human, Commander," Lialdra replied, her voice clipped. "I am a priestess of the Light, and would never turn away someone in need."

"Then why... are you looking at me as if I smell particularly foul?" Auriana asked bluntly.

Lialdra frowned, and looked nervously down at her long, slender fingers. Auriana hadn't spent much time around blood elves, but off all the peoples of the Horde, she wondered if the blood elves might be those she could understand best. The sin'dorei had long struggled with their well-known
racial addiction to magic, and Auriana knew better than most how it felt to crave the sweet embrace of the arcane. Every single time Auriana reached for her magic, there was the temptation to draw on more and more and never stop. It had only been worse since Blackrock Foundry, though her training with Jaina and Kalecgos had done much to help her control her longings. Auriana didn’t know what she’d done when she had broken Blackhand’s shackles, but she knew it had irrevocably changed her magic forever. It wasn’t something she had admitted to anyone, even Varian, afraid as she was of taking that one step over the line that would turn her from a dedicated servant of the Alliance into a monstrous enemy.

"I mean... I know I probably do, but…"

"I… I have healed many soldiers since the invasion," Lialdra said abruptly, though her back remained turned. "They tell stories. As I understand it, many of them are alive today because… because of you. You protected them as if they were your own."

"I'm here to ensure the safety of Azeroth," Auriana said carefully. "Besides which, your Commander saved me. It would be rather poor form if I were to repay the kindness he has shown me by allowing his troops to come to harm when it could be prevented."

Lialdra nodded, and finally moved to look Auriana straight in the eye. Her expression held the slight air of disdain common to all blood elves, but to Auriana's great surprise, she mostly looked contemplative.

"There are some who would still see you killed…" the priestess said slowly. "But I thought you should know that you have more friends amongst the Horde than you may realise."

As she finished speaking, she looked briefly over towards an unconscious male blood elf, and Auriana wondered whether she might have inadvertently saved a member of the priestess' family, or perhaps even a friend or lover.

"In any case," Lialdra said, her voice all business once again, "You really shouldn't be awake. You have a nasty concussion, Commander, and you still need rest."

"What I need is to find my people," Auriana said doggedly.

She tried to stand up, only to be overwhelmed by a wave of nausea that sent her falling back down to the floor.

"Our Commander has scouts searching for their encampment as we speak, but right now you need to rest," Lialdra said sternly. "He'll come for you in the morning, and see you safely back to the Alliance."

The priestess touched her soft hands to Auriana's cheek, and Auriana instantly felt her eyelids start to droop.

"Oh... don't… don't you try that sleep spell on me," she slurred, her muscles weakening as exhaustion threatened to overtake her. "I hate it... when priests... do that."

"Perhaps you should stop getting yourself injured, then," Lialdra suggested, with a very faint smile. "I've only attended to you twice and even I can see how much punishment your body has taken over the years. I can't imagine what you've put your own healers through."

"I like... I like to give them... a challenge..." Auriana managed, before the priestess' spell took full effect and she faded away into the black river of unconsciousness once more.
Under the influence of Lialdra's spell, Auriana fell into a deep and dreamless sleep, and it appeared to be mid-morning when she finally woke. Her head was still covered in bandages, but it seemed that the dull throbbing in her temples had subsided somewhat, and she found that she was able to sit up without too much difficulty. She quickly realised that she was still in the Horde infirmary, surrounded by a half-dozen other patients who all seemed to be unconscious. Lialdra was nowhere to be seen, but there were a pair of orc shaman tending to a tauren bull who had lost his entire right arm at the shoulder.

Auriana winced at the sight of the gruesome injury and shook her head sadly, immensely grateful that she had managed to escape the battle with nothing more than a bad concussion. She looked around for her boots, and had just begun to pull them on when the tent flap opened and Zala'din stepped inside.

His sharp red eyes found Auriana immediately, and he moved swiftly to stand beside her.

"Ya sure ya allowed ta get up, little lion?" he said lightly. "Ya lucky ta be alive, ya know."

"So everyone keeps telling me," Auriana muttered, persisting with her boots despite Zala'din's warning.

The troll chuckled drily, but Auriana could see genuine concern behind his eyes. He gave her a close and rather unsubtle inspection, and only offered to help her stand when he had satisfied himself that she was not on death's door. Auriana accepted his arm gratefully, trying to ignore the sudden wave of nausea that rolled over her as she rose to her feet. Zala'din held her arm tightly, allowing her time to gather her legs before releasing her from his iron grip. Auriana wavered slightly as he stepped back, but she grit her teeth and managed to stay standing through an act of sheer willpower.

"My scouts finally found da Alliance camp earlier dis mornin'," Zala'din told her. "I figured ya want ta get back to dem as soon as possible."

"Thank you," she said sincerely. "And not just for finding my people. For everything else, too. You could have left me to die. Twice, in fact."

Zala'din gave her a serious look, his red eyes narrowing thoughtfully as he stared down upon her.

"No," he said quietly. "I couldn't have."

He placed a gentle hand on Auriana's shoulder, and she nodded her understanding. Although she would never have believed it a year ago, she knew she could count the troll as one of her most loyal and steadfast allies.

"Come on," he added, holding open the tent flap so that she could step outside.

The morning sun burned brightly overhead, and Auriana had to blink several times before her eyes adjusted to the light and she was able to look around. Surprisingly, the Horde had been able to complete a significant amount of work in only five days, and Auriana couldn't help but to be impressed by their industriousness. What had clearly begun as a shanty town of tents had quickly grown into a properly fortified base of operations, from which the Horde would be able to launch assaults against Gul'Dan and the demonic forces that he now commanded.

"Welcome ta Vol'mar," Zala'din said proudly, looking out over his base with keen eyes. "Whatcha tink?"

"Your progress is remarkable," Auriana said honestly. "I can only hope that my men have been
"Well, if ya like it… ya welcome ta join da Horde," he suggested teasingly. "I could always use a woman of ya talents."

"Nice try," she replied, "But the Alliance already has claim over my 'talents'. And speaking of which… I really should be getting back to my command."

"Alright," Zalad'in conceded, "Have it ya way. But before ya leave… dere's something I tink ya need ta see."

Auriana frowned curiously, but followed the troll without question as he lead her through the bustling war camp and towards a newly constructed watch tower. Many Horde soldiers paused their work to watch her pass, but none of them made any comment. Zalad'in, as always, seemed entirely unconcerned by the attention, and he never even bothered to look sideways as he made his way to the top of the tower with Auriana in tow.

The watch post was staffed by a handful of orcs and trolls, all of whom carried enormous longbows, spyglasses, and signal flags. Zalad'in spoke quietly to one of the orcs, and after a brief discussion, he took the orc's spyglass and handed it over to Auriana.

"I wanna know whatcha make of dat," he said grimly, pointing to the west.

Auriana swung the spyglass in the direction that Zalad'in had indicated, and gasped as she looked out upon the ravaged landscape. The thick jungle abruptly gave way to a decimated plain of mud and iron, and Auriana could see where the land had been irreparably torn apart by great green scars of fel magic. At the centre of the destruction was a massive citadel, whose towering iron parapets had been all but consumed by thick tendrils of dark, demonic power.

Hesitantly, Auriana reached out towards the citadel with her power, and almost immediately wished that she hadn't. The foul, corruptive stench of fel magic was all over the jungle, and the horrific wrongness of it made Auriana's stomach churn violently. She staggered, head spinning, and it was only through the aid of Zalad'in's quick reflexes that she avoided tumbling off the side of the guard tower.

"What's wrong?" he asked quickly, holding both her arms by the elbows.

"Everything," Auriana said, trying to keep her voice from trembling as she released her magic. "Gul'Dan has wrought a great evil with his fel magic. And more than that… I don't think he's done. There's an incredible amount of power being drawn into that citadel. A warlock might be able to tell you more, but… whatever it is that he's using that kind of power for, it isn't good."

"All da more reason ta get ya back ta ya people as soon as possible," Zalad'in said seriously. "We need ta start preparin' a siege."

"Agreed," Auriana said, unable to tear her eyes from the monstrous damage inflicted by Gul'Dan. The feeling of fel magic clung to her skin, and Auriana knew it would be some time before she would be able to shake the sense of primal revulsion that had settled deep in her heart. Zalad'in let her stand in silence, and it was several long minutes before she gathered enough strength to look away. She had regained most of her balance, at least, and she was able to follow Zalad'in back down the stairs and outside.

"How's da head? Ya right ta walk?" he asked. "Da Alliance base is a bit of a way from here."
"I'm fine," Auriana said, more confidently than she actually felt. "Looking forwards to a bath, actually."

"Well, I wasn't gonna say anythin'…" Zala'din said slyly, raising an eyebrow.

Auriana snorted and shook her head, though even she had to admit that she probably smelled terrible. Zala'din grinned, and turned away to wave to two of his troll scouts. They responded instantly to his command, loping easily to his side and

"Auriana – dis be Zul'kaz and Tasiya… dey gonna take ya back ta da Alliance," he explained.

He then began to speak to the two scouts in rapid Zandali, punctuating his words with sharp hand gestures. Auriana didn't speak the troll language, save for a few choice swear words she'd learned from a troll mercenary in Uldum, and she had no idea what he was saying. Whatever it was seemed to be very serious, however, and both scouts looked almost intimidated by the vehemence of Zala'din's words.

"Little lion - keep in touch, will ya?" he said finally, turning his attention back to Auriana and switching to common. "I dun fancy goin' up against Gul'Dan alone, and we both know dat we're stronger together."

"I will," Auriana said sincerely. "I'll prepare the Alliance for a siege as soon as possible."

"Good," Zala'din said. "And try not ta lose ya head in da meantime."

"I know no-one seems to believe me, but I'm not actually trying to get myself killed," Auriana muttered.

"Sure ya aren't," he grinned sarcastically.

Auriana rolled her eyes, and turned away to follow the two troll scouts out into the jungle, keeping a wary eye out for any sign of Iron Horde activity. It was doubtful that the orcs would attempt anything so close to an enemy base, but it never hurt to be careful. The two scouts took similar care, each keeping their weapons free as they prowled swiftly through the jungle. Auriana had no idea how they kept track of direction in the endless sea of vines and lush foliage, but they moved through the jungle as if they had lived in Tanaan their entire lives.

Eventually, they lead her across a wide and well traversed path, and Auriana saw a glimpse of drab grey stone through the trees.

"Ya base is about another four hundred yards up dat way, mon," the taller of the two trolls said, pointing. "Dere are a few Iron Horde patrols about though, so I'd get dere real quick."

"Thank you," Auriana said gratefully. "Please tell your Commander that you performed your duties well."

"Ya welcome," the second troll said, with a strange jerk of her head. "We be leavin' now."

With nothing more than that blunt statement, the young troll turned and tapped her companion on the arm, and together they sprinted back into the jungle. They were consumed by the trees within moments, and Auriana was left feeling very alone. She knew where she needed to go now, however, and the familiar sight of Alliance stonework suffused her with new energy.

Auriana broke into a slow jog, and made her way eagerly up the small hill that lead towards the Alliance fort. She was so close now, and could think of nothing more than getting back to her
people, which was perhaps why she almost failed to notice when an arrow suddenly came flying towards her head from the direction of the Alliance base.

Startled, Auriana threw up a protective ward at the last second, and was able to send the shot bouncingly harmlessly off into the jungle. Gritting her teeth, she summoned her magic and quickly moved to take cover behind a large boulder in preparation for another attack. No more arrows were forthcoming, however, and after a minute she cautiously peeked over the top of the boulder.

"Hold your fire!" she cried angrily. "I'm a friendly!"

"Are ye blind, boy?" she heard a dwarf shouting. "That's… that's the Commander of Lunarfall! Ye'll be lucky she doesn't have your head!"

"I'm not taking any heads," Auriana yelled back. "I just want to enter the base without being shot, if you don't mind…"

"Don't mind 'im, Commander," the dwarvish voice called in reply. "He's a fresh 'un, straight from Stormwind. Ya perfectly safe to enter."

"I should hope so," Auriana said drily. "Thank you, Guardsman."

The dwarf raised a hand in acknowledgement, and Auriana saw him cuff the younger soldier up the back of the head as she made her way up the hill and beneath the great stone archway that protected the entrance to the Alliance base. More than one person shouted out a greeting as Auriana's presence became known, and several even went so far as to salute or pat her on the back. She found their concern genuinely touching, and was unable to stop herself from smiling with relief as she made her way towards the centre of the base.

Much like the Horde, the Alliance had been very successful in their attempt to establish a foothold in the forbidding Tanaan Jungle, and had been hard at work building up their defenses. Of course, it was abundantly clear that finishing the base would still take a fair bit of work, but the outer wall at least was complete, as was most of a large bunker at the centre of the base.

Auriana was just admiring the speed at which the Alliance had constructed their fortress, when two slender draenei women emerged from the main structure.

"Commander!" Yrel shouted, waving frantically in Auriana's direction. "Thank the Light!"

The draenei Exarch was accompanied by Lieutenant Hafela, and both women looked incredibly relieved to see that Auriana was alive. The expressions of concern they wore were almost identical, and Auriana had to smother a grin as they both hurried to her side. Yrel touched an urgent hand to Auriana's cheek, her luminous eyes wide as she checked for any sign of injury. Hafela was more restrained, showing due deference to standard military protocol, though it was clear that she, too, was greatly concerned about Auriana's wellbeing.

"We thought… we thought you were dead," Hafela said urgently, her elegant features marred by a deep scowl. "We've got scouts looking all over the jungle for you. Your bodyguard has barely slept since the invasion."

Auriana felt a surge of guilt, and she resolved to apologise to Ironfist and her other scouts personally.

"Please see to it that they're recalled," she ordered quietly. "I'll make sure they are commended for their hard work."
"You can't blame us for worrying, Commander," Yrel said, the slightest hint of reproach in her tone. "It's been five days, where on earth have you been?"

"Ah… it's a long story," Auriana replied. "One I'm happy to tell – on the condition I get to bathe first."

"You've been injured," the Exarch observed, sounding for all the world like Auriana's mother. "What are these bandages for? And why are you holding your ribs like that?"

"I was hit over the head by a mace and unconscious for five days," she explained quickly. "My ribs were also broken."

"How many more injuries do you think you're going to collect in this war, Commander?" Hafela asked incredulously. "I'm not sure if you're incredibly lucky, or incredibly unlucky."

"Let's be honest," Auriana said grimly, "It's probably a little of both. In this case, however, I was fortunate enough to receive good healing."

"From whom?" Yrel asked, looking confused.

"Ah… the Horde, actually," Auriana said.

"What?" Hafela demanded, exchanging another quick look with Yrel.

"I told you, it's a long story," Auriana said, shrugging. "Suffice to say I'm here now, and we need to hurry. Gul'Dan is doing terrible things in that Citadel of his, and the sooner we march on it, the better. Yrel, I'll need a full report on the battle at the Iron Front, and the current state of the draenei forces."

"I've already briefed your Lieutenant on the battle, but I had also prepared a written report in anticipation of your return," Yrel said smoothly.

"You prepared a report?" Auriana asked lightly, folding her arms across her chest and raising an eyebrow. "Even though you believed me dead?"

"All things are possible under the Light," the Exarch said serenely. "And for whatever reason, the Light seems to love you."

Her delicate facial appendages twitched, and Auriana realised that she was trying not to laugh. Hafela, too, seemed somewhat amused, and she hid her mouth behind her hand, trying very hard to maintain proper decorum. Once again, Auriana was strongly reminded that both women had been extremely troubled by her disappearance, and she was more than happy to permit their catharsis.

"I honestly don't know how you do it, Commander," Yrel added, once she had regained her composure. "You have a rather uncanny knack for avoiding death."

"Perhaps one day I'll have to teach you my secret," Auriana said drily. "Once I figure out what it is…"

Yrel smiled broadly, and for a brief moment it was if all the Light itself was shining down upon Tanaan Jungle.

"I'd like that, my friend," she said gently. "There will be time for that later, however…"

She looked across to Hafela, and a sudden flicker of nervousness crossed her features.
"What?" Auriana asked, putting her hands on her hips. "What's wrong?"

"I think it would be best if you were to return to Lunarfall as soon as possible," Yrel said cagily.

"Lunarfall? Why?" Auriana asked, thoroughly nonplussed. "Did something happen? Please tell me there wasn't another attack…"

"No, nothing like that, Commander…" Yrel said quickly, holding up both hands in a gesture of reassurance. "However…"

"The King of Stormwind is in Lunarfall," Hafela suddenly blurted. "He isn't… ah… happy."

Auriana winced and closed her eyes, knowing precisely how terrifying Varian could be when displeased. Varian was a protector, first and foremost, and she knew there wasn't much he wouldn't do for those he loved. He had, after all, made the journey to Draenor to rescue her from Blackhand's torture chamber, and she could only imagine how he might have reacted upon hearing that her ship had been destroyed and her body nowhere to be found.

"He's there for me," Auriana muttered, shaking her head. "Of course he is."

She looked up at Yrel and Hafela, and winced apologetically.

"I'm sorry," she said quietly. "I know how he can be."

"It's Lieutenant Thorn who caught the brunt of it, Commander," Hafela confessed. "If it weren't for her, I don't doubt that the King would be out here scouring the jungle for you."

"I'll be sure to thank her, then," Auriana said seriously. "Profusely."

She sighed, and ran a hand through her still-muddy hair.

"He's a king," she muttered, mostly to herself. "He should know better."

"Men will ever do strange things for the people they care about," Yrel said sagely.

Auriana frowned thunderously at the implication, but Yrel was not one to be cowed by a mere stare. The draenei met Auriana's gaze evenly, her beautiful face the picture of innocence, but she declined to elaborate on her enigmatic statement.

"Or their military commanders," Auriana growled pointedly, biting down her irritation at Yrel's gentle teasing.

"So it would seem," Yrel agreed, smiling slightly. "In any case, there is a portal open to Lunarfall near the main structure, at your earliest convenience."

"Thank you," Auriana said, more than happy to move the conversation away from talk of Varian. "Both of you. You've done excellent work in my absence, and I'm immensely grateful."

Yrel inclined her head warmly, before gracefully spinning on her heel and heading back towards the command bunker. She gestured for Hafela to follow, but the Lieutenant paused, looking down at Auriana with a strange expression.

"Hafela? Something wrong?"

"Commander… Auriana…" the draenei said, her iridescent eyes impossibly bright. "Just… I… I'm glad you're alive. We all are."
Hafela's gaze briefly flicked sideways, and it was only then that Auriana realised that nearly everyone within the camp was looking in their direction. Builders, merchants, the guards upon the wall – all were unashamedly staring back at her, and she was surprised to feel a powerful surge of emotion welling in her throat. Auriana had never sought power – quite the opposite – and in truth, she had rather fallen into her role as Commander of Lunarfall. She had always tried her best, of course, but it was a great comfort to know that despite her failings, her frequent aloofness, and her rage, that people still considered her a leader worth following.

"Me too, Lieutenant," she said softly, looking around with a fierce pride at the brave men and woman of the Alliance that she loved so dearly. "Me too."
Varian

Varian had tried to contain himself for as long as he could, but after barely a day of working himself into a frenzy over the lack of news surrounding Auriana's disappearance, he had made the journey to Lunarfall himself. His son, advisers, and generals had all cautioned him against making such a rash move, but Varian could no longer stand by and do nothing while Auriana remained lost.

Admittedly, there wasn't much he could actually do in Lunarfall, either, but it gave Varian some small sense of comfort to have made the journey. While the Alliance garrison had successfully re-established contact with their troops in Tanaan Jungle, Auriana was still nowhere to be found. Despite carrying the heavy responsibility of establishing a base in the middle of the Iron Horde territory, Lieutenant Hafela had sent out a number of search parties to find the wayward mage, but not a single search had been successful to date.

Each failed search was like a dagger in Varian's heart, and he began to dread the sealed missives that arrived at his temporary quarters in Lunarfall each morning and evening. Every piece of parchment that he added to his growing pile was another piece of evidence suggesting that Auriana was dead, and Varian found himself falling into a sullen depression. He had barely slept or eaten in days, and while he had genuinely tried, he had mostly done a poor job of hiding his displeasure from those around him.

As it stood, Lieutenant Thorn typically bore the brunt of his outbursts, and today was no exception. After waking up to receive word of yet another failed attempt to locate Auriana, Varian's temper finally boiled over, and he stormed downstairs to give Thorn a piece of his mind.

Of course, he knew full well that it wasn't the Lieutenant's fault, but Varian desperately needed an outlet for his feelings, and right now she was the only person he had. In the beginning, she had attempted to placate him with words of reason and comfort, but lately had abandoned her strategy in favour of stony silence. The worgen were a strong people, and knew much of fury, but even their ferocity paled in comparison to the rage of Lo'Gosh.

That morning, the young worgen stood before Varian as he once again subjected her to a pointless tirade. She listened patiently as he rehashed the same tired arguments; showing her discomfort only in the way that she held her long ears flat against her head.

"Do you see her? Has she somehow magically returned while we've been talking?" Varian roared, stabbing a finger violently in Thorn's direction. "I don't care how many men you have out there, it obviously isn't enough! Whatever it takes, you will tear that jungle apart until you find her! I..."

He cut off abruptly as Lieutenant Thorn's ears suddenly pricked, and her level gaze shifted to a point over Varian's left shoulder.

"What is it?" he demanded, thrown by the abrupt change in the worgen's expression.

"Ah… Your Majesty… sir…" she stammered, speaking for the first time since Varian had started shouting, "You might want to turn around."

Varian froze, his breath catching in his throat as he fought down competing waves of wild hope and suffocating terror. He was almost too afraid to look around, afraid as he was of seeing Auriana's corpse brought before him, but in the end his desperation and curiosity won out over his fear. He turned slowly, and his heart stopped in his chest as his gaze fell upon his beloved young
mage standing nervously in the doorway. Worryingly, her head was covered in bandages, and she looked as if she had been rolling around in a mud pit, but she was *here*, right in front of him, and she was *alive*.

His mouth opened and closed a few times wordlessly as he was rendered utterly speechless by her sudden presence, and his legs felt made of lead. Auriana, too, seemed similarly dumbstruck, and for what seemed like an eternity they simply stood, staring at one another without blinking.

Eventually, Varian recovered enough of himself to regain control of his traitorous limbs, and he crossed the room in four swift steps. He didn't care one whit that he was surrounded by half a dozen guards, nor that Lieutenant Thorn was watching. All that mattered was having Auriana back in his arms, and the moment he reached her side he pulled her close and held her as if he would never, ever let her go.

Surprisingly, she returned his embrace with equal intensity, pressing herself as close to him as physically possible and knotting her hands in the fur lining of his armour. She was trembling violently, and Varian closed his hand around the back of her neck so that he might feel her precious, fluttering pulse beneath his fingertips.

"I thought you were dead," he whispered raggedly, as he buried his face in her hair. "I… oh, Light, Auri, I thought you were dead."

He didn't know how long they actually stood there, but he felt as if he could hold Auriana for years before his need to touch her was fully satisfied. Eventually, however, a surreptitious cough from one of his guards pulled him back to reality and he was strongly reminded that they were not alone.

"Auriana… Commander… you… you smell awful," he said, stepping awkwardly away from her and blurtting out the first thing that came to mind. "Where on earth have you been?"

"It's something of a long story, Your Majesty," she said carefully, shooting a nervous sideways glance at the guards, as if she too had just remembered that they were there. "I'd appreciate the opportunity to clean up before I make my report. Perhaps you could wait in my study while I complete my ablutions, and then we could talk?"

"Agreed, Commander," he said quickly, willing to give her just about anything within his power if it meant that he could get her alone.

Auriana nodded gratefully, and she stepped sideways to smile tiredly at Lieutenant Thorn. The worgen woman was standing to sharp attention, and she looked happier than Varian had ever seen her.

"I'll return to brief you after I've spoken to the King," Auriana said quietly. "If that's alright."

"Of course, ma'am," Thorn said, her relief clearly visible in every line of her face. "I hope it's not too forward… but… we… I… I'm glad that you're home safe."

"As am I," Auriana said lightly. "Thank you, Thorn."

"Please remain here," Varian ordered his guards, as he gently ushered Auriana from the room. "And see to it that the Commander and I are not disturbed under any circumstances."

Both his guardsmen and Lieutenant Thorn nodded sharply, and Varian made a mental note to offer them all a sincere apology before he returned to Stormwind. Right now, however, his immediate concern was to attend to the woman he loved, and he hovered anxiously on Auriana's heels as they made their way upstairs to the privacy of her chambers.
Varian locked the door behind him as he and Auriana walked into the small antechamber adjoining her bedroom. She moved immediately to rest up against the table in the middle of the room, and flinched as she touched a shaking hand to her side. It was a small gesture, but it was enough to cause something inside Varian to break, and all the pain and fear and rage that he had felt over the last week welled up uncontrollably within his heart.

"I thought you were dead, Auriana," he whispered bitterly. "I thought… do you have any idea what that's like for me?"

"I'm sorry," she said quickly, her face ashen. "I know how you must feel, I…"

"Do you? Do you really?" he demanded. "Because it seems to me that if you understood you would have made an effort to contact Lunarfall, to let me know you were still alive."

Varian swept across the room so that they were standing toe to toe; not sure if he wanted to kiss her, throttle her, or both. He loomed over her, taking her by the shoulders with a dangerous intensity, and she wilted slightly beneath the power of his gaze.

"I'm so sorry," she stammered, her eyes huge. "I didn't mean to make you angry, I…"

"Angry? Angry?" he repeated. "I... I'm not angry."

The vulnerability of her position suddenly hit Varian like a bolt of lightning, and his ears burned hot with shame. In a moment when she most needed his love, he had shown her nothing but his terror-born wrath, and he desperately fought to bite down the turbulent swell of his darker emotions.

"I was afraid," he admitted softly, tentatively opening his arms so that she might step into his embrace once more. "I thought I'd never see you again."

"I would have returned sooner," Auriana said quietly, pressing both her small hands against his chest. "But there were complications."

"You were injured," Varian observed, touching her bandaged forehead with great care.

"Yes, I was," she said thickly. "I was unconscious for several days. In truth, I would have been dead if not for the Horde. They saved my life."

"The Horde?" Varian demanded, his stomach twisting painfully at the thought of Auriana's death. "Were they holding you prisoner? After everything you've done for them?"

"I was there willingly," she said. "I promise you, they did me no harm."

"Willingly?" he repeated. "I… I don't understand."

"Please, Varian," she murmured. "I'm exhausted. I'm filthy, and I hurt. If you let me bathe, I will tell you everything, I promise."

A slight note of pleading had entered her voice, and Varian realised that he had failed her for the second time in as many minutes. Auriana had maintained an air of quiet confidence and poise in front of Thorn and the royal guards, but in the privacy of her own chambers, her facade had all but fallen away. Varian finally realised how pale and drawn she looked, and he could now see a noticeable slump in her shoulders.

"Of course," he mumbled, his protective instincts surging wildly. "I… of course. Here."
Varian placed a gentle hand against the small of her back, and carefully guided her towards her small bathchamber. Auriana stripped down to her underwear almost immediately, tossing her muddy boots and clothes into the corner of the room with obvious relish. She also removed the bandage wrapped around her head, and Varian winced as he noted the stark red wound along her hairline, as well as the line of black bruises along her ribs.

Auriana raised an eyebrow as she followed the line of his gaze, and she shook her head warningly.

"Don't," she said tiredly. "Please."

"I wasn't going to say anything…" Varian protested, knowing perfectly well that he was lying.

"Sure you weren't," Auriana said drily, a very small smile playing at the corner of her lips.

She turned away and began to fill her deep bathtub with scalding hot water, before gingerly removing her undergarments so that she stood slender and naked in the cool air. Her bare back was a mess of various small cuts and bruises, and Varian found himself once again struggling to contain his fury. While he was grateful beyond belief to have Auriana back alive, every bruise and cut upon her pale skin was a stinging reminder of his failure to keep her safe. He was no fool, and he knew that injuries were a necessary consequence of her chosen line of work, but at the same time he couldn't help but wonder if she would have suffered so badly if he had been there at her side.

Nevertheless, he chose to heed Auriana’s earlier warning, and firmly bit his tongue. More as a means of distraction than anything else, he decided to remove some of his own clothing, and quickly pulled off his heavy armour and boots to reveal his pants and loose shirt beneath.

Once the water level was sufficiently high, Varian offered Auriana a hand so that she might clamber into the tub, before taking a seat of his own on a nearby bath stool. Auriana let out a long sigh as she lowered herself beneath the water, closing her eyes as she allowed the heat to soothe away her aches and pains. Headless of his gaze, she lay down so she was fully submerged, her inky hair fanning out around her neck and shoulders like a shroud. In fact, her entire pose – eyes closed, hands folded across her belly – looked rather funereal, and Varian was rather relieved when she finally sat up and reached out to grasp a small glass bottle of hair cleanser that had been balanced on the edge of the tub.

"Let me," he offered, gently prising it from her hands and removing the stopper.

Auriana frowned slightly, but didn't resist, and soon she was putty beneath his hands as he slowly massaged her scalp with his thumbs and worked the tangles knotted throughout the length of her dark locks.

"Where'd you learn to wash women's hair?" she murmured vaguely. "You're better than the barbershop in the Trade District, that's for sure."

"What, you think my lustrous mane stays like this all on its own?" he teased gently, hoping to break some of the stiff tension that had arisen between them.

"Lustrous?" she repeated. "I'm sorry… did the great and powerful Varian Wrynn just suggest that he has womanly hair?"

"I don't think that's what I said," Varian grumbled, though he was secretly pleased to hear a sudden lightness in her voice.

"I think that's exactly what you said…"
"Hush," he said firmly, kissing her on the forehead. "You've got a bad head wound, you don't know what you heard…"

As Varian had hoped, his comment was enough to make Auriana laugh, and soon her brief snort of amusement had turned into a full-blown fit of giggles. Her slim shoulders shook uncontrollably, and her nose crinkled in the way that Varian absolutely adored.

After a while, however, her giggles began to sound strangely choked, and Varian realised that quiet tears were slowly tracking down her face. He ceased working on her hair immediately, and gently turned her by the chin so that he could better see her face. It may have been an old-fashioned sentiment, but Varian absolutely hated to see a woman cry, especially one he cared about, and it left him feeling unusually powerless.

"Auriana…" he murmured, gently cupping her cheek. "I… what's wrong? I'm sorry if I frightened you earlier, I wasn't thinking, I…"

"I'm sorry," she sniffled, rubbing her eyes. "I guess I'm more relieved to be home than I thought."

She gave him a shaky smile, and placed her small hand over his own.

"Sorry," she repeated. "I know you don't like watching me cry."

"Don't apologise," Varian said roughly. "I'm glad to have you back in Lunarfall, too. More than I could ever say."

"You misunderstand me," she whispered. "Lunarfall isn't home. You are."

Varian growled low in his throat, and the temptation to kiss her became overwhelming. He pulled her towards him, taking special care of her damaged ribs, and practically lifted her out of the tub as he embraced her passionately. Her breasts pressed against the thin cotton of his shirt, soaking it clean through, but Varian didn't care. The moment his lips met hers, the rest of the world fell away, and there was nothing but Auriana. There was no Alliance, no Horde, no war – just her, and the intoxicating press of her mouth on his.

"You're getting water everywhere," she mumbled, panting slightly as they broke apart.

Varian looked down, and realised that he had, in fact, splashed half the tub out all over the floor of the bathchamber, and cocked his head ruefully.

"Sorry," he said, though he rather felt that a wet floor was a small price to pay for a kiss like that. "But you should get out anyway. You're shivering."

Auriana nodded, and ducked her head back beneath the water to rinse the soap from her hair. With the aid of Varian's arm, she then gingerly stepped out of the tub, wincing slightly as her feet hit the floor. Varian frowned and placed a gentle hand on her shoulder, but she shrugged him off with a weary grin.

"I'm fine," she assured him. "Go sit down, I'm not the only one who looks exhausted."

"I haven't been sleeping very much lately," Varian admitted, reluctantly stepping out of the small bathchamber to take a seat on the edge of Auriana's bed.

"I figured as much," she said lightly.

Varian had made sure to leave the door open, and he watched Auriana like a hawk as she towed
herself dry and painfully shrugged her shoulders into a long silk nightgown. Now that she was back, he had no intention of letting her out of his sight; or at least not until he was completely satisfied that she would be alright. Varian knew that Auriana was extraordinarily fierce and strong, but she was not invincible, and there was only so much punishment one person could take before they broke.

Finally, she tied her nightgown loosely around her waist, before moving to lean her slender frame up against the thick oak of the bathchamber door.

"So," she said, crossing her arms over her chest. "Would you like to know what happened?"

"Please," Varian insisted.

He would have preferred that Auriana take a seat by his side, but he knew from experience that sitting with broken ribs could be very uncomfortable, and he couldn't begrudge her standing in the least.

"We sailed from Lunarfall without incident, and our allies in the Horde arrived as promised," she started. "I thought we would be able to land with little resistance... but they knew we were coming. They had boarding parties... and... artillery. Maybe I should have known... should have done something... but we weren't prepared to face that kind of machinery."

She paused briefly, and the sorrow behind her eyes tore at Varian's heartstrings. He knew how much Auriana absolutely hated to lose her men, and how she kept all their names and faces locked away in a vault deep within her heart. It pained him greatly to see her sadness, but he knew she was strong, and would have continued to fight on in their honour.

"Anyway," she said, shaking her head slightly, "When I realised my flagship was being targeted, I teleported my men away to the safety of the nearest destroyer. Unfortunately, I was too slow to save myself, and I was on board when it was hit. I fell down into the powder magazine."

"Never an excellent idea when your ship is on fire," Varian commented drily.

"No, it isn't," she replied, the corner of her mouth twitching. "I knew I had to leave, and so I cast a quick teleport. As you know, however, casting teleports under time pressure and with no particular destination can be... problematic."

Varian snorted, remembering back to his own disastrous trip to Tanaan Jungle.

"Failed teleports aren't all that bad," he pointed out. "I might have never gotten to know you otherwise."

"Tanaan with you would have been preferable," she said wryly. "This time, however, I ended up in the middle of the ocean. I had to remove my armour to keep from drowning, when some damn orc showed up and decided that he'd try to finish the job."

"That explains the pieces of armour that your men found," Varian realised.

"They recovered some of my armour?" Auriana asked, seeming genuinely surprised. "No wonder you thought I was dead."

Varian scowled darkly at the casual way with which she referred to her own possible demise, and was forced once again to bite back a pointed comment.

"Ah... in any case," she said quickly, clearly noticing the look in Varian's face, "I managed to kill
him with my knife, but there was so much blood in the water that it attracted some local wildlife. I managed to explode my new shark friend and get myself to a piece of driftwood, but after that I was spent. I must have passed out, because I don't remember anything until I woke up on the shore."

"Hold on a second… you exploded a shark?" Varian repeated, raising an eyebrow.

"What was I supposed to do? Ask it very nicely to leave me alone?" she protested. "Besides… isn't that why you like me? Because I'm a woman capable of exploding my own sharks?"

Auriana smiled shyly, and Varian couldn't help but to smile back. Her absence may have put him through hell over the last few days, but it was immensely comforting to see that she had survived with both her wit and her love for him intact.

"The next thing I remember, I was waking up with Commander Zala'din and one of his tauren standing over me," she continued. "They took me with them into the jungle, and offered me healing. After I woke up, I joined Zala'din's war council… and then… then I… sort of… well… I think I may have… slightly… joined the Horde."

She wasn't quite able to meet his eyes as she spoke, and with good reason. Although Varian had better learned to work with the Horde in recent years, he still clung to a deep and abiding mistrust of the savage war band, which Auriana knew full well.

"What do you mean, you joined the Horde?" Varian asked warily. "How does one slightly join the Horde?"

"Well…" she said nervously, "Zal… Zala'din trusts me, but his lieutenants didn't. One of the orcs suggested that I wasn't strong enough to have a voice in the Horde, and that I could only prove myself by participating in a traditional orcish initiation duel."

"So all five foot of you fought all seven foot of him? Without magic, I assume?" Varian sighed, unable to hide his weary exasperation this time. "Auri…"

"What?" she protested, her eyes widening innocently. "I won."

"That's not really the point," he growled. "You really have to stop picking fights with orcs."

"Says Varian Wrynn..." Auriana quipped, rolling her eyes.

"Well… I'm admittedly not the best role model…" he agreed reluctantly, "But that doesn't make you any better."

For a split second, Auriana's eyes blazed definitely, but she at least had the good grace to look somewhat abashed as she conceded the argument with a shrug.

"If you didn't like that, you're definitely not going to like the next part of the story," she said quietly, her gaze flicking downwards once more.

"I don't like any of this," Varian pointed out, folding his arms across his chest and affixing her with a stern glare. "But we've made it this far. Continue."

"As I said, I won. I doubt I'll be making friends within the Horde any time soon, but my willingness to honour their traditions and my demonstrable strength as a warrior gave me some measure of acceptance within the war band," Auriana said seriously. "I decided that it was best if I joined them in their assault the following morning."
"You could have returned to Lunarfall at that point," Varian observed stiffly.

"I could have, yes," she admitted. "But if I had, I would not have been able to easily return to my troops in Tanaan without knowing where they were. It could have been weeks before we established a foothold, and we both know I'm best at the front. I made a deal with Zala'din – I would fight for him, if he would help me find the Alliance."

Varian nodded to show that he understood her reasoning, though it didn't make him feel any better. It was a petty thing, but some dark part of his subconscious was angered by the fact that she had prioritised fighting on with the Horde over returning to Lunarfall – and him.

"Afterwards," she added tentatively, "I fought alongside Zala'din and his troops as they engaged the Iron Horde. I helped them disrupt another artillery line, and then I ran into an old friend of ours."

"An old friend?" Varian repeated, thoroughly confused by her phrasing.

"Borak Crushfist. The orc who hunted us in Tanaan; the one who broke my leg and nearly killed us both," she explained. "I defeated him in single combat."

"Is that when you acquired your head wound?"

"No. He was the one who broke my ribs. I was… possibly… a little overconfident," she confessed, tightening her arms protectively around her chest. "I won, but I had expended a lot of magic. I didn't see the blow that hit my head. The next thing I remember was waking up in the infirmary of the Horde's base of operations in Tanaan, and now… I'm here."

"By some minor miracle, from the sounds of it," Varian muttered. "You're far too reckless."

He had been talking mostly to himself, but he had spoken loud enough for her to hear. The subject of Auriana's recklessness was something of a sore point between them, and he knew she would respond poorly to the comment. As expected, her eyes narrowed, and she straightened her spine defensively.

"Has it ever occurred to you to have faith in me?" she said, her voice suddenly cold. "I don't just stumble blindly around out there, you know. I survive because I am smart and I am strong."

"I won't have this argument again, Auriana," Varian said warningly. "My concern has nothing to do with your abilities, as you know perfectly well."

He rose swiftly to his feet, trying not to let his hands shake as he stared her down. No matter how many times he made the point, Auriana never seemed to have grasped the depths of his fears for her, nor the scope of her own recklessness, and it chilled him to the bone.

"Do you know what I see, every time I close my eyes?" he asked, his voice deathly quiet. "I see all the people I've lost – the people I failed to protect. My father… Bolvar… Tiffin… do you think I want to add your name to that list? Do you think I want to see your cold corpse alongside theirs?"

"Of course not," she said, her voice wavering almost as much as Varian's own. "But I stand by my decision. Choosing to stay and fight was the best course of action I had at the time."

"Be that as it may… you are an Alliance commander, Auriana, and a damn good one," he argued. "You are not expendable. I'm not the only one who would suffer from your loss… which is perhaps why I'm not the only one who has been tearing my hair out around here for the last five days."
For some reason, his last words seemed to have struck a nerve, and Auriana's aggressive posture withered instantly.

"Have you really been here all that time?" she whispered, all the colour draining from her face.

Varian frowned, genuinely confused by the question, and cocked his head slightly to one side.

"Where else would I be?" he asked. "You're everything to me. Everything."

"I don't know. I… you and I… we're still a secret…" she stammered, looking nervously down at her feet. "And whatever else we are, you're still my king. You can't come chasing after me every time I get myself into trouble."

"What's the point of having a secret if you're dead?" he countered. "I can't lose you, Auriana. I just… can't. I won't."

Varian squeezed his eyes tightly shut, and all but collapsed back into a seated position on the bed. He sensed rather than heard Auriana move, and a moment later he felt the press of her cool skin upon his cheeks as she gently took his face in her hands.

"Varian… there is nothing and no one, on this world or any other, that can stop me from coming home to you," she murmured. "No matter what happens… I will always find you, I promise."

She took a final step forwards and kissed him desperately, and any lingering tension between them vanished the moment her lips found his. Varian let out a low growl as leaned longingly into her kiss, brushing aside a wayward strand of her hair as he began to slowly and tenderly explore her mouth.

As always, Auriana's kisses left him feeling breathless and lightheaded, and Varian almost suspected that he might have been dreaming when her hand trailed down the hard planes of his stomach to slip the laces of his pants. He drew in a sharp breath as her soft fingers brushed against the length of his manhood, and he instinctively shifted his hips to press closer into her hand. He grew hard almost instantly, but the part of his mind not entirely driven to distraction by her touch vaguely remembered that an arduous encounter was perhaps not the best idea.

"Oh, Light, Auri… you… you are injured… we… we shouldn't," he groaned, entirely surprised by her boldness, but she cut him off with a finger to his lips.

"I don't care," she murmured, planting soft kisses along the line of his neck and making him shiver.

"My guards are downstairs," he pointed out, though he knew he had as much chance of resisting Auriana's kisses as he would have of spontaneously growing wings.

"I don't care…" she repeated determinedly, never having been the kind of woman to take no for an answer. "I need you."

Her teeth grazed the skin of Varian's neck and he surrendered utterly, clutching feverishly for her hips as she moved to straddle him. Having now fully freed Varian's hardened length from the confines of his breeches, Auriana placed her hands on his shoulders for leverage as she lifted herself and over his lap. She then carefully positioned her knees on either side of his thighs, before finally lowering her weight with tantalising slowness.

Varian gasped as Auriana took him fully within her; his sudden movement causing her nightgown to shift from her left shoulder and fall away to reveal the generous curve of her breast. Varian growled at the sight of her, marveling at the masterful arch of her body and the seemingly
impossible luminosity of her dark blue eyes. Her skin was so soft as to put the silk of her nightgown to shame, and the powerful heat emanating from her core was enough to make him shudder uncontrollably with desire.

He cradled her close as she kissed him with breathtaking tenderness, and held her with the kind of reverence one might show a priceless artifact. Varian was a virile, libidinous man by nature, and he and Auriana had shared more than a few wild and lustful encounters. Today, however, was not about raw passion, but rather his deep and desperate need to possess Auriana entirely; to reassure himself that she was still alive, and still *his*.

Varian's eyes drank her in shamelessly, trying to commit every precious curve and plane to memory as she tormented him with every languorous movement of her hips. During his darker moments over the last few days, he had come to genuinely believe that she was dead, and the pain of her imagined loss had been staggering. Her love was sorely needed, and he couldn't get enough of the miraculous feel of her eager flesh pressed against his own, or the sensual way she sighed against his lips.

Gradually, Auriana began to increase her pace, raising and lowering her hips with a slowly burning sense of urgency. Each aching thrust was enough to make her moan, and her soft sounds of pleasure were like music to Varian's ears. He was more than happy to surrender full control, and simply buried his face in the curve of Auriana's neck as she made love to him with extraordinary sweetness.

At some point, Varian genuinely lost track of time, and his entire past, present, and future became Auriana. There was nothing in the whole world save for the two of them; nothing but the heady scent of her skin, the exquisite tightness of her sex, and the slow, fierce fire kindling deep in his belly. Auriana's breath now came in ragged gasps, and Varian knew her body well enough to know that she was rapidly approaching her release.

With a low growl, he began to meet Auriana thrust for thrust, wanting nothing more than to give his beautiful young mate the pleasure she deserved. He soon felt her back stiffen beneath his hands in response, and she sighed his name as a great shiver rolled down her spine. She clung to him desperately, and the feverish shaking of her body was more than enough to send him tumbling over the edge a moment after. So great was the strength with which he broke himself within her that Varian was forced to bite down hard on her shoulder to prevent himself from crying out, and for a single, perfect moment, everything was finally right with the world.

Varian held Auriana for a long time afterwards, and it was only with great reluctance that he finally loosened his needful grasp. Auriana seemed similarly loath to leave his embrace, and she lingered in his lap for quite a while before briefly disappearing back into the bath chamber. When she returned, her nightgown was no longer askew, and she had tied her damp tresses up into a loose braid. Varian, too, had made an attempt to tidy his appearance; retying his pants and smoothing down his tangled hair, and he hoped it would be enough to appear innocent before his guards.

Auriana returned to take a seat at his side, placing a gentle hand on his thigh and letting out a soft sigh. Her beautiful face had grown grave, though the uncomplicated joy of their lovemaking lingered somewhere deep within her eyes.

"You need to return to the front," Varian realised, struggling to keep his voice even.

"Yes. In truth, I only came back because I heard that there was an angry wolf terrifying my villagers," Auriana said quietly.
She gave him a sly sidelong glance, and a very faint smile crossed her face.

"Terrifying the villagers?" Varian scoffed. "Really?"

"You're quite scary when you get going, you know," she told him, though her voice was warm with affection. "There's a reason they call you Lo'Gosh."

"Oh?" he asked. "And why is that?"

"You're fierce… and strong… and you protect the people you love," she murmured, taking his hand in hers and punctuating each word with a soft kiss against his weathered knuckles. "Even… even the reckless, pigheaded ones."

Varian nodded in acceptance of her silent apology, and tightened his fingers around her small, pale hand. He had always marvelled at the way that they could say so much to one another in so few words; the bond between them now being nothing less than absolute. Auriana rested her head against his shoulder with a drawn out sigh, and for a long while they simply sat in silence and breathed one another in.

Their brief peace was not to last, however, and Varian felt Auriana's shoulders abruptly tense.

"It… it's worse than we thought," she said, her voice disturbingly ragged. "I felt it. I don't know what Gul'Dan is doing out there, but… it's bad, Varian."

"You sound afraid," he said, genuinely surprised. "You're never afraid of a fight."

"I'm afraid all the time," Auriana snorted. "I'm afraid of what will happen if we… if I lose this war. I'm afraid every time I see my soldiers step outside the walls of this garrison. I'm afraid for Azeroth… for Anduin… for you…"

"Be that as it may… what worries me is that you're never afraid for yourself," Varian said gently.

"I don't have time to be afraid for myself," she said wearily. "If I were, I don't think I'd be able to move. If I let myself think… I'd be back in Blackrock."

Varian's jaw tightened, and he placed his arm protectively around her shoulders.

"You don't have to win this war on your own," he told her gently. "After everything you've been through, after the Foundry… no one would think less of you if you walked away."

Auriana considered the question seriously, her forehead creasing slightly as she tried to find the right words.

"If I don't fight, who will?" she said slowly. "I fight because I can. I have the power to do what other people can't. If I didn't use that power… if our people came to harm because of my inaction… I don't think I could live with myself."

She shook her head, her brow still furrowed in deep concentration.

"You could have walked away, too, when you were Lo'Gosh. You could have chosen not to return to Stormwind and claim your throne. I know a part of you would have preferred Lo'Gosh's life, but you came back anyway," she reasoned. "You're not a king because of an accident of birth, you are a king because you chose to be one. To put your people ahead of yourself. You can't begrudge me for making the same choice."
"No. I suppose I can't," he agreed quietly.

"Azeroth… Azeroth needs us," she added, her keen eyes suddenly ablaze with determination. "Those who can fight must protect those who cannot."

Varian's chest swelled with a fierce pride, and he couldn't remember a time when he'd ever seen something more beautiful. He nodded his understanding, and he lifted Auriana's chin so that he might better see her face.

"If I could have any power in the world, I would have the ability to let you see yourself as I see you now," he murmured throatily. "Because I know you don't have the slightest idea how remarkable you are."

"Well, I don't know about that…" she said lightly, a soft blush spreading across her cheeks. "I was pretty pleased with myself when I exploded that shark."

Varian couldn't help but to let out a dry chuckle, and it was only then that he realised how infrequently he laughed when Auriana was away on Draenor. Her mere presence suffused him with the kind of energy he hadn't felt for years, and he had grown to despise the time they were forced to spend apart.

"Do me a favour?" he asked, rising to his feet and pulling her upright so that she stood with her head tucked in against her favourite spot in the crook of his shoulder.

"What kind of favour?"

"Come back to Stormwind tonight," he requested. "I know you have things to do here first, but… after…"

His voice was low and urgent, and he pressed his forehead longingly against hers. Having Auriana to himself for an afternoon was not at all enough, and he could not deny the powerful urge to keep her close for as long as possible. Varian quite simply needed her – needed to have her in his bed, needed to feel her curled up against his side, needed to watch her chest slowly rise and fall as she slept.

"Varian…"

"Please," he implored, pressing a kiss to the top of her head. "Just for the night. Don't make me beg."

Auriana let out another short sigh, and she lifted her head from Varian's chest to fix him with a penetrating stare. Her face softened as she pressed a hand to his heart, and she readily nodded her assent.

"I… of course," she murmured huskily. "I'm all yours, Varian. I'm always yours."
Auriana

As promised, Auriana returned to Stormwind later that evening to sleep close to her beloved King. Admittedly, there were few things she loved more than burying herself in the thick furs that lined Varian's bed and curling herself up against the warmth of his side, and she had perhaps needed less convincing than she had made out. Auriana was not usually one to indulge in luxury, but there was something so indescribably comforting about nestling into Varian's shoulder, and feeling the strong beat of his mighty heart thrum throughout her body as she drifted off to sleep.

Regrettably, the warmth and safety of Stormwind's Keep was now quite literally worlds away, as Auriana stood alone before the forbidding gates of Hellfire Citadel. It had been over a week since her reunion with Varian, and she hadn't returned to Stormwind since. Auriana's time had been utterly consumed by preparations for the assault on Gul'Dan's fel fortress, though her thoughts would inevitably turn towards the King whenever she had a moment to breathe.

Leaving Varian was always difficult, of course, but their most recent parting had been tainted by a strange undercurrent of foreboding. Auriana had stayed in Stormwind until late morning, finding it very hard to resist the allure of the soft blankets and Varian's warm embrace. It was only with great reluctance that she had finally crawled out of bed and dressed in preparation for her return to Draenor, feeling Varian's wolfish gaze upon her back the entire time. Auriana was more than familiar with the moods of the King of Stormwind, and she knew that he had been struggling mightily with the temptation to order her to stay.

"Not another lecture, please," she had warned him. "You know why I have to leave."

"I wasn't going to lecture you, Auri," Varian replied, though his eyes told a different story. "I may as well smack my head against a brick wall for all the good it would do. I just… I don't like it when you fight."

"That's a lie," she had murmured, taking his face in her hands.

His skin had been warm, as it always was, and he had leaned wistfully into her touch. It never ceased to amaze her how such a big and dangerous man could look at her with such tenderness, and she had felt her heart begin to race beneath the power of his stare.

"You love it when I fight. It's what makes me who I am," she reminded him gently. "What you don't like is when I lose."

Varian had frowned, and it was a long time before he finally spoke once more.

"Hmph," he had grunted, reverently closing his fingers around Auriana's throat and caressing her pale skin with a weathered thumb, "Then I suppose you'd better win…"

As she stood now before the gates of Hellfire Citadel, Auriana absently mimicked the King of Stormwind's final gesture, touching her hand to her own throat as if through imitation she might recall the warmth of his hands. There was no one else she would have rather fought alongside in the coming battle, but she knew all too well that he had his duty, as she had hers.

*I'll make you proud, Varian, Auriana thought grimly. I will protect our kingdom.*

A strong burst of wind caught her hair, and she shifted irritably beneath her new armour. The smiths of Lunarfall had worked hard to replace the armour that Auriana had so unceremoniously sacrificed during the invasion of Tanaan Jungle, but she couldn't seem to get comfortable. Her new
set was finely crafted, and it fit her like a glove, but it wasn't quite the same as her well-loved old set. The armour she wore now had been made for a commander of the Alliance, and she felt it far too new, too *shiny* and ostentatious when compared to the simpler garb that had served her well for many years.

"Ye alright, lass?" came a voice from behind her, and Auriana briefly looked over her shoulder to see Delvar Ironfist approaching. "Yer twitchin' like a wild wolpertinger on Brewfest."

"It's nothing," she said dismissively, returning her gaze to the Citadel. "I didn't realise you were talking to me again."

The grim-faced death knight had made no secret of the fact that he took Auriana's brief disappearance during the invasion of Tanaan as a personal insult, and he had been gruff with her ever since her return. Of course, he had also barely strayed three feet from Auriana's side the entire time, and she had actually needed to order him out of her bedroom more than once so that she might bathe and sleep.

"Ha, ha," Ironfist growled drily. "I'll talk ta ye when ye stop tryin' ta get yerself killed. Yer a damn difficult woman to guard, ye know that?"

"My apologies," Auriana said, her tone ever so slightly sarcastic. "I thought you might appreciate the challenge."

"I'll appreciate the 'challenge' more once I get yer pretty little head safely back ta Azeroth," he grunted, adjusting his belt. "For now, however, I thought ye might like ta know that yer troll friend has arrived."

Her interest piqued, Auriana looked back beyond Ironfist to see a large force of Horde soldiers emerging from the jungle. She and Zala'din had remained in contact ever since she had left the Horde war band, and she had been expecting his arrival. As promised, he had bought the full strength of his invasion force, and they took up a marshalling position opposite the already assembled Alliance troops. Auriana made a few quick calculations, and estimated that Zala'din had brought roughly several hundred of his finest troops. Combined with Auriana's own Alliance soldiers, they represented a considerable force, and she only hoped it would be enough to stop Gul'Dan.

*Cut off the head of the beast, and the rest of them will soon fall,* she mused darkly.

As Auriana watched, she saw a sudden movement within the Horde lines, and the war band parted to allow Zala'din to ride free. He was mounted upon a large, snarling raptor, and both beast and rider were adorned with bright feathers and fearsome war paint. The troll Commander's eyes were sharply focused, and he found Auriana immediately; urging his raptor forwards to meet her where she stood upon the narrow concourse leading to the gates of Hellfire Citadel. He was followed closely by a Horde standard bearer, who rode a similarly decorated raptor, and carried a fluttering red and black banner on her back.

Zala'din pulled his raptor up a few feet short of where Auriana and Ironfist stood, and practically leapt from the beast's saddle. He gave Ironfist a fleeting, curious glance, before turning his attention fully to Auriana and the Citadel.

"How ya doin', mon?" he asked, eyeing Auriana carefully from head to toe.

"I'm well," she replied, giving him a brief smile. "Or, about as well as one can be when preparing to launch an all-out siege on an insane warlock and his rabid band of fel orcs."
Zala'din barked out a short laugh, and jerked his chin towards the two monstrous fel cannons protecting the outer gates of the citadel.

"Dey gonna be a problem," he said grimly. "Dere's only one way in, and with dis bridge bein' so narrow, our troops are gonna make easy fodder for da Iron Horde."

Auriana nodded in agreement, having just been contemplating the very same dilemma herself. She had made sure to stay just out of range as she conducted her inspection of the Citadel's defenses, but she was under no illusions about the kind of damage the Iron Horde cannons could inflict once she ordered her army to move within range.

"I had an idea about that, actually," she said thoughtfully. "How many mages do you have with you?"

"A dozen and den some," Zala'din supplied. "Da Regent Lord was kind enough ta send a group of Sunreavers ta aid us in da assault."

Auriana frowned ever so slightly at the mention of the Sunreavers; the faction of Horde magi who had been thrown out of Dalaran after the theft of the Divine Bell. While Auriana had not participated in the Purge of Dalaran herself, she knew there was no love lost between the Sunreavers and the Kirin Tor, and she wondered how well the Horde mages would take to her direction. Still, for her plan to work, Auriana needed the strength of the Horde to augment the small cadre of Kirin Tor mages that Jaina Proudmoore had given over to her command, and if it meant keeping her men safe, she'd take whatever help she could get.

"Would it be possible for me to speak to one of your mages?" she asked. "I have a plan, but the Alliance and the Horde will need to work together."

"We don't need 'em, lass," Ironfist interjected quickly, fixing Zala'din with a fearsome scowl. "The Alliance can take care of themselves!"

"I will not risk good men against those cannons, Delvar. If I have to use the Horde to advance our cause, then so be it," Auriana said firmly. "Zal?"

Zala'din frowned down at Ironfist, but nevertheless muttered an order to his standard-bearer in Zandali. They talked back and forth for a while, before the standard bearer turned her raptor and rode briskly back towards the Horde lines.

Auriana gave Ironfist a swift, disapproving look, and jerked her head at the marshalling Alliance soldiers.

"In the meantime… Delvar, could you fetch Calandra for me, please?" she asked, the politeness of her phrasing undercut by the sternness of her tone.

Ironfist stiffened, but his almost fanatical loyalty won out over his obvious dislike for Zala'din, and he hurried off to comply with Auriana's command. As he left, a tense silence settled between the two Commanders, and Auriana sighed. She knew she was more pragmatic about working with the Horde than many of her comrades; and that Ironfist in particular was one of those who had strongly questioned her willingness to ally with the Horde in the past. While Auriana tentatively considered Zala'din a friend, and might have otherwise pursued a conversation, she did not know how a troll might react to a perceived insult from a dwarf, and decided that for now it was perhaps best if she didn't push the issue.

Fortunately, the Horde standard bearer returned before the silence became too oppressive, with a
raven-haired blood elf woman in tow. The blood elf was immaculately dressed in the distinctive red and gold of the Sunreavers, and her fierce green eyes radiated an imperious intelligence. Auriana stood her ground, though it belatedly occurred to her that while she was not currently representing the Kirin Tor, the Sunreaver mage may not look kindly upon someone who had completed their training in Dalaran.

"Dis be Girana. She leads da Sunreaver contingent here in Tanaan," Zala'din said, by way of introduction. "Girana, dis be Auriana Fenwild, Commander of da Alliance."

"Yes, I know who she is," Girana said shortly, considering Auriana with a wary expression. "What is it that you want from me, Commander?"

Well, I'll take curiosity over outright hostility, I suppose, Auriana thought drily.

"I need the help of you and your mages to disable those fel cannons," she explained. "If we run at them headlong, we're going to get slaughtered. Horde and Alliance both."

Auriana gestured to path behind her, where Ironfist had returned with an elegant, auburn-haired woman following close on his heels. Warmage Calandra had served the Kirin Tor in the Borean Tundra during the Nexus War, and Auriana knew her to be a strong leader and a talented mage. She had been chosen by Jaina to lead the Kirin Tor mages in the assault on Hellfire Citadel, and Auriana was grateful for the presence of another powerful ally against the Iron Horde. Unfortunately, it seemed that Calandra did not share Auriana's tolerance of the Horde, and no sooner had she arrived than she began to glare daggers at Girana.

"Between your Sunreavers and my Kirin Tor, we should be able to freeze both cannons long enough to get our armies inside that first gate," Auriana continued, pointedly ignoring Calandra's scowl as she gestured back towards the fearsome Iron Horde artillery. "Once inside, we can take control of the cannons and turn them back against the Citadel."

"Clever," Zala'din commented, nodding his approval. "What ya tink, Girana?"

"You have proven yourself a steadfast ally in the past, Commander, and for this reason I might have considered doing as you ask… but I will not work alongside agents of the Kirin Tor," the Sunreaver mage said coldly, her bright green eyes narrowing with intense dislike as she turned upon Calandra.

Auriana opened her mouth to head off the argument, but Calandra was faster.

"You were one of us, once, Girana," she retorted, squaring her shoulders aggressively before the blood elf's challenge. "Before you turned traitor."

"I was a member of the Kirin Tor before you were even born, jael," Girana snapped. "Jaina Proudmoore had no right to throw us from a city that was as much ours as hers!"

"Then perhaps the Sunreavers should have considered that before they allied with Garrosh Hellscream," Calandra growled.

Auriana bit her lip, wondering if she had perhaps been overambitious in believing that the Sunreavers and the Kirin Tor could overcome their recent history and work together. She looked briefly over to Zala'din as the two women continued to bicker, and the husky troll shrugged. His gaze was keen, and he was clearly ready to move at the first sign of serious trouble, but there was a wry lightness to his expression that Auriana understood to mean that the squabbling mages were her problem. She sighed, trying to think of what she might say to encourage the two factions to
work together, when she realised that there was a faster solution, if not precisely an elegant one.

Silently, Auriana reached for her power, and her eyes and arms blazed to life. She drew on as much magic as she was able, until she was full to the brim with raw, surging energy. Auriana vaguely realised that she was holding more power than she previously would have believed possible, but now was not the time to dwell, no matter how interesting such a discovery might have been.

"Are you all quite done?" she asked quietly, arching one eyebrow with as much disdain as she could muster. "Forgive me, but I thought we were here to win a war. To do so, I need those cannons frozen. I will not repeat myself again."

Calandra's eyes widened dramatically, and even Girana's haughty blood elf facade broke before the untempered force of Auriana's power. The Sunreaver woman acquiesced with a short nod, and a moment later, Calandra mimicked the gesture.

"Thank you," Auriana said, sighing slightly as she released her power. "I believe there are currently more Alliance mages here than Sunreavers, but in order for this to work, we need to take both cannons out at the same time. Calandra, send half a dozen of our mages to assist the Sunreavers in disabling the right hand cannon. The remainder of our forces will concentrate their efforts on the left."

Calandra grimaced, as if swallowing something very bitter, but Auriana knew she would not disobey. Historically, hierarchy among mages was not decided by birth, or title, or wealth, but rather by raw power. It was now considered an antiquated, if not outright barbaric, way of determining relative rankings among mages, but the primal sense of disquiet brought on by facing a mage of superior power was nevertheless hard to resist.

"See to your mages, Calandra," Auriana ordered softly, "And await my signal to begin your attack."

"Ya got dat, Girana?" Zala'din added, giving his own ally a stern glare.

The two warring mages exchanged a charged look, but nevertheless parted without further discussion. Calandra simply blinked away, while Girana mounted up behind the standard bearer and rode slowly back to re-join the Horde.

"Go with Calandra, Ironfist," Auriana added. "I will follow you shortly, but I need a word with the Commander first. No arguments."

Despite her warning, Ironfist looked as if arguing was precisely what he would like to do, but even the stubborn death knight knew there was little point in picking a fight with Auriana when she had dug in her heels. He was still defiant enough to shoot her a disapproving look, however, before heading off down the road after Calandra.

"Care ta explain what just happened?" Zala'din asked, once the two of them were alone.

"Ah… have… have you ever seen young men flex their muscles at one another in order to establish a pecking order?" Auriana asked awkwardly. "I did… that. Magically speaking, at least. I can't have either side forgetting who holds the power around here. Working together has never been more important, and we cannot lose ourselves to petty squabbles."

"So… ya threatened dem," Zala'din surmised.

"Basically… yes," she conceded sheepishly, her discomfiture making the troll grin. "It seemed to be the most expedient option."
"Ya got no argument from me," the troll shrugged. "If it works, it works."

He looked down at her thoughtfully, and a strange expression flickered across his face.

"Just how powerful are ya, really?" he asked slowly. "I dunno about dat Warmage of yours, but Girana is very strong… yet dey both seemed proper afraid of ya."

Auriana frowned and stared down at her scarred hands, and realised that she had been avoiding asking herself that very same question.

"Honestly… I'm not actually sure anymore," she admitted. "But if I'm going to find out… today seems as good a day as any."

"Hmph. Well, da Horde are ready ta do dere part," Zala'din said proudly, swinging back up into the saddle of his raptor. "We'll move on ya order, Commander."

"I've sent gnome sappers to set charges around the outer gates," Auriana informed him. "They will detonate upon my mark, and the path should be clear for us to move in. I figure that exploding the gates should be enough of a hint, don't you think?"

"Even some of my denser orcs could figure dat one out," he agreed, giving her a wry grin. "May da loa watch over ya, little lion. It be time ta finish this fight."

Zala'din whistled to his raptor, and the big beast turned instantly at his command. Auriana watched him leave, enjoying the last few moments of relative peace before she unleashed pandemonium upon Hellfire Citadel. As much as she loved to throw herself into the heat of a battle, she had never lost sight of her overall goal, and would certainly never take risking the lives of her men lightly.

"Alright," she said finally, to no one in particular. "Let's get this done."

With a casual wave of her hand, Auriana teleported herself back to the middle of the Alliance marshalling grounds, where her men were completing their final preparations for battle. A quiet, eager energy thrummed through the group, and everywhere she turned Auriana saw calm and determined faces staring back at her. She was also pleased to note that despite her reservations, Warmage Calandra had already begun to move the Kirin Tor into position, along with a number of Lunarfall's own mages.

Auriana was soon joined by Ironfist and Lieutenant Hafela, who both looked grim and ready for the battle ahead.

"Is everything alright, Commander?" Hafela asked, a slight note of reproach entering her voice.

"Everything's fine," Auriana said firmly. "Are we ready here?"

"Of course," Hafela said proudly. "We await your command to move out."

Auriana nodded, and forced herself to take a deep, steadying breath. She noted a large rocky outcrop nearby, and climbed atop it so that she might be better seen. Auriana was the type of person to lead by deed rather than by word, but she knew that words still had their place, and she would do her best to inspire her troops as best she could.

"Soldiers of the Alliance!" she shouted, magically enhancing her voice so that she could be heard by every last one of her men. "You have done yourselves proud throughout this long campaign, and the spoils of your sacrifice now lay before you! We have pushed the Iron Horde back to their fortress, where they stand upon the brink of defeat!"
A great whoop went up from her men, and Auriana felt her heart quicken in response. As much as she had once tried to deny it, standing at the head of a great army was exactly where she belonged, and there was no denying the way her blood surged and her legs trembled impatiently.

"The defenses of the Iron Horde will crumble before us, and we will bathe the halls of Hellfire Citadel in their blood," she roared fiercely, balling her hands into tight fists. "The time has come to end this war… with a victory for the Alliance!"

"For the Alliance!" came the answering cry, as the brave soldiers of Lunarfall unsheathed their weapons and lifted them to the sky.

"For Azeroth!" Auriana screamed, thrusting her right hand into the air.

"For Azeroth!"

The roar of the Alliance was almost deafening, and a moment later, the Horde added to the cacophony with a fierce rallying cry of their own. The jungle practically shook with the combined fury of the Azerothian forces as they crashed swords into shields and rattled their spears, and Auriana felt that she had scarcely seen a more magnificent sight. She looked across the field to left, and was somewhat surprised to see that Zala'din looked similarly affected. He leaned forwards eagerly in the saddle of his raptor, his red-eyed gaze sharp, and he already carried both of his swords free.

As if sensing Auriana's attentions, Zala'din turned his head to look in her direction, a sly grin spreading across his face. The big troll nodded, and Auriana knew the time had come. She opened her palm and sent a burst of red sparks flying from her fingertips, signalling the gnome sappers hidden beneath the bridge. For a tense moment, it seemed as if something might have gone wrong, only for a mighty crash to reverberate through the jungle a second later as the outer gates of Hellfire Citadel were torn asunder. Perhaps unsurprisingly, it appeared that the gnome sappers had rather overestimated the strength of the explosion required, and the resulting fallout was enough to briefly obscure the entire Citadel. When the dust finally settled, however, the path into Gul'Dan's fortress lay clear, and Auriana grinned in brazen anticipation.

"Soldiers of Azeroth!" she thundered, sending wild power crackling through every inch of her body. "Attack!"
Auriana's forces surged forwards before she had even finished speaking, racing swiftly for the destroyed gate. The blue tide of the Alliance was soon joined by the red and black of the Horde, all of whom appeared just as eager to give Gul'Dan what was coming to him. At the head of the war band rode Zala'din, shouting wildly in Zandali as he flattened himself across the neck of his raptor and pushed it for greater speed.

For her part, Auriana sprinted with the Alliance vanguard, both Ironfist and Hafela close on her heels. She was not the kind of leader to fight from the back, and would never permit her soldiers to face any danger that she was not prepared to face herself. Moreover, she was fiercely determined to finish the long war that had consumed her life for the past year, and she refused to let Gul'Dan or anyone else stand in her way.

The fel orcs had been well prepared to defend the Citadel against an extended siege, and Auriana was greeted by a hail of cannon fire the moment she made it through the shattered gates. The Iron Horde had mobilised several of their small, mobile tanks to repel the Azerothian forces, as well as hundreds of grunts, berserkers, and felcasters. The sky was already thick with ash and flying spells, and Auriana came within inches of a fiery death more than once.

Fortunately, the Kirin Tor and Sunreavers had followed her commands to the letter, and had encased the two monstrous fel cannons in massive blocks of ice, jamming their firing mechanisms and preventing them from adding their firepower to the chaos. Of course, between the heat of the machinery itself and the efforts of the fel orcs, the cannons would not be inoperational for long, and Auriana's top priority was securing them for her own purposes.

"Get to those cannons!" she hollered, rallying those nearest to her into a coordinated thrust. "Turn them on the main gates!"

With a snarl, she leapt clean over a flying piece of metal, her hands already icing over with a powerful frost spell. Ironfist was right by her side, and behind him ran a dozen other soldiers of the Alliance. Just before they hit the orc lines, Auriana flicked her wrist, and sent a fast-moving frost orb flying out ahead of her. She grinned as the orb smashed into the enemy lines with a satisfying hiss; snaring and slowing the orcs and leaving them vulnerable to further attack.

Ironfist took full advantage of the opportunity, drawing on his own strange necromantic magics to harden himself for battle. He leapt past Auriana with a savage dwarven battle cry, swinging his axe upwards to take an orc's arm off at the shoulder. The stout dwarf death knight was barely visible amongst the crush of orcs, but from the pained shouts and clash of steel on steel, it was clear that he was rather successfully creating all sorts of havoc.

Auriana blinked directly into the fray, following up on her frost orb with a series of precise, deadly frostbolts. Three orcs fell instantly before the fury of her magic, and a fourth soon followed as she blinked forwards. One particularly ugly orc with a missing ear howled at seeing his comrades dispatched so handily, and took a heavy swing at her head with his barbaric mace. Auriana's small stature was something of a disadvantage when it came to contests of pure strength, but when it came to speed, there were few people who could match her. She slid swiftly to the side, punishing the orc with a point blank frostbolt to the face before he could even recover from his initial swing. He tumbled to the ground, dead, and Auriana blinked away to find herself another target.

Her battle-hungry gaze fell upon an orc felcaster, who had separated herself from the chaos of the melee so that she might better cast her dark spells. Auriana could feel her power, even from a
distance, but she knew that one-on-one there were few living spellcasters who could hope to beat her. She drew her magic close in around her, forming a protective ice barrier, and intercepted the orc's incinerate spell. The felcaster gasped in surprise as her fel fire burned away to nothing in the face of Auriana's unrelenting ice, but she quickly regained her composure and hurled a vicious fel volley back at Auriana's chest. Auriana leapt to the side, freezing the scattered felbolts as they raced past her and turning the felcaster's own power back against her. The orc's eyes widened as she was subjected to a storm of razor sharp icicles, and she had barely raised a hand to defend herself before she was impaled through the neck and chest.

Breathing lightly from her effort, Auriana turned back to the melee, and was gratified to see that the last of the cannon defenders had fallen.

"All clear, ma'am!" one of her paladins cried. "Cannon's ours!"

Auriana raced to the edge of the parapet, and looked down at the Kirin Tor mages still holding the fel cannon in their icy thrall.

"Good work!" she shouted. "We've secured the cannon; get inside and join the fight!"

The Kirin Tor ceased their frost attack immediately, and without the constant pressure of their magic, the fel cannon immediately began to thaw.

"Turn that cannon inwards!" Auriana ordered sharply. "Let's knock on the door!"

Her soldiers complied immediately, and she took advantage of the brief pause in battle to look out over the Horde battle lines. They, too, had taken control of the fel cannon on their side of the field, and had also begun the process of turning it on the Citadel's sky-high gates. Auriana nodded approvingly to herself, satisfied that the major threat to the safety of her men had been contained.

"All of you - hold this position at all costs," she added. "We'll see to it that you're protected. Delvar, you're with me."

"Right behind ye, Commander!"

Together, Auriana and Ironfist leapt off the small, fortified hill that housed the fel cannons, and threw themselves into the main battle. Between the fire from the Iron Horde tanks, the relentless magic of the felcasters, and the general chaos of the melee, the Hellfire staging grounds had descended into complete and utter anarchy. It was incredibly difficult to tell friend from foe, and more than once Auriana had to pull a spell at the last second to avoid hitting one of Zala'din's orcs.

Ironfist fought at her side with more ferocity than Auriana had ever seen, brutally slaughtering any orc who dared to come within ten feet of her. Of course, Auriana wasn't complaining - a mage was most dangerous when given time and space to work, and with Ironfist's protection, she was able to wreak havoc on the Iron Horde lines. When fighting a pitched battle, Auriana was usually forced to prioritise spells that could be cast quickly over those that were the most powerful, but given time, she was able to push her abilities to the limit. A slow, savage grin spread across her face as she called down colossal ice meteors of terrible power, picking off the Iron Horde tanks one by one and crushing any orcs unlucky enough to be standing nearby.

Unfortunately, her efforts did not go unnoticed, and one of the furthest tanks turned its sights on Auriana and her death knight protector. Lost in the magnificent ebb and flow of her magic, Auriana heard the dread whine of a cannonball far too late, and only had mere seconds to react.

"Move!" she screamed, shoving Ironfist hard in the back and using the force of the push to launch
herself in the other direction.

Auriana's last minute efforts were enough to save both of their lives, but she wasn't fast enough to avoid the blast entirely. The cannonball hit the ground and detonated hard, engulfing both Auriana and Ironfist in a wave of flame and sending them flying off in different directions. With a determined snarl, Auriana somehow managed to twist her body in the air and land in a shaky crouch, her left knee slamming hard into the dirt as she fought to stay upright. She squinted through the smoke for any sign of Ironfist, but the dwarf was nowhere to be seen amongst the crush of orc bodies.

A sudden movement to her left caught her eye, and Auriana couldn't help but gasp as her gaze fell upon one of the biggest orcs she had ever seen; a dark, reddish-brown brute with a mouthful of jagged tusks and shoulders roped with dark tattoos. The hulk was at least twice the height and three times the width of a normal orc, and he stared down at her like a wolf who had just discovered a particularly vulnerable deer. His target chosen, he bellowed fiercely into the air, before lowering his head and charging at Auriana like a wild bull.

Startled, she only just managed to blink out of the way as the hulk barrelled past her, kicking up a massive cloud of dust as he ran. Despite the fact that the orc had passed by a dozen Alliance and Horde soldiers in his charge, he seemed to have eyes only for Auriana, and he skidded in the dirt as he came around for another pass. This time, at least, Auriana was prepared, and she managed to bounce a frostbolt off his tough, leathery skin before blinking sideways at the last second.

She timed the blink perfectly, but in her efforts to avoid the hulk, she moved right into the path of a rocketing cannonball. Letting out a rather undignified squeal of surprise, she stumbled backwards, only narrowly avoiding a chunk of iron to the gut. While Auriana was able to avoid being pummelled by a cannonball, the unexpected manoeuvre was enough to throw off her rhythm, and she was easy prey for the rampaging hulk. She did her best to avoid the orc's charge, but was unable to avoid being clipped in the shoulder and sent sprawling into the dirt.

Auriana's head hit the ground with a resounding crack, and for a moment she saw nothing but stars. She reached for her magic, but in her state of shock, she was unable to summon the necessary concentration, and a dagger of pain lanced through her forehead. Groaning, she rolled onto her back, feeling the ground shake with every step as the hulk approached to finish her off.

The orc let out a guttural laugh of derision as it lifted a fist as big as Auriana's head, ready to pummel her into the dirt, but she could do nothing more than lift a futile arm in her defense. Despite the hopelessness of her position, she stared up at the orc fearlessly, but to her great surprise the finishing blow never came.

As the hulk's mighty fist flew downwards, it was intercepted by a long, vicious blade, and Auriana looked up in astonishment to see none other than Zala'din standing to her defense. He had apparently abandoned his raptor in the chaos of the fight, but he otherwise looked fresh, eager and decidedly angry.

"Why don't'tcha pick on somebody ya own size?" he hissed, moving to stand between Auriana and her orc assailant.

The hulk roared definitely, its fist bleeding from the cut of Zala'din's blade, and turned its wrath on the furious troll. The hulk had superior strength, but Zala'din was gifted with incredible agility, and he danced under the orc's lumbering swings. As he passed behind the hulk, he slashed backwards with one of his swords, opening the brute from waist to shoulder. The hulk stumbled, and Zala'din took full advantage of its sluggishness to whirl on his heel and drive both blades deep into its back.
The orc staggered forwards, trying desperately to keep its feet, but even something as large as the hulk could not withstand being bisected by Zala'din's dual blades. It stumbled forwards, dead, and Zala'din roared in satisfaction as his gaze fell upon Auriana once more.

"Ya still with us, little lion?" he asked, shouting to make himself heard over the din of battle.

He moved to help Auriana to her feet, but before he could reach her, he was intercepted by a pair of slavering fel orcs, and he was forced to engage them lest he lose his own head.

"It takes more than a cannonball to keep me down!" Auriana yelled back. "Keep fighting!"

She shook her head to clear it, and as she did so, Auriana noticed a massive she-orc that stood out amongst the hundreds of other Iron Horde combatants. The orc was heavily armoured in magma-infused plate, and had her fierce red hair styled into three long spikes. In her right hand, she carried an axe whose head was nearly as long as Auriana was tall, and she seemed to be having a perfectly wonderful time using the monstrous weapon to slice her way through the Horde and Alliance lines, all the while barking curt orders to the Iron Horde troops.

"Zal!" Auriana hollered, rolling over onto her stomach in the dirt. "I think that's their commander! Go, I'll give you cover!"

Zala'din jerked his head around, his eyes darkening eagerly as he followed Auriana's line of sight. He immediately finished off his two assailants and sprinted forwards, knowing all too well the importance of taking out the Iron Horde leadership. He ran towards the red-haired orc with his swords raised high, dropping his shoulder at the last second and crashing into her with a mighty shout. Sparks flew as his twin blades met plate, and the orc commander staggered backwards beneath the ferocity of his attack.

She recovered quickly, however, bellowing angrily as she forced Zala'din off with a brutal punch to the face.

"Taste my axe!" she roared, hurling the monstrous weapon through the air with astonishing strength.

Zala'din drove the point of one sword into the dirt, pressing his weight on the blade for balance as he vaulted over the flying axe. The orc's flying weapon missed his feet by only inches, and no sooner had he recovered his feet than he was tackled hard from behind.

Determined to help her friend, Auriana dragged herself back to her feet and blinked forwards, her hands glittering with deadly frost. She narrowed her eyes as Zala'din and the orc commander traded blows back and forth, trying to pick the perfect moment to attack. A misplaced frostbolt would not discriminate between friend and foe, and Auriana knew her aim would have to be excellent.

Despite being at a temporary disadvantage, the orc commander somehow managed to recover her axe, and she slammed into Zala'din so that they stood body to body. Zala'din raised his blades at the last second, catching her axe neatly in the cross of his swords, but Auriana could see sweat glistening on the troll's brow as he strained to resist the she-orc's bulk. His feet slid backwards in the dirt, but in the process of fighting back, he inadvertently moved the orc commander so that her back was facing Auriana.

"Perfect..." she muttered to herself, and raised her hands to unleash a devastating beam of ice.

The orc gasped as Auriana's magic hit her back, and she roared in frustration as her protective plate began to ice and crack beneath the power of the spell. Grinning, Zala'din used her moment of
distraction to push her away, then slashed at her chest with both his blades. The orc screamed as the blades bit deep beneath her armour to find flesh, and she only managed to escape by slamming the hilt of her axe into the side of Zala'din's head.

"I'll be back..." she panted, her hand pressed to the wound on her chest.

She leapt defiantly backwards, her axe still firmly in hand, and began to sprint back towards the gates of the fortress.

"Ha! Run away, coward!" Zala'din crowed triumphantly. "And ta think ya have da nerve ta call yaself Horde!"

He spit in the dirt with supreme contempt, his shoulders set proudly

"Tanks for da assist," he said, turning back to face Auriana with a weary grin. "Looks like we be even for today."

Auriana grinned and quickly wiped a hand across her face, trying to clear the dust and grime from her eyes. Already the fighting had turned the visible parts of her skin a dusky brown, and her robes were stained with blood, soot, and Light knew what else. Still, it appeared that the Azerothian forces had come off far better during the initial assault. The Iron Horde artillery lines had been entirely decimated, and the fel orcs were now scrambling to retreat in the wake of their commander. A handful of Azerothian soldiers were now picking off the survivors, while the rest of the Horde and Alliance troops had to pulled back towards the front gate to tend to the wounded.

"Hellbreach is ours," Auriana said confidently, tightening her right hand into a fist. "It's time that we finished off those doors."

With Zala'din loping close behind, she ran up the hill towards the fel cannons. The Alliance and the Horde had successfully kept their respective weapons secure from the Iron Horde during the battle, and both were now trained on the inner gate of Hellfire Citadel. Auriana waited patiently while her men and that of the Horde pulled back, but the moment they were clear, she raised her hand to signal the attack.

"Ready?" she shouted. "Fire!"

The Alliance-controlled cannon boomed, and a few moments later, Auriana heard the answering roar of the Horde's own captured artillery. Two massive fel cannonballs barrelled towards the inner gates of the Citadel, slamming into the heavy steel doors and eating them away with fel corruption. Auriana winced slightly, disconcerted by the nearby presence of fel magic, but she supposed that she could appreciate the efficiency with which it was destroying the doors.

"Again!"

A second volley launched at her command, dealing critical damage to the gates, and with a final shriek of protest, the thick metal collapsed. A yawning black hole now lead into the Citadel beyond, broken only by the occasional green spark of felfire. Auriana squared her shoulders defensively, half expecting to see a flood of orcs emerging from the Citadel, but the monstrous fortress remained forebodingly silent.

"Is dat all ya got?" Zala'din hollered, champing his tusks triumphantly. "Ha!"

"Er... Zal..." Auriana said quietly, reaching out to grab his forearm warningly. "Something's moving in there... something big..."
"What?"

"There!" she shouted, pointing.

The shadows inside Hellfire Citadel darkened, and something enormous took its first step out into the light. It was generally humanoid in shape, with massive spikes rising from its shoulders. It was also heavily armoured and at least thirty feet tall, and seemed to be powered by liquid hellfire. Worst of all was the massive fel cannon it had in place of one of its hands; the deadly weapon now firmly trained on the soldiers of Azeroth.

"What the hell is that?" Auriana breathed.

As if in answer to her question, the construct fired its green fel jets, and flew forwards until it was hovering over the centre of the arena. A harsh, grating voice boomed out from within the metal monstrosity, and with a start Auriana realised that it was piloted by the orc commander who had fled the battlefield earlier.

"The might and invention of the Fel Horde… the fury of Hellfire itself!" the she-orc screamed. "Behold!"

"Get back!" Auriana screamed, as the massive iron construct began to clear the area of debris with its deadly cannons.

While the majority of the Azerothian forces had retreated to the position secured by the fel cannons, there were still a large number of troops in the centre of the arena. Auriana raised her hands, and began to frantically teleport anyone within her range back to safety. She didn't discriminate between Horde and Alliance, and more than one orc or tauren gave her an odd look upon realising the identity of their rescuer. Luckily, both the Sunreavers and the Kirin Tor were quick to follow Auriana's lead, using their combined powers to save the dozens of soldiers fleeing from the iron reaver's wrath.

"Alliance, form up on me!" Auriana ordered. "We're not out of this yet!"

The soldiers of Lunarfall complied like the well-oiled machine that they were, pulling the wounded back out of harm's way and sending their most heavily armoured troops to form a vanguard on Auriana's position. Behind them, her ranged troops assembled into three neat lines, their faces set as they prepared to unleash hell on the Iron Horde's terrible creation. Both Ironfist and Lieutenant Hafela flanked her on either side, while Zala'din quickly moved away to see to the reorganisation of his own lines.

I'm not afraid of you, you big metal bitch, Auriana thought grimly. Let's do this.

"Alliance! Engage!"

Auriana's men charged into the fray without hesitation, followed closely by the warriors of the Horde. Auriana kept pace with the vanguard, drawing deeply on her wellspring of power and allowing the faintest hint of her rage to unfurl within her belly. The iron reaver was a truly fearsome opponent, and Auriana suspected that defeating it would take a special effort to see it destroyed.

"I warned you!" the orc's voice roared, as she swept the reaver's cannon arm back to cast down a wave of bright green fire across the battlefield.

"Watch yourselves!" Auriana yelled, blinking sideways to avoid the flame and opening up on the reaver with a powerful frostbolt.
What followed was one of the most hectic fights that Auriana had ever experienced. The tidy lines of the Horde and the Alliance broke almost immediately as the reaver turned the battlefield into a scene of utter chaos. The orc pilot continually sprayed the arena with hellfire, making it difficult to breathe, and Auriana began to wonder if they really had descended into hell.

Of course, the hellfire was only one entry in the long list of Auriana's problems. In between blasts of green flame, the iron reaver fired out artillery shells and firebombs every few minutes, and even began to tear up the ground beneath them. She felt badly for the melee fighters like Ironfist and Hafela who had to try and contend with the roiling earth as they fought, and she began to grow seriously concerned as more and more of her men fell. Unfortunately, her ranged fighters and the Kirin Tor seemed to be having just as much difficulty dodging the hellfire, and even with her phenomenal reflexes, Auriana caught the tail end of a fire blast more than once.

Despite the pandemonium and her singed robes, however, Auriana was not so easily discouraged. Gritting her teeth, she hurled spell after spell as quickly she was able, hoping to douse the iron reaver's flames with the fury of frost. She blinked around the battlefield like a woman possessed, her rage burning almost as bright as the iron reaver's flames. Thanks to her hard work with Jaina and Kalecgos, however, she was able to keep it tightly leashed, and slowly, gradually, her efforts began to take effect.

Unfortunately, much as with the earlier battle against the Iron Horde's siege engines, the orc piloting the iron reaver had realised that Auriana was a considerable source of trouble. After forcing the vanguard back with yet another wave of deadly hellfire, the iron reaver dropped into a low crouch, and began feeding greater amounts of energy into its powerful leg jets. For a split second, Auriana paused, confused, only to deeply regret her distraction a moment later as the iron reaver dropped its head and charged.

For such a large construct, it moved impossibly fast, knocking over dozens of soldiers who failed to move quickly enough to avoid the attack. Auriana just managed to avoid getting directly hit by blinking sideways at the last second, though the heat wave generated by the reaver's charge was enough to send her flying into the air like a ragdoll. She tumbled head over heels through the dirt, crying out in pain as she rolled straight over a lingering patch off hellfire.

The iron reaver then turned around for a reverse pass, and while the soldiers of Azeroth were better prepared this time, there were still those unable to avoid the iron reaver's devastating blitz attack. As a result, both the Alliance and the Horde were now completely scattered, and the iron reaver's pilot took advantage of the chaos to fully power its jets and take to the air.

"Oh, come on," Auriana growled, pushing up off the dirt floor of the battlefield and lurching back to her feet. "It flies, too?"

The ability to fly gave the iron reaver a considerable advantage, in that it rendered more than half of the combined Azerothian forces useless. Warriors, paladins, and the like could hardly be expected to hit something hovering forty feet off the ground, and they could do little more than watch in frustration as the iron reaver continued to rain down death from above. In addition to the continued threat of the hellfire, the iron reaver had begun to blanket the area with deadly bombs, and Auriana knew that her men could not hold out against such a furious barrage for long.

"We need to bring it back down!" she shouted, gesturing frantically to Calandra and the other warmages of the Kirin Tor. "Concentrate all your fire on its jump jets!"

The Kirin Tor complied immediately; channelling frost, fire, and pure arcane energy into a single coordinated blast. Blinking forwards, Auriana added her magic to their own, pouring every last bit of strength she could muster into one of the most powerful frostbolts she had ever cast. Her rage
surged, fighting for release, and Auriana began to fear that she would lose control long before the iron reaver was grounded.

Sweat poured down her face as she wordlessly screamed her fury to the sky, and she was finally rewarded for her efforts as one of the reaver's jets exploded, sending the great machine crashing back down to earth. Seeing the reaver fall was enough to reinvigorate the spirits of the Horde and Alliance soldiers, and they fell upon the twisted metal creature with renewed ferocity.

Auriana, too, had begun to sense victory, and she was not the kind of fighter to allow any kind of advantage to go unpunished, no matter how small. Her eyes narrowed as she concentrated her savage attentions on the reaver's heart and the burning hellfire that lay within, overwhelming the orc machine with a stream of endless power. All around her, mages, shaman, priests and druids began to do the same, and the iron reaver began to stagger and smoke under the combined weight of the magical assault.

*I've got you now,* Auriana snarled inwardly, sending one last concentrated burst of power lancing towards the reaver.

The construct sent one last blaze of hellfire arcing across the battlefield in a pale imitation of its earlier attacks, and Auriana knew in that moment that it was finally done for.

"Eject! Eject!" the orc pilot screamed, but it was far too late.

The iron reaver's internal systems must have been badly compromised, and it seemed to Auriana as if it were now being torn apart from the inside. The liquid hellfire powering the reaver's heart abruptly flared blinding green as a series of explosions raced up its left leg, and barely a second later the entire construct simply exploded. Auriana raised her hand to shield her eyes from the blast, and when the flames had finally died down, nothing remained of the fel reaver save for a smouldering pile of scrap metal. The Horde and the Alliance let out simultaneous roars of triumph at their collective victory, raising hands and weapons into the air with an air of fierce pride.

For her part, Auriana simply slumped in place, letting out a long, relieved sigh. She closed her eyes in concentration as she slowly forced her rage to slip away inch by inch, though took a few long minutes before she was able to overcome the sweet temptation of her power fully. Only once was she certain of her control did she finally look out over the battlefield once more, and her brow furrowed deeply as she began to tally the aftermath of the fight. The fel reaver was a weapon of terrible power, and she knew they had been incredibly lucky to escape with as few casualties as they had. Thankfully, more of her men than not seemed to be still standing, and Auriana let out a silent prayer of thanks to the Light for their lives.

Among their number were Hafela and Ironfist, who had shared the brunt of the iron reaver's attacks between them. Hafela was crouched down over her sword and shield, apparently taking time to recover her breath, while Ironfist loomed protectively over her. Fortunately, both seemed largely unharmed by the encounter, if perhaps a bit singed, and they looked up as one as Auriana approached.

"Are you both alright?" she asked, placing a hand on Hafela's shoulder.

"Just fine, Commander," Ironfist said, wiping off the blade of his axe on his cloak. "And a hell o' a lot better than that reaver, ha!"

Auriana couldn't help but to smile at the dwarf's enthusiasm, though her grin faded somewhat as Ironfist secured his axe to his back and looked her up and down. His expression was difficult to read, and the intensity of his stare made Auriana feel vaguely uncomfortable.
"What are you looking at?"

"Oh, nothin', I'm just surprised that ye seem to have survived the battle without any life threatenin' injuries," Ironfist said slyly. "It's a nice change."

"Oh, very funny," Auriana huffed, rolling her eyes.

She offered Hafela a hand and pulled the draenei back to her feet, before turning her gaze back to the ruined Citadel gates. The inside of Gul'Dan's fortress remained eerily quiet, but Auriana wouldn't put it past the Iron Horde to have some other nasty surprises in store.

"Lieutenant - have our forces pull back," she ordered thoughtfully. "Set up a camp."

"We're not entering the Citadel?" Hafela asked, blinking in surprise.

"Not yet," Auriana said firmly. "We've won an important victory today, but we cannot afford to be hasty. Gul'Dan is clever, and I won't risk underestimating his power."

"Never thought I'd hear ye counselling caution, lass," Ironfist guffawed, though Hafela nodded her agreement.

"Do you really want to fight one of those again?" Auriana asked, gesturing to the remains of the iron reaver. "No. We will take the opportunity to secure the Hellbreach, heal our wounded, and bring in reinforcements."

She looked over her shoulder to the right, where Zala'din seemed to be involved in a similar discussion of strategy with his own officers. Aside from Zala'din, Auriana recognised one of the orc sergeants from her time with the Horde war band, as well as the feisty young shaman lieutenant, Te'Jaia. She knew that she wasn't particularly liked by Zala'din's seconds, particularly Te'Jaia, but waiting to assault the Citadel proper would be a rather ineffective strategy if the Horde simply ran headlong at Gul'Dan, and Auriana resolved to speak to Zala'din immediately.

"Wait here," she instructed, and ignoring Ironfist's growl, she walked over towards the Horde lines.

Many of the Horde soldiers looked up as she approached, though none of them moved to bar her path. Surprisingly, the Sunreaver leader Girana nodded to her with grudging respect, and Zala'din's tauren friend Stormrunner even waved. Auriana only had eyes for Zala'din, however, and the Horde commander looked up almost instinctively as she drew near.

Auriana stayed slightly back, jerking her head to the side to indicate that they should talk. He nodded his agreement, much to Te'Jaia's obvious displeasure, and bounded up to the hill towards Auriana. Together, they walked back towards the outer gates, taking up a position midway between the Alliance and Horde camps so that they might speak in private.

"Ya men are pullin' back," Zala'din observed. "Ya givin' up, little lion?"

"Ha!" Auriana barked. "Have you ever known me to run away from a fight? That said… I'm trying to be smart about this, and I suggest that you do the same. I…"

She cut off abruptly as she felt a sudden surge of arcane power, and she whirled with her hands raised defensively. Every muscle tensed, Auriana was ready to call down a spell of terrible power, when she finally recognised the figure who stepped out from the bright light of a teleport.

"The Citadel is breached," the newcomer said, his voice at once both comforting and imposing. "Gul'Dan is within."
"Khadgar!" Auriana exclaimed.

With a genuine smile, she stepped forwards to meet the older mage, and was thoroughly surprised when he pulled her into a tight and affectionate embrace despite her sweat and blood stained robes.

"It's good to see you, Auri," Khadgar said warmly.

"Don'tcha get any ideas about cuddlin' me, mon," Zala'din said, giving the Archmage a toothy grin. "I not be dat kinda troll."

"And you, Zala'din," Khadgar added, his lips twisting into an amused smile.

He released his hold on Auriana's waist, and looked over her head to the shattered remains of the iron reaver.

"I see you've been busy," he said lightly, raising a bushy eyebrow as he surveyed the destruction.

"Well, you know me, Khadgar…" Auriana said slowly. "I like to make an entrance."

"Indeed. When do you intend to begin your assault on the inner Citadel?" Khadgar asked, his face growing unusually stern.

"In the morning. We… well… the Alliance, anyway… are going to set up camp here for the night and bring in our reinforcements," Auriana explained. "The Iron Horde still have troops moving freely in Nagrand and western Tanaan, and I don't want to risk being hit from behind while we're trying to press our assault. I'm sure Gul'Dan has plenty of surprises for us in _there_ without having to worry about attacks from out _here_. Holding the Hellbreach also means we have a strong fall-back position, and a place to evacuate our wounded."

"Da Horde are also in agreement," Zala'din added, pulling on one of his tusks. "As da little lion said… we need ta play dis one smart."

Auriana smiled ever so slightly at Zala'din's acknowledgement of her earlier words, and she silently nodded her thanks.

"A wise decision," Khadgar agreed.

"Well… it had to happen sometime," she said wryly, making Zala'din chuckle.

"You two seem to be on good terms," Khadgar observed, looking between the two of them thoughtfully. "Somewhat unusual for a troll and a human."

Auriana and Zala'din exchanged a look, and the big troll grinned mischievously.

"Lions make good pets," he said slyly. "Especially da little ones."

"And trolls make _excellent_ cannon fodder," Auriana retorted, deadpan. "Especially the big ones."

"Ha!" Zala'din barked, clapping Auriana on the back with such enthusiasm that she staggered.

"Well, whatever the reason, I'm glad you two have found a way to work together," Khadgar said approvingly. "Azeroth needs all the heroes she can get, and we cannot afford to stand divided against an enemy like the Burning Legion."

"So I be learnin'," Zala'din said, looking down at Auriana with a strangely considered expression. "Now dat we got a plan, however… I gotta see to my men. Dat reaver did some serious damage,
and I wanna make sure we be fightin' fit for da assault tomorrow."

He inclined his head respectfully towards Khadgar, and loped back down the hill towards the Horde war band without another word. Both Auriana and Khadgar watched him go, each taking a moment to gather their thoughts. Although she might never have said it, Auriana was very glad to have the elder mage by her side in the upcoming siege. Khadgar knew the depths of Gul'Dan's machinations better than anyone else alive, and if she wanted to win, his help would be invaluable.

"I meant what I said before. It is good to see you," Khadgar said, finally breaking their long silence. "I heard you gave Varian quite the scare during the invasion of Tanaan."

"He worries too much," Auriana said vaguely.

She frowned, wondering how Khadgar had come across word of Varian's impromptu visit to Lunarfall. The Archmage had always had an uncanny sense for gossip, though Auriana found herself slightly perturbed by the fact that he knew more about what was happening in Lunarfall than she had initially realised.

"Still… from what I hear, you were very lucky that Zala'din came along when he did," Khadgar mused. "I don't know what it is about you, but you seem to be a magnet for trouble."

"How did you…? I… ergh, never mind," Auriana grumbled, shaking her head ruefully. "And don't you start. I've already been thoroughly lectured, thank you very much."

Khadgar's eyes twinkled, and he scratched thoughtfully at his chin.

"I can imagine," he said lightly. "The anger of the King of Stormwind is said to be a legendary thing to behold."

"If 'legendary' is another word for 'unnecessary', then... perhaps," Auriana scowled. "I'll tell you what I told him - I know what I'm doing."

She gestured defensively to the debris all around them, slightly miffed by Khadgar and Varian's seeming lack of faith in her destructive powers.

"Oh, I bet he loved being told that. Our fearless King does ever so enjoy his protectiveness," Khadgar mused, clearly enjoying their banter despite the devestation all around him. "Still, I think it's clear that everything between you two worked out eventually."

"Oh, really? And how do you know that?" Auriana asked archly, turning to face him with her hands on her hips. "Are you a mind reader now, as well as an Archmage?"

"I don't have to be a mind reader," Khadgar said gently, folding his arms across his chest and giving her a surprisingly devilish grin. "I can still see the bite marks on your neck, my dear."
Zala'din

The next few hours passed in a blur as Zala'din oversaw the establishment of the Horde war camp, barking orders to his subordinates as they set about preparing for the following day's siege. The most seriously wounded soldiers had been evacuated to Vol'mar, though those who were less badly injured were being treated on site, in hopes that they would be fit to fight on the morrow. He had sent a number of his troops to establish a secure perimeter, while at the same time bringing in more supplies and troops to bolster the strength of the final assault.

From what he could see, the Alliance were also making similar preparations, raising their own bright blue tents beneath the shadow of the mighty Citadel. Like the Horde, they moved with a precise and practiced efficiency, though Zala'din soon realised that they did so without any direction from their diminutive Commander. Despite the fact that night had now fallen over the Hellbreach, Auriana was nowhere to be seen, and Zala'din found it decidedly odd that she would not stay with her men the night before such an important battle.

Frowning, he cast an agitated eye over the battlefield, and was surprised to see a small, pale figure that could only be Auriana standing alone before the shattered gates of the Citadel. She had removed her heavy armour in favour of a dark blue, homespun tunic dress, and against the terrifying depths of the Gul'Dan's fortress, she looked smaller than Zala'din had ever seen her.

He carefully made his way through the debris towards her, wondering why on earth she would approach the Citadel alone, and alone in the dark, at that. As Zala'din drew closer, however, he realised that her hands were both raised, and each glowed with the tell-tale signs of magic. Complex runic circles danced around her fingertips, and she seemed entirely consumed by whatever spell she was attempting to cast.

"Er… little lion? Whatcha doin'?" he asked, approaching Auriana's right flank with great caution. Zala'din was by no means an expert in magic, but even he knew that it was a bad idea to startle a powerful magus in the midst of great sorcery.

"Zala'din," Auriana said, though her eyes never left the Citadel, and magic continued to pour from her hands. "What are you doing here?"

"Ah… I be askin' ya da same question, actually," he repeated, pausing a few feet behind her. "What's with da spell?"

"Gul'Dan is up to something in that Citadel, and I'd like to know what. There's a hell of a lot of magic in the air, and I doubt it's being put to use creating pleasant things," she explained. "I'm casting… well, I suppose you'd call it a spell of scrying, though I'm not having very much luck."

"Aren't ya supposed ta be some kinda magical prodigy?" Zala'din asked, only half-joking. "I seen ya fight, ya got more skill den any mage I ever seen."

"Fightin's one thing, but… I'm not very good at this kind of magic. It's my own fault, really, as an apprentice I always found it… well, boring," she confessed, looking rather sheepish. "Right now… it's akin to a tailor trying to sew with a blacksmith's hammer instead of a needle."

"And I take it ya be da hammer?" Zala'din surmised.

"Precisely," she said, a very small smile pulling at one corner of her lips. "A big, dumb hammer that's gettin'... nowhere."
Her voice was thick with agitation, and her hands pulsed briefly brighter as she attempted once again to penetrate the darkness that enshrouded Hellfire Citadel.

"Could ya not get some help from da Kirin Tor? Or Khadgar?" he wondered, but Auriana shook her head.

"No. Khadgar returned to Zangarra to prepare for tomorrow, and as for the Kirin Tor… they've done enough today already, what with the battle and then teleporting in additional troops and supplies," she explained. "I won't tire them further simply to assuage my own morbid curiosity. It's something of a fool's errand, anyway. I doubt even Khadgar could ever penetrate Gul'Dan's defenses now, he's had too long to build them up."

She lowered her hands in defeat, and rested back against a nearby piece of iron debris with a sigh. Zala'din tentatively moved to sit beside her, half expecting that she would recoil from his sudden closeness, but she barely even acknowledge his presence; her attention still entirely consumed by the black Citadel.

"What about warlocks?" he suggested. "I know we all like ta pretend we don't use dem, but…"

"There are no Alliance warlocks left on Draenor," Auriana snapped, her eyes darkening as if she were focused on something very far away.

"None? Ya killed… all of dem?" Zala'din asked. "Really?"

While he knew that the Alliance garrison had been betrayed by a group of their own warlocks, he hadn't fully appreciated the extent of Auriana's resulting purge. Evidently, she was not the kind of woman who took betrayal lightly.

"Yes," she said coldly. "They were passing information to the Iron Horde in order to orchestrate our defeat, and eventually hand the orcish forces over to the Legion. They were traitors, and they died like traitors."

Auriana closed her eyes, and subconsciously touched a hand to the slight imperfection that broke the otherwise smooth line of her left cheekbone. The pale light of Draenor's twin moons had turned her skin an ever brighter shade of white than normal, and in combination with her deep, shadowed eyes, it made her look positively ghostly.

"It was because of their actions that I ended up in Blackrock Foundry," she murmured.

"I be sorry, little lion," Zala'din said sincerely.

While he didn't know the specifics, he knew that Auriana had been badly tortured by the Warlord Blackhand, and that she still carried the lingering trauma of the experience with her in every waking moment. Zala'din had seen his fair share of battles, thought he couldn't imagine what it might be like to be left powerless before a monster like Blackhand. It was one thing to face pain and death when armed and with a chance to fight, but quite another to face endless torment with no hope of escape or reprisal.

"It's funny," she said, snorting sardonically. "I could almost forgive Blackhand for what he did to me. After all, I'm a commander. I'm a viable military target; it's a risk we all accept when we go into the field. But he tried to use me to get to my King. My King. Some things… some things are unforgivable."

Her normally bright blue eyes were now almost black with suppressed rage, and Zala'din realised that the last place on earth he ever wanted to be was between Auriana and her mate. She had
begrudgingly confirmed to him the extent of her relationship with Varian Wrynn at their last meeting, and her passion for the King of Stormwind burned off her like heat.

"If it be any comfort, I tink Blackhand woulda had his hands full with a man like Wrynn," Zala'din said honestly, trying to lighten her mood. "Sometimes I tink ya King have more of da Horde in 'im, dan da Alliance."

Auriana frowned, and for the first time that night she turned her head to look at him fully.

"Er… no offense," he added quickly.

"No, it isn't that… I know what you mean," she said quietly. "Varian is… well, Varian. He isn't really like other people."

For a split second, her entire face softened as she mentioned the King of Stormwind's name, and for the first time since Zala'din had known her, she looked entirely… human. For as long as he'd known her, Auriana had always possessed a slight air of unreality about her, as if she weren't completely grounded in the natural world. Zala'din wasn't sure if it was her ethereal looks, or her fearsome arsenal of powers, but it was rare to see her surrender to any kind of emotion other than fury.

"And… being a member of the Horde isn't in itself a bad thing, you know," she said, her forehead still deeply furrowed in thought.

"Ya think?" Zala'din asked, playfully bumping her shoulder with his own. "Strange thing ta hear from an Alliance dog."

Auriana looked at him strangely for a long moment, and Zala'din wondered if she might have been genuinely insulted. She was a difficult person to read at the best of times, though Zala'din hoped he knew her well enough not to have made a grave miscalculation.

"Watch your mouth, Horde scum," she retorted slowly, her delicate eyebrows raised.

She shot him a falsely serious glare, though only managed to hold the expression for a few seconds before she was forced to bark out a brief but genuine laugh. Zala'din, too, found himself chuckling, and they eventually fell into a deep but companionable silence.

Pleased that he had been able to make Auriana laugh, he sighed, and languidly stretched out his long legs. Despite the forbidding orc Citadel looming above them, it was a surprisingly pleasant night, and Zala'din found himself rather enjoying Auriana's unexpected company. She, too, seemed quite content to sit silently by his side, leaning her head backwards so that she might stare up at the canopy of stars as she lost herself in her thoughts. Her expression could have very nearly been described serene, and for a second Zala'din could almost forget that she was a battle-hardened sorceress of terrible power.

In any case, Zala'din was certainly in no hurry to interrupt her deep reverie, and was somewhat surprised when Auriana finally broke the long silence herself.

"Zal…" she murmured, her voice uncharacteristically soft, "Whatever happens tomorrow… I wanted to thank you."

"Tank me? Why?"

"Way back at the start of all this… when I asked you to fight alongside the Alliance at Grommashar… you came," she said slowly. "You had no reason to trust me, and ever since then…"
well, I think we've been able to really build something. Not everyone in your position would have
done the same. You took a chance on me, and... I'm grateful."

"It be a risk dat paid off," he said firmly, believing it to be nothing less than the absolute truth. "Ya
not da only one dat's grateful. On da battlefield, ya worth ya weight in gold, believe me."

"Ah… was that supposed to be a compliment? You can see me, right? You know I weigh about as
much as a bag of feathers," Auriana quipped, making Zala'din laugh once more.

She shook her head in wry amusement, and with a reluctant sigh pushed off the debris supporting
her weight.

"I really should head back to camp," she admitted. "Having godlike powers doesn't really mean
much if you can barely keep your eyes open."

"I should be off ta my own tent, as well," Zala'din agreed, giving her his toothiest grin. "I be
needing my beauty sleep."

"Well, that's for damn sure," she muttered slyly, giving him one last wicked grin before she turned
to make her way back towards the Alliance camp. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"See ya tomorrow," he echoed, his gaze following Auriana's path until she was finally swallowed
up by the bright lights of the Alliance camp.

Despite what he had said to her, however, Zala'din did not leave his perch immediately, instead
choosing to linger out in the pleasantly cool open air. The night before a big battle was always a
strange time of restless contemplation, and Zala'din admittedly appreciated the opportunity to calm
his nerves away from the hustle and bustle of the Horde war camp.

After a while, Zala'din shut his eyes and began to breathe deeply as he dropped into a waking
meditation, only to be terribly surprised as he was suddenly hit upside the head. His eyes
immediately flew open and he reached for his attacker on instinct, pushing the offending hand
away from his head with his forearm. He twisted his weight expertly, reaching for the assailant's
throat and throwing the humanoid creature hard up against the wall of debris. Snarling in anger, he
was just about to finish it off with a brutal punch to the face, when his initial haze of alarm cleared,
and he realised that he was choking Te'Jaia, of all people.

"What da hell are ya doin', Zal?" she demanded haughtily, seeming to care very little for the fact
that his hand was around her throat, nor for the fact that she had just assaulted her commanding
officer.

"Whatcha mean, what am I doin'?" he growled, instantly releasing her from his grasp. "I not be the
one goin' around hittin' other people for no good reason! Are ya insane? I coulda killed ya!"

"No good reason?" she repeated angrily. "Ya out here colludin' with an Alliance commander like…
like ya some kinda friends! Do ya have any idea what dat looks like?"

"We are friends!" Zala'din roared, furious beyond belief. "It ain't a crime ta have friends, human or
otherwise. Ya got no right ta interfere in my affairs, Jaia."

Te'Jaia had made no secret of her dislike of Auriana, and with Auriana's own prodding, Zala'din
had eventually come to realise it was not simply an issue of faction pride. Still, Te'Jaia had mostly
confined her displeasure to quiet grumbles and some pointed comments whenever Auriana or the
Alliance came up in conversation. Zala'din wasn't entirely sure what had provoked her particular
outburst tonight, but he didn't particularly appreciate her new method of communication.
"It not be right, Zal, sittin' out here at night, all cosy and alone with her," Te'Jaia pleaded, her ears going bright red.

"What are ya, jealous?" he growled, throwing up his hands in exasperation. "Da Commander be an ally, an' a good one at dat."

"It be more dan dat," Te'Jaia countered, flushing with anger and embarrassment as her lips pulled into a barely perceptible pout. "I know ya, Zal, and I know when ya not tellin' me da whole truth."

"I be ya commander," Zala'din reminded her sternly. "I don't always have ta tell ya da whole truth."

He stepped away from her and rubbed the back of his head ruefully.

"Specially when ya decide ta clock me upside da head," he muttered.

"Suit yaself, Commander," Te'Jaia said archly, looking supremely disdainful. "I just figured ya should know dat dere's rumours. Amongst da men. Dat ya beddin' her… or at least ya want ta, and sittin' out here with her like dat isn't really helpin' matters much."

Zala'din blinked in genuine surprise, thrown by the sudden allegation. Whatever he had expected Te'Jaia to say, it certainly wasn't that, and he couldn't quite believe that anyone would draw such conclusions from his relationship with Auriana.

"Beddin' her?" he repeated, entirely bewildered. "By all da loa, why would I wanna do dat?"

"I dunno," Te'Jaia said, shrugging. "Ya show her a lotta favour, is all. People talk."

"What, an' a man and a woman can't be friends without one wantin' ta bed da other?" Zala'din growled hotly. "Lemme make one ting clear, Jaia, I have no interest Auriana. She wins battles. End of story."

Te'Jaia looked slightly mollified by his fervent denial, but placating her did little to assuage Zala'din's own irritation. The entire idea was, quite frankly, ludicrous, and he had to imagine that Auriana was perhaps the last person on earth he would ever consider becoming involved with. He also didn't like the idea of his men spreading baseless rumours when there were far more important problems to contend with.

"Gul'Dan tearing da whole world apart, and all people care about is where I like ta stick my snake, he grumbled inwardly, still not quite believing that such rumours could exist.

"Look… I dunno if she be pretty by human standards, but she be hardly comparable to a troll," he said seriously, determined to be finished with the issue once and for all. "Any troll child born dat small and colourless would be abandoned by da tribe - and with good reason. A real woman should have tusks, and colour, and muscles… like… well, like ya do, Jaia. Auriana, on da other hand… she may as well be one of dem night elf wisps for all da substance she has to her."

Te'Jaia's eyes went wide, and any lingering anger in her expression vanished in an instant. Her posture slumped and she blushed brilliantly red, and it was only then that Zala'din realised that he had complimented her great beauty aloud. It wasn't that he didn't find her attractive, of course, far from it, but more the fact that it wasn't exactly the sort of thing one generally said to a fellow soldier.

"Er… I very much doubt she has a taste for trolls, either," he added quickly, inwardly cursing his awkward slip. "We just… get along."
"I… alright," Te'Jaia said, all her fight suddenly gone. "Dat… dat makes sense. I… sorry. I shouldn't'a accused ya like dat."

"Shouldn't'a smacked me in da head, either, but dese tings happen," Zala'din said wryly.

He gave her a small smile to let her know that he accepted her apology, and folded his arms across his chest. Te'Jaia's fiery personality was one of the things he liked most about her, though he did hope she would gain a bit more wisdom and perspective as she aged. She was still very young, and had not yet learned to temper her volatile passion with calmer judgement. She was also very pretty when she looked abashed, and Zala'din found he couldn't entirely begrudge her suspicions.

"Ya are right, in a way," he admitted quietly. "If I'm bein' honest… dere's a bit more ta how I tink about Auriana den I let on. She… she reminds me of someone."

"Really?" Te'Jaia asked, genuinely curious. "Who?"

"I had a sister, ya know," Zala'din said quietly. "Her name was Sen'jabra… Senja."

"'Had?" Te'Jaia repeated, her eyes narrowing perceptively. "She be dead?"

Despite the seriousness of the conversation, Zala'din couldn't help but to let out a dry chuckle at Te'Jaia's characteristic bluntness. If nothing else, he could always count on her for uncensored honesty, and in truth he found her attitude rather refreshing.

"Yes," he replied, his hands inadvertently clenching into fists. "Prettiest little troll ya ever saw. Fierce as a bull raptor, and unbelievably skilled with a knife. If she wanted ya dead… ya throat be cut before ya even realised she be dere."

He tilted his head back to look up at the moons, smiling ever so slightly in fond memory of his sister. Zala'din was at heart a pragmatic troll, and it had been some time since he had allowed himself to dwell upon thoughts of his past. As far as he was concerned, the only thing that mattered was the here and now. The past could not be changed, and the future could not be predicted, though Senja seemed to be the exception to his rule. He could picture her as clearly as if she were standing beside him right now, with her vivid blue skin, fire-orange hair, and a smile so bright that it put the sun to shame.

"She was killed when Vol'jin retook da Echo Isles from Zalazane," he explained heavily. "She loved ta fight more den anyting, and… well…. she was young, and reckless. Let's just say she got more of a fight den she bargained for."

"I'm sorry, Zal," Te'Jaia said, her voice softening with sincerity. "I know what it be like ta lose family. But… I still don't understand what all dis has ta do wit dat Alliance commander."

"I'm gettin' there, girl," Zala'din growled, though he pulled a face to let her know that he wasn't really angry. "If ya'd let me finish… da first time I saw Auriana… she may be human, but she and Senja, dey have same eyes. Da same spirit. All fight, and fire, and stubbornness."

He sighed, trying not to picture Senja's death in his mind's eye. He had been there, fighting alongside Vol'jin and the other Darkspear, but despite all his skill, he had not been able to save his sister from her own hubris.

"It might be silly, but I figure… I couldn't protect Senja, but if I could protect someone like her… someone like Auriana… I dunno…" he added, shrugging. "Maybe it would balance tings out."

Te'Jaia nodded, slowly considering the new information. She no longer looked quite so
disconcerted by the mention of Auriana's name, though it was clear that she didn't entirely understand Zala'din's reasoning, either.

"I… she still be Alliance, Zal. Human," she murmured, her face inscrutable.

"Yeah. I know. But… dis fightin' between da Alliance and da Horde… aren'tcha sick of it, sometimes?" Zala'din wondered, finally giving voice to something that had plagued him since the Siege of Orgrimmar. "Believe me, I never thought I'd be callin' a human my friend, but… dey not so different from us, really. Dey wanna protect home, and family. Dey wanna be brave, and honourable. Dey wanna be remembered."

Te'Jaia nodded seriously, and for the first time Zala'din felt that she might actually understand where he was coming from.

"Don't we all," she said faintly.

She turned to face him fully, the moonlight glinting off her short, sharp tusks, and Zala'din took a moment to fully appreciate her beauty. It was difficult to notice, sometimes, beneath all her youthful bravado and her smart mouth, but she really was an exceptional example of trollish womanhood.

"I reckon people'd have a hard time forgettin' ya, Jaia," Zala'din admitted slowly.

He hadn't entirely meant to say the words out loud, and judging from the look on her face, Te'Jaia hadn't exactly been expecting such an admission, either. Some kind of indescribable emotion crossed her face, but before Zala'din could figure out what she was thinking, he found himself taking a blow to the head for the second time that day. Te'Jaia lunged to his side faster than he thought her capable of moving, and somehow managed to throw his considerable bulk handily over her hip.

Zala'din's was not the Commander of Frostwall for nothing, however, and he grasped Te'Jaia's wrist before she darted away, pulling her down to the ground with him. The two trolls rolled over in the dirt, each seeking to gain the upper hand, though in the end it was Te'Jaia who proved victorious. She gnashed her tusks triumphantly as she pinned Zala'din beneath her powerful thighs, and it was only then that he realised that her sudden actions represented neither challenge nor censure, but rather an invitation.

With a somewhat tentative grin, Te'Jaia pushed her weight off him and rose to her feet, brushing the dirt off her breeches. She casually brushed a long strand of her wild hair behind her ear as she stared him down, and for the longest time neither of them dared to speak. Eventually, however, she turned to leave, only to pause at the last second so that she could look back at Zala'din over her shoulder.

"Zal…" she murmured, her voice all of a sudden rich and sweet as honey, "Ya know someting? After dis war is over… I tink we gonna have to have a good long fight… just ya and me. Yeah?"

Her rich amber eyes were alive with promise, shining brightly beneath the moonlight, and Zala'din found himself tongue tied as she sauntered away. His throat was completely dry, and for the very first time he let himself really imagine what it might be like to take Te'Jaia as his mate.

"I… yeah…" he muttered throatily to himself, resting his head back against the ground as he tried to make sense of the bewildering course of their conversation. "Ya know what? I'd like dat…"
When Zala'din awoke the next day, both the Horde and Alliance camps were a flurry of activity. Despite the fact that it was barely an hour after dawn, the majority of the Horde war band were already awake and making their final preparations for the siege. The air was thick with the sound of iron on steel as last minute repairs were made and weapons were sharpened; and nearly everywhere Zala'din walked he heard good-natured taunts or bold shouts of bravado.

The Horde war band seemed to be in high spirits, fresh off the back of their victory the previous day. Zala'din knew his men were not stupid, and that they understood the danger posed by the upcoming siege, but it pleased him greatly to see that they were not cowed by the prospect of facing Gul'Dan. The orc warlock had an almost mythical reputation, particularly amongst his own kind, and it would not have surprised Zala'din if they were somewhat reluctant to face him. Nevertheless, it seemed that there was not a man or woman amongst the Horde who had not awoken with the fire of battle in their veins, and Zala'din found his own bloodlust building as he shouldered his own well-worn armour and sheathed his twin blades.

As soon as he had made his own personal preparations for war, Zala'din went in search of Te'Jaia and his other lieutenants, and ordered them to begin marshalling his troops towards the Citadel. He had no idea what awaited him inside the forbidding stronghold, but he wanted to press the attack as soon as possible, in order to deny Gul'Dan any further opportunity to build up his defenses. They may have survived the opening of the Citadel gates with limited casualties, but Zala'din knew that taking the Citadel proper would be a far more difficult task, and would almost certainly come at a price.

Fortunately, in addition to his own troops, Zala'din had called on the aid of Durotan's loyal Frostwolves, who were just as eager to reclaim their homeland as Zala'din was to defend Azeroth. A complement of elite Frostwolf warriors had arrived late the previous night, mounted upon their namesake wolves and lead by the huge warlord himself. Zala'din glanced in the direction of the impressive orcs as he walked by, nodding briefly to Durotan before turning his attention to the Alliance encampment.

The Alliance had awoken just as early as the Horde, and Zala'din was entirely unsurprised to see that Auriana already had her men formed up in neat lines and moving towards the yawning Citadel entrance. She stood at the head of a great blue column, her dark hair gleaming in the early morning sunlight as she barked out order after order. Archmage Khadgar waited by her right hand side, looking steely eyed and determined, and Zala'din was abruptly reminded that he was looking at two of the most powerful living sorcerers on Draenor. Even at this distance, Khadgar exuded an aura of quiet command, while Auriana possessed a sheer force of presence that belied her otherwise unimpressive stature. The arcane scars on her arms were already ablaze with light, and Zala'din could read her well enough by now to know that she was most definitely spoiling for a fight.

Of course, she wasn't the only one. The Alliance troops seemed to have caught the same eager, lusty battle fever that now raced throughout the Horde; and even the normally stoic Kirin Tor mages looked rather restless. Zala'din also noted the presence of a dozen heavily armoured paladin lead by a pale-haired draenei woman that could only be Exarch Yrel, come to lend her aid in the fight against Gul'Dan. He felt a strange upsurge of guilt as he started at the Exarch, knowing full well that war had come to her lands as a result of the actions of Garrosh Hellscream, and he silently made a promise to undo the damage that had been wrought.

Coughing slightly to clear his throat, Zala'din made his way over towards Auriana and Khadgar,
feeling the flesh on the back of his neck tingle beneath the curious glances of the Alliance troops that came his way. His thoughts briefly drifted toward his conversation with Te'Jaia the previous night, and wondered if people really did suspect some kind of sordid relationship between him and Auriana. Such an idea was patently ridiculous, of course, but Zala'din supposed that people had dreamed up stranger things.

Both Auriana and Khadgar looked up as he approached, and Auriana made a small hand gesture to prevent her overzealous bodyguard from raising arms against Zala'din. It was clear that the death knight would have preferred Zala'din stay well away from his commander; and from the look on his face, he probably would have also preferred if Zala'din were six feet under. Of course, Zala'din was hardly offended, and in fact had to smother a quick grin at the dwarf's furious enthusiasm. Given Auriana's penchant for putting herself in mortal peril, an officious bodyguard was exactly what she needed, and he could at the very least commend the dwarf's loyalty.

"Greetings," Zala'din said lightly, nodding to each mage in turn, while at the same time pointedly ignoring the dwarf bodyguard.

"Hello, Zala'din. Nice day for a siege, don't you think?" Khadgar asked, sounding for all the world as if he were about to go for a relaxing stroll, instead of assaulting a fortress controlled by agents of the Burning Legion.

Despite the casualness of Khadgar's tone, however, Zala'din didn't miss the way his hands had reflexively balled into fists at his sides, and he realised that the elder mage had more of stake in this fight than almost anyone else. He was also acutely aware of a strange tension between the grey-haired man and his young protégé. Khadgar's gaze darted towards Auriana more often than was natural, though she steadfastly refused to look in the older mage's direction. Zala'din frowned slightly, but as he had no desire to interfere in the affairs of mages, he declined to voice his concerns out loud.

"It be an excellent day for a battle," he agreed smoothly, looking up at the towering Citadel above them.

"Ready to fight?" Auriana asked, her voice sharp with restless energy. "Once we're in, we aren't coming out until Gul'Dan is dead."

"It will be my genuine pleasure ta slit him from ear ta ear," Zala'din growled, meaning every word.

"Yeah, well... get in line," Auriana said grimly.

She looked out over her troops, her lips drawing into a thin line, and she sighed.

"Sometin' wrong?" Zala'din asked, following her line of sight.

"I just hate knowing that some of them are going to die today," she admitted quietly. "Probably a great many of them, in fact."

"I know how ya feel," Zala'din said honestly. "But I also know dat any warriors who die today will not have died in vain. Da fate of two worlds rests on da success of dis assault, and we gonna make every second count."

"Well spoken," Khadgar said, though while his words were directed at Zala'din, his gaze was once again fixed on Auriana. "Are the Horde in position?"

Zala'din gestured behind him, where the Horde, the Sunreavers, and their Frostwolf allies had begun to move into place opposite the Alliance. Eager not to be outdone by the soldiers of
Lunarfall, they had formed ranks with clockwork precision, the black and red of their banners waving proudly in the breeze.

"Da Horde always be ready ta fight!" Zala'din said confidently. "Dey will move on my order."

"Then I suggest you give it," Khadgar said seriously. "Gul'Dan's reign ends now."

Zala'din grinned savagely as he turned away to address his troops, only to feel the press of a small hand on his arm. He looked down to see Auriana's pale fingers wrapped around his vibrant blue wrist, gently holding him back as she stared up at him with enormous eyes.

"Wait," she said quietly. "We're attacking together… we should rally them together."

Zala'din paused, considering the wisdom of her suggestion. While many in the Horde had accepted Auriana's aid in good faith, there was still plenty of animosity towards the Alliance lurking just below the surface. Zala'din had very deliberately chosen the soldiers that he considered the least volatile, and the most likely to follow his orders regarding the Alliance for this assault. That said, even in the presence of some of the more tolerant and open-minded members of the Horde, he could appreciate the importance of leading by his own example.

He quickly nodded his agreement to Auriana, and together they mounted the stairs of the Citadel to look at over their combined forces.

"Soldiers of da Horde and da Alliance!" Zala'din shouted, freeing his blades from their sheaths. "Ya all fought hard durin' dis long campaign, and ya now stand before da final challenge. Da freedom of Draenor rests upon ya shoulders!"

"Check your aim! We are here for Gul'Dan and his foul minions, and them alone," Auriana added, staring imperiously at both Zala'din's men and her own. "The Iron Horde has threatened all of Azeroth, and today is the day that Azeroth fights back!"

"For da Horde!" Zala'din hollered, raising one of his blades aloft.

"For the Alliance!" Auriana answered, adding her voice to the almost deafening din as the Horde and the Alliance roared their fury before the Citadel. "To arms, soldiers of Azeroth!"

Without any further preamble, Zala'din spun on his heel and sprinted into the yawning maw of the Citadel's entrance; the very first soldier to cross the darkened threshold into hell. As his eyes adjusted to the low light, he saw a large company of hulking fel orcs awaiting him, and he slammed into the nearest warrior with as much fury as he could muster. He was not alone, however, as a flash of arcane light signalled Auriana's arrival at his side. She threw herself right into the melee with her trademark élan, sending a veritable storm of icicles flying from her fingertips as she darted in and around the fel orcs.

Zala'din watched her from the corner of his eye as he crossed swords with a particularly bulky orc. He blocked the brute's overhead strike with his right hand blade, while raking his second sword across the orc's belly. The orc fell to his knees as his entrails spilled across the floor, and Zala'din was forced to lunge to the side to avoid slipping on the blood and gore. He grunted slightly as he suddenly took a blow to the shoulder, catching it harmlessly on his heavy plate pauldron, and twisted to his left. He thrust his left-hand blade forwards, catching a second orc just below the ribs, and held the orc firmly in place while he drove his main hand sword through the creature's neck. The orc gurgled horribly as he died, but Zala'din was already gone, leaping over the corpses of two fel orcs as he sought his next fight.
Within a few brutal minutes, the fel orc company were lying dead or dying all around, at no cost to either the Horde or the Alliance. Of course, Zala'din knew it was a very small victory, and he silently reminded himself not to get cocky. These orcs were nothing but cannon fodder, sent by Gul'Dan to test the strength of the Azerothian forces. The true test of skill would lie deeper in the Citadel, and Zala'din would need a clear mind to emerge victorious.

He walked over to Auriana, who was frowning as she nudged a dead orc contemplatively with the toe of her boot.

"It be a little crowded in here," he observed, casually nodding his head towards the masses of Horde and Alliance soldiers awkwardly filling the corridor behind them.

Despite the fact that they were ostensibly working together in a combined assault, both the Horde and the Alliance seemed to be trying to stay as far away from one another as possible. Unfortunately, it was proving to be rather difficult in the narrow confines of the Citadel's corridors, and Zala'din saw more than once soldier jump as they accidentally bumped shoulders or elbows with a member of the opposite faction. The Horde and Alliance may have been willing to fight alongside one another for the purposes of taking down Gul'Dan, but it was abundantly clear that there was still a long way to go before relations between the factions were truly amicable.

"Yes," Auriana said, wrinkling her nose delicately. "And it smells like feet."

She signalled both Zala'din and her eager bodyguard to stay put, and was quickly swallowed up by the gloom as she took a few tentative steps forward into the dark passageway before them. Hellfire Citadel was a labyrinth of dank passages and vaulted ceilings, and it possessed an evil and cloying aura that made Zala'din's hair stand on end. Much of the stonework had been shattered or melted away by the thick fel sludge that oozed from the very walls and coated the floor, and their air was filled with the distant sound of low, eerie moaning.

Zala'din shifted uncomfortably as he waited several long minutes for Auriana's return, and actually breathed a sigh of relief when her pale face finally loomed out of the darkness.

"I'm all but certain Gul'Dan is above, but we're going to have to fight our way up there," she said, seemingly unconcerned by the fel horror of their surroundings. "The passage splits up ahead, and I think we'd be wise to do the same. So… do you want to continue on down the creepy corridor, or head outside into the pit of unknown terrors?"

"Well, ya make both sound so excitin'..." Zala'din remarked, giving her a sarcastic grin. "I guess da Horde will take da pit."

"Sounds good to me, I've always been a corridor sort of girl anyway," Auriana retorted drily. "If we split up, we can clear the lower levels quickly, then make our way upwards to Gul'Dan. That said, I don't think either of us should fight him alone. He is not to be underestimated."

"I agree," Zala'din said seriously, knowing full well the kind of power the orc warlock could bring to bear. "We started dis together, we finish it together. For Azeroth."

Auriana nodded, biting her lip anxiously as she looked back towards her men.

"For Azeroth," she echoed quietly. "Good luck, Zal."

She smiled at him faintly, her blue eyes remarkably intense, before walking away to call her troops to attention. Under her expert guidance, the Alliance reformed their lines within minutes, vanishing down the largest nearby passageway and leaving the soldiers of the Horde alone in the Citadel
"In ta da pit we go..." Zala'din muttered under his breath, tightening his grip on his swords as he gave the signal to move out.

The Horde formed up into two neat columns as Zala'din lead them down the passageway to his right. The floor was littered with large chunks of shattered rocks, and Zala'din wondered if it was the influence of the fel that had caused the Citadel to begin to decay from the inside. For a troll born and bred in the wild jungles of Azeroth, Gul'Dan's fortress was almost chokingly oppressive, and he was surprisingly grateful when he stepped across the threshold at the end of the corridor.

Of course, while the pit was ostensibly out in the open, Zala'din instinctively knew that no true sunlight had ever touched this place. The air hummed with dark energy, and Zala'din's gaze was drawn to three foul-coloured pools tended by an array of fel corrupted orcs. Three monstrous beasts patrolled around the outside of the pit, roaring occasionally as they were subjected to the magic of their orcish captors. Each of the three giants was possessed of rocky, overdeveloped forearms and a single enormous eye perched above a tusked maw. Somewhat unnervingly, all three eyes were now firmly fixed on Zala'din, and the largest of the three creatures took an earth-shattering step forward and bellowed.

"Magnaron..." he breathed, setting his jaw in preparation for what promised to be a serious fight.

The magnaron's roar had attracted the attention of the fel orcs, and they quickly abandoned their attempts to infuse the giants with dark energy in order to turn their attention to the warriors of the Horde.

"Ta arms!" Zala'din shouted, as both the magnaron and the orcish sorcerers began to charge his position.

He leapt forwards, ducking under the swing of a magnaron's fist as he sought out the nearest orc felcaster. Zala'din didn't know much about magic, but he figured if the orcs were somehow bolstering the magnaron's power with their spells, then killing them as quickly as possible would help to weaken the rock giants. Trusting that his heavier juggernauts would keep the magnaron occupied, he lunged at the nearest orc, opening her throat in a macabre grin before she'd even had a chance to scream.

Zala'din spun and eagerly sought his next target, only to gasp as he was hit in the chest by a sudden burst of green energy, and he grunted in pain as he felt the primal energies leech away his life force. It seemed that several of his comrades in arms had also been hit by the spell, and were struggling to move under the power of the fel orcs' oppressive magics. Snarling, Zala'din lunged for the nearest source of the primal power, a slender she-orc with a ruined face and mad eyes. She raised her hands to curse him as he sprinted towards her, but he ducked to the side and drove both his swords deep into her gut.

He immediately felt the pain in his chest lessen as she died, but there was no time to dwell on such a small victory. Zala'din winced as a blood elf priest beside him abruptly burst into flames, and he was forced to dodge to the side as she perished with a tortured scream. Elsewhere, the fel orcs had inflicted some of his other soldiers with some kind of strange, shadowy malady; while the three magnaron simply rampaged around and tore up the earth beneath them.

Gritting his teeth, Zala'din redoubled his efforts to eliminate the orc spellcasters. He was soon breathing heavily as he raged around the pit like a madman, dodging pools of flame and shadow as he cut down caster after caster. Eventually, only the three magnaron were left, and without the protection of their fel infusers, they were soon hacked to pieces by the Horde. Magnaron were
strong and dangerous, but they weren't invincible, and they were certainly susceptible to an attack by a coordinated force with superior numbers.

Unfortunately, the Horde's victory over the magnaron had not come without sacrifice. Zala'din regrettfully noted that several of his men lay dead or wounded, including the unfortunate blood elf priest he had encountered earlier. Those that could no longer fight were being evacuated to the Horde staging area, while those that were able to continue had pulled back to receive healing.

"Still… suppose it coulda been worse," he muttered to himself as he dug both of his swords into the ground and surveyed the destruction.

"We were never in any real danger of losin'," a voice behind him said assuredly, and Zala'din turned about with a wry expression. "Nothin' is stronger den da Horde!"

Somehow during the fight, he had ended up alongside Te'Jaia, who grinned as he caught her eye, and wiped the blood and grime from her forehead with an air of nonchalant bravado. Fortunately, it seemed as if she had escaped the first two engagements entirely unharmed, with her contagious aura of self-confidence well intact.

"We got a long way ta go yet, Jaia," Zala'din reminded her sternly. "Dis is just da beginnin'. I don't doubt dat Gul'Dan got plenty more nasties hidden away up in dat Citadel."

Te'Jaia pulled a face and began to argue, only to be interrupted by a low and unearthly groan that seemed to have emanated from the sludgy green pool at the far end of the pit. She whirled to face the sound, her mouth falling open in genuine surprise as a fourth magnaron slowly began to climb its way out of the pool. Zala'din's hands instantly flew to the hilt of his twin blades, and gestured for his men to form up behind him.

The height and breadth of the magnaron quite simply put the other three to shame, and Zala'din felt his mouth go suddenly dry. It was at least twice the size of the dead beasts that now lay at its feet, and infused with the same fel energy that had corrupted the orcs. Its left arm and shoulder had erupted in monstrous, unnatural spikes, and its single eye glowed with the distinctive, unerringly green taint of fel magic. It lumbered slowly out of the pool, its knuckles grating across the pit floor, before it slammed a fist into the ground and roared so loudly that the entire Horde army reflexively winced.

"Don'tcha just stand dere gawping at it, kill it!" Zala'din shouted. "Charge!"

A massive tauren Sunwalker was the first to move, and he hurled his shield into the magnaron's ugly face to attract its attention as the rest of the Horde army moved to attack. The magnaron bellowed angrily, as if it couldn't quite believe that such puny creatures would dare to move against it, and it slammed its fists into the floor. Zala'din dashed to the side as the ground beneath him rippled unnaturally, and came very close to losing his balance. The shockwave from the magnaron's attack was enough to rattle his teeth inside his head, and he felt a sudden surge of pity for the poor Sunwalker taking the brunt of its fury. He made to position himself of to the side, where he could hack at the creature's legs, but he may as well have been chopping at a rock wall for all the good it seemed to be doing. Above him, he could see bright flashes of magic as his casters threw themselves into the fray, and he could only hope that they would have more luck bringing the magnaron to heel.

Abruptly, the earth beneath Zala'din's feet shifted once more, and he cried out in genuine surprise as the rocky ground seemed to rise up and grip his body tight. He looked to the side, and with a rising sense of alarm saw that each and every Horde soldier had been similarly encumbered, and were now being slowly crushed to death by the strength of the earth. Zala'din called on his deepest
reserves of energy to slash furiously at the rock that now held him fast. Chunks of earth went flying, but only with considerable effort was he finally able to free himself.

Having discovered that the grasping hands of earth could at least be destroyed, Zala'din leapt towards his nearest ally to lend his aid. Fortunately, a number of other soldiers had also realised that they could free themselves, and the Horde quickly rallied to destroy the crushing earth before the magnaron pounded them all into oblivion. Once free, the Horde's concentrated attack on the creature resumed once more, and after a few more minutes of intense fighting, they forced it to retreat away from the green fel pool and towards the red.

Zala'din fell on the magnaron in a flurry of steel, hoping that the beast would no longer be able to draw power from the dark magic of the sludgy green pool. Unfortunately, it seemed as if he had just replaced one problem with another, as the magnaron slammed its fist into the ground once more, and summoned an array of bright red runemarks all across the pit. Confused, Zala'din rolled to the side to avoid standing on the fel mark, only cry out in pain as the rune exploded and sent pure fire racing through his veins.

He looked about wildly, and was horrified to see that his entire fighting force had been affected by the runic blast. It became nearly impossible to concentrate on anything but the His grip tightened desperately on his blades, when he suddenly felt the soothing rain of a shaman's healing magic wash over him. Mercifully, the burning sensation lessened within moments, and Zala'din found he was able to clear his head enough to throw himself back into the fight.

Unfortunately, the magnaron was not nearly as dull as it looked, and it had clearly realised the explosive power of its runic spell. Another wave of red marks blossomed across the pit floor almost immediately following the first, sending Zala'din's heart jumping nervously into his throat.

"Don't let da runes explode!" he hollered, lunging for the nearest offending mark and damaging it with a scrape of his foot. "We can't survive another blast like dat!"

Hoping that it would be enough to prevent the runes from exploding with full force, he sprinted to the next closest rune, and the next, damaging each as he ran. Several of his allies had also taken up the cause, and by some minor miracle the Horde managed to damage each rune before they exploded. Unencumbered by the magnaron's magic, they were able to resume their assault with renewed fury, and soon the beast was groaning in agony beneath the combined power of sword and spell. The speed of its pounding fists had slowed considerably, and it no longer seemed to have the energy to conjure any more of the devastating red runes.

Just as Zala'din thought the Horde might be gaining the upper hand, however, the magnaron abruptly stunned the Sunwalker holding its attention with a brutal blow to the side of his head, and leapt high in the air in the direction of the purple pool. From what Zala'din could tell, the creature seemed to be gaining power from whatever fel magic had corrupted the waters, and he could only wonder what fresh hell would emerge from this third pool.

Unhappily, he didn't have to wait long for an answer, as the magnaron used the last of its strength to summon endless waves of creeping shadow energy. An unlucky goblin hunter was caught standing at the pool's edge, and was instantly devoured by a dark purple wave. He died almost immediately, crumbling to the ground before he'd even had a chance to move.

"Do not get hit!" Zala'din roared, dodging between the waves as he fought to make his way back to the magnaron. "Ya wanna live, ya better run!"

As far as he was concerned, the sooner the beast died, the better, as he wasn't sure whether his troops could take much more punishment. As he was about to close in on the magnaron, however,
something in the corner of his eye diverted his attention. Te'Jaia was still up and fighting, flinging bolt after bolt of lightning at the magnaron's side, but she was so focused on her magic that she had failed to notice a fresh wave of shadow energy forming right behind her. There was no doubt in Zala'din's mind that she was in a great deal of trouble, and he abruptly diverted his course to intercept her.

With a wordless shout, he threw his swords to the side and ploughed into the younger troll, tackling her out of the way just as the shadow wave threatened to engulf her from behind. Together, they went sprawling into the dirt, Zala'din placing his hand protectively over head to protect her from harm. He felt her struggle instinctively beneath him, only to go abruptly still as she realised how close to death she had actually come.

"Still tink dis be easy, Jaia?" he muttered in her ear, rolling off her to one side so that he might clamber back to his feet.

Zala'din offered her a hand and pulled her upright, though the moment he was sure she was safe he moved to recover his swords and re-join the battle. He thought she might have said something in reply, but right now he had bigger problems than Te'Jaia's smart mouth. The magnaron was still fighting, though it seemed the effort of summoning the shadow waves may have been its undoing. Several Horde had fallen to the unexpected assault, but far more remained on their feet. Zala'din's melee soldiers had managed to close the distance of the magnaron's leap and slashed at the ailing creature with renewed vigour, while his casters continued to harass it mercilessly with spells.

The magnaron's bellows had increased in both pitch and frequency, and Zala'din knew a dying creature when he heard one. It had put up an admirable fight, but in the end the sheer numbers and quick thinking of the Horde would prove to be its undoing. Sensing victory, Zala'din dove forward, both swords raised overhead, and drove the blades deep into the back of the magnaron's left leg. The twin blades bit true, finally breaking through the creature's rocky hide, and it stumbled to one knee with an agonised roar. A nearby frost mage compounded Zala'din's efforts by freezing the magnaron's wounded leg in place, while a group of shaman burned clear through its right arm with a coordinated burst of searing lava. Zala'din held tight to the hilt of his swords as the beast toppled into the dirt, still swiping at the Horde with its one good arm, and roared in triumph as the brave Sunwalker juggernaut at last stepped forward and pounded the magnaron's head into dust.
Auriana lead the Alliance down into the darkness, keeping her attention carefully focused on the path ahead. Light knew what kind of monsters Gul'Dan kept hidden in these halls, and Auriana was in no mood for surprises. She had slept poorly the night before, tormented by dreams of the Burning Legion and the destruction of both Draenor and Azeroth. In her nightmares, the demonic hordes stood victorious, laughing at her from atop the smouldering ruins of Lunarfall. Her dreams became even darker as the night wore on, and she only narrowly avoided waking with a scream after envisioning Varian's fel-charred corpse impaled upon the ramparts of Stormwind.

Her lack of sleep made it somewhat difficult to remain focused; a problem further exacerbated by the generally creepy atmosphere of Hellfire Citadel, and the small metal object currently burning a hole in the pocket of her robes. After dreaming of Varian's horrific death, Auriana had naturally been unable to return to sleep, and she had instead donned her armour and gone for a walk around the war camp in the pre-dawn light. The vast majority of the camp had still been asleep, with the notable exception of Khadgar, who had caught up to her as she had made a lonely patrol beneath the shadow of the Citadel.

"Morning," he had said lightly, though his eyes had been hard.

Khadgar frequently presented himself as a kind and somewhat eccentric gentleman, but Auriana knew that beneath his genteel exterior lurked a steely determination unmatched by almost anyone else alive. Much like Auriana herself, his attention had been firmly fixed on the Citadel above, and no doubt he was consumed with thoughts of Gul'Dan's destruction.

"You're up early," Auriana had observed, folding her arms across her chest.

"So are you," Khadgar had retorted. "Couldn't sleep?"

"No," she had said, trying not to let herself shiver as she recalled her earlier dream. "What are you doing out here?"

"Same thing you are, I imagine," he remarked drily. "Although... I have something for you."

With an enigmatic half smile, he had reached into his pocket, and from it withdrew a simple, shining ring. Auriana sensed its power almost immediately, the contained fury shifting just below the surface of an otherwise innocuous piece of metal. She had known that Khadgar had been constructing a weapon of great power in his mage tower at Zangarra, and had even helped him to procure some of the necessary components. What she hadn't known, however, was that he intended for her to wield the ring the battle.

"I call it Nithramas," Khadgar had explained. "The All-Seer. More powerful than its size might suggest... much like you."

"This is a weapon, Khadgar. A very powerful weapon. Do you really think you can trust me with something so dangerous?" she had asked slowly. "You know what... you know who I am. With that kind of power... there's no telling what I could do."

"You know how deep magic works, Auriana. Some things are just... right. This ring is borne of Draenor, and Draenor is a wild and savage land. You and it have that in common," he said quietly. "It was meant to be yours. If we are to triumph today... you must wield Nithramas in defense of Azeroth."
He had held the ring out to her then, and Auriana had reluctantly allowed him to drop it into her palm.

"There's something... unfamiliar... about the magic," she observed, rolling the ring around between her fingers and trying to ignore the way it called to the rage within her heart.

"It was made to fight the Burning Legion," Khadgar said. "It draws on elements of the fel. I did, however, have the naaru bless it, to counteract any lingering taint of fel magic. It is perfectly safe to use."

"Perhaps for you. I feel like giving this to me is like adding fuel to a wildfire," she said, shifting her weight uncomfortably from foot to foot.

"Auriana..." Khadgar had said seriously, grasping her shoulders tightly. "I have sacrificed much to create this weapon. Cordana... well, that's a story for another time."

"What happened, Khadgar?" she had asked compassionately, knowing full well that Khadgar had been rather close to his overprotective warden.

"I'll tell you later. Right now, we need to kill Gul'Dan, and that means using Nithramas," he said firmly. "Take the damn ring, Auri, we've a war to end."

His voice was unusually sharp, though his blue eyes were not unkind. Auriana frowned, still not trusting herself to wield a weapon of such power, but she had nevertheless had reluctantly tucked the ring into the chest pocket of her robes.

"I will take it," she said carefully, "But I'll only use it if necessary. The last thing the Alliance needs is to have to fight me, as well as Gul'Dan."

Khadgar had given her a sharp look, but had seemed reasonably willing to concede to the compromise. Of course, Auriana had been very careful to avoid looking him in the eye since he'd given her the ring. She couldn't help but feel as if he'd put her in a rather impossible position, and a part of her felt resentful. If she refrained from using Nithramas, she was depriving the Alliance of a powerful weapon, but if she did end up using the ring, she risked losing control of her carefully managed rage and creating a far greater problem.

Unsurprisingly, she had been tempted to use Nithramas from the very first moment she had engaged the orc patrols in the antechamber of Hellfire Citadel, but knew that once she did, there would be no going back. Fortunately, she'd barely had to extend herself to beat back Gul'Dan's initial defenses, and the pull of the ring had been nothing more than a gentle itch in the back of her mind. Auriana hoped against hope that the weapon's allure would remain similarly subtle as she continued to press the fight, though realistically she knew that such a thing was unlikely.

As she lead the Alliance through the lower chambers, Auriana began to wonder what surprises the Iron Horde had in store for them. She knew that both the Alliance and the Horde had gotten off lightly the previous day, and that many soldiers would give their lives before the siege was over. Gul'Dan remained unopposed in his stronghold for a long time, and seemed to have a twisted sort of talent for scheming and inflicting pain on others. Auriana could feel his hatred and lust for power practically seeping from the walls as she lead the Alliance onwards into darkness, and she had to work hard to stop her heart leaping in fear every time she rounded a corner.

Eventually, the Alliance soldiers reached the end of the main corridor, where a crumbling staircase lead down to a yawning black hole below. While Auriana had no particular desire to head down the stairs when she knew for a fact that Gul'Dan was above, she knew that they could not safely
assault the warlock until the lower levels of Hellfire Citadel were completely clear. She kept her eyes firmly fixed ahead as she lead her soldiers downwards, on high alert for any sign of trouble, though curiously the Alliance were able to reach the bottom of the staircase unmolested.

It was unnaturally dark in the pit, even compared to the rest of the Citadel, and the air was ripe with the scent of decay. Auriana wrinkled her nose in disgust as she caught the source of the foul smell; a deep, yellowish pool on the opposite side of the room. Crumbling masonry lay all around, though as her soldiers spread out to take up defensive positions around the edges of the pit, Auriana realised that the space appeared to be otherwise empty.

Frowning, she exchanged a look with Khadgar and Yrel, both of whom looked just as nonplussed.

"There does not seem to be anything here," Yrel said, her lilting voice clipped.

"No…” Auriana mused, scratching thoughtfully at the corner of her nose. "Luckily for us, I suppose. We'd best head back into the antechamber, then, I'm sure there are plenty more fights to be had elsewhere."

As if her words had been a summons, however, the foul waters of the pool suddenly stirred, and a monstrous creature rose from the depths below. Unable to stop herself, Auriana gasped, having never seen anything quite like the thing that now floated before her. The fel monstrosity was huge, at least the height of three men, and seemed to be mostly comprised of stomach. It was fat and impossibly bloated, and its belly was torn in half by an enormous mouth lined with gnashing yellow teeth. Auriana realised it must have once been something resembling a humanoid, judging from its head and stubby arms, but it had been so warped out of proportion that it was now unrecognisable. Two twisted demon horns had erupted from its face, entirely obscuring one eye, though it didn't look at all like any demon Auriana had ever seen.

All in all, the creature's visage was nothing short of terrifying, though Auriana found it alarmingly difficult to look away. Her gaze flicked towards briefly towards Khadgar, forgetting for a moment that she'd been trying to ignore him, only to see that he looked just as confused and revolted as she felt.

"What the hell is that?" she whispered, though doubtless Khadgar had no more understanding of the monstrosity than Auriana herself.

"Do you not recognise me, little mage?" the grotesque creature rumbled, the maw on its stomach yawning horrifically in time with the smaller mouth on its face. "We have met before, albeit when I had a different form."

"Ah… I'm pretty sure I would remember meeting you," Auriana quipped, silently signalling her men to ready themselves for battle. "There's... a lot of you to remember."

Surprisingly, the creature laughed, his fat belly shaking with each guffaw. The sound sent shivers through Auriana's very soul, and she knew that if she never heard something like that again in her life, it would be too soon.

"You came to free Auchindoun from my grasp, if I recall correctly…” it intoned. "You will not find me so easily defeated this time."

"No… you can't be. Not… not Teron'gor?" Auriana breathed, her memory stirring. "What, did you eat half the Iron Horde?"

While she clearly recalled lending her assistance to the Auchenai as they struggled to liberate the
sacred draenei holy site from the Burning Legion, she could not for the life of her fathom how the orc warlock Teron’gor had become the twisted monstrosity that now stood before her. Auriana knew that to surrender to the Legion was to court corruption itself, but she had never before seen someone become so horribly distorted by their pursuit of power.

"You thought me slain within Auchindoun, but when the Auchenai threw my body into the heart of their precious mausoleum, they unleashed a far greater power! I am Gorefiend, now!" the former orc bellowed, and the floor shook violently with the force of his rage. "I have feasted upon a thousand souls! And yours... yours will be next."

Auriana grit her teeth, sensing the latent power building within Gorefiend. Whatever he was now, it was vital to remember that he had once been a powerful warlock of the Shadow Council, and he likely still had access to his arsenal of fel power. In answer, Auriana called upon her own magic, and exchanged a brief glance with Khadgar as she felt him do the same. His face was set, serious, and not at all reminiscent of the friendly older man with kind eyes that she knew so well. Behind him, Yrel held her hammer with a white-knuckled grip, while the rest of the Alliance forces moved into defensive positions.

"Each death has given me untold power!" Gorefiend bellowed. "Now, I unleash it upon you!"

As he spoke, Auriana felt a chill go up her spine, and with a terrifying sense of dread she realised that the Alliance were not as alone as she had originally thought. Lost souls had begun to stream from the walls, their ghostly hands stretching out towards her soldiers as the air filled with the sounds of their torment. Her attention briefly diverted from Gorefiend, Auriana watched in horror as one of the souls reached out to an unfortunate young worgen and murdered him with a single touch.

"Alliance, engage!" she screamed, breaking the eerie spell that had descended over the pit as she hurled a frostbolt at the nearest soul. "Do not let them touch you!"

Startled into action, the Alliance men spread out as far as they were able, desperately trying to kill the spirits before they could claim more souls with their deathly touch. Gorefiend himself joined the fight immediately, using his twisted magic to spread chaos amongst the Alliance lines, and soon Auriana found it hard to see between all the flying spells and the seemingly endless onrush of lost souls.

She abruptly found herself side by side with Khadgar, and together they did their best to keep the advancing souls back while the bulk of the Alliance and draenei forces dealt with Gorefiend. For her part, Auriana called on her frost magic to summon a fast-moving blizzard, intending on slowing the souls and create a barrier between them and her men. Beside her, Khadgar used his considerable skill in the arcane to pick off soul after soul, sending flaring balls of purple death flying around the pit with perfect precision.

Unfortunately, it soon became clear that Gorefiend had not been lying when he had boasted of consuming thousands of souls. It seemed that he had a veritable army of tortured spirits at his disposal, and Auriana soon realised that her men would exhaust themselves long before Gorefiend. She risked a brief look towards Khadgar, and judging from the look on his face, it seemed as if he had come to the same conclusion.

Auriana bit her lip as she continued to fight, trying desperately to think of a way to counteract Gorefiend's death magic. For a second, she considered using Nithramas, only to dismiss the idea as folly a moment later. The idea was certainly tempting, especially given the amount of power she now held, but Auriana refused to use the ring as anything other than a last resort.
Think! she urged herself, as she picked off another advancing soul. There's got to be a way to…

Auriana shrieked in sudden surprise as she felt an irresistible pull of magic deep within her gut, and the world around her became a blur as she found herself transformed into nothing more than a stream of spirit energy. For several long seconds, concrete reality simply ceased to exist, and all Auriana knew was light and colour. Everything around her twisted violently, until she found herself rematerialising inside what she quickly realised was Gorefiend's grotesque stomach.

And I thought he smelled bad on the outside...

Biting back the sudden urge to vomit, Auriana looked around, and was somewhat surprised to see that she was not alone. Yrel and a handful of other soldiers had also had their souls sucked in by the orc monstrosity's magic, and each looked just as revolted as Auriana felt. Instead of food, it seemed that Gorefiend subsisted entirely on the souls of the dead, all of which seemed to be streaming towards a single point at the centre of his stomach chamber.

"Don't let them get to the centre!" Auriana yelled, figuring that allowing Gorefiend to devour more souls was akin to adding more wood to a fire. "Kill them!"

"We are going to fight?" one of the draenei exclaimed incredulously, his facial appendages twitching madly in consternation.

"Got any better ideas?" Auriana shouted back, sending a flurry of ice at the two nearest souls. "I figure he needs those souls for a reason. If he's stupid enough to pull us in here… well… let's give him a stomach ache, shall we?"

Without waiting for a reply, Auriana blinked sideways to avoid a floating soul, killing it with a frostbolt the moment she was out of harm's way. To her left, Yrel dispatched another soul with a mighty blow of her hammer, before dancing backwards away from a third. The rest of the trapped draenei and soldiers of Lunarfall quickly joined in the fray, and by their combined efforts, they managed to slow the flow of souls reaching Gorefiend's soul stomach dramatically.

As they fought, however, Auriana began to feel strangely diminished, and she realised that the longer she remained within Gorefiend's gut, the more of her life spirit would begin to drain away. Growling loudly in frustration, she finished off yet another lingering soul, and turned her attention to the core of Gorefiend's stomach. Auriana was certainly no expert in anatomy, much less monster anatomy, but she reasoned that if the structure was what Gorefiend used to draw souls in, then it could also be used as a way out.

"Get ready!" she hollered to Yrel. "This may get ugly."

Auriana narrowed her eyes, and concentrated all her attention on the centre of Gorefiend's stomach. A veritable flood of magic flowed through her veins, and through sheer stubbornness and force of will she began to turn Gorefiend's magic back against him. Instead of creating a portal to draw souls in, Auriana inverted the spell and simply tore open a hole within Gorefiend's enchanted stomach as the diminishing feeling in her chest became almost overwhelming. She frantically urged the others towards her hastily improvised portal, before stepping through after them with a deep breath and a quick, desperate prayer.

Somewhat to her surprise, Auriana rematerialised next to Khadgar, who almost took her head off with a spell before he realised that she wasn't a disembodied soul.

"Where on earth have you been?" he hollered, his face tight.
"Believe me, you don't want to know," she shouted back. "On the bright side, however, I think he might be about to…"

Auriana cut off abruptly as Gorefiend roared in fury and turned his fetid gaze upon her, his stubby arms flailing wildly in the air. She glared back defiantly, knowing full well that he had intended to devour her and consume her soul, and that he was now thoroughly enraged by her unexpected escape.

"Souls!" he shrieked, sounding entirely deranged. "I must have more souls!"

The maw of his stomach opened impossibly wide, and the remaining souls in the pit were suddenly drawn towards him at tremendous speed. Auriana winced in pain as she felt the force of his magic wash over her, but she realised that Gorefiend's insatiable hunger for more power had put him in an incredibly vulnerable position. So long as he was focused on drawing the souls to him, he wouldn't be able to see to his defenses, nor continue to rain havoc down upon her men.

*Bad move, ugly,* she thought grimly, blinking forwards to take up position right in front of Gorefiend's swollen belly.

"Alliance, to me!" she roared, blood pounding in her ears. "Ignore the souls, concentrate all your attacks on Gorefiend himself!"

Auriana reached deep into her wellspring of power, ignoring the screams of both her rage and Nithramas, and threw everything she had at Gorefiend. She tore through his defenses like they were nothing, shredding through spell after spell with pleasure. Beside her, Khadgar did the same, stripping away Gorefiend's magic until he was left entirely exposed before them. Without the protection of his foul spellwork, he was simply flesh and blood, and entirely vulnerable to the bite of cold steel.

"Finish him!" Auriana ordered, giving no pause to her attacks.

Inspired by her furore, the Alliance struck hard at the defenseless Gorefiend, hacking into his fleshy stomach with abandon. He screamed horribly as his yellowed blood spilled into the pool below, and he made a desperate attempt to re-establish his defenses. While the souls Gorefiend had gathered in his fit of gluttony had given him something of a buffer against their attacks, he had stopped the spell far too late, and Auriana had no intention of letting him regain the advantage. She pressed her men hard, and herself even harder; destroying Gorefiend's spells as fast as he could cast them, while her men continued to ravage his failing body.

Auriana began to strongly suspect that Gorefiend would be unable to hold out much longer, and was proven correct a moment later as the souls that remained in the room simply vanished. Gorefiend's stomach was now a ruined mess of blood, and he no longer had any power left with which to hold his devoured souls within his thrall. He stared hatefully down at Auriana as he swayed wildly, before collapsing against the side of the pool in a spray of blood and foul water.

"But… my… power…" he wheezed desperately, a glutton to his dying breath as his deformed body heaved and finally deflated.

Auriana permitted herself a single sigh of relief as she felt the last vestiges of Gorefiend's power slip away, but nothing more. There would be time enough later for rest, assuming she survived the siege, and right now she had more important things to do. She barked out a series of orders to her men, ensuring that the most badly wounded were evacuated the staging grounds, and along with them the bodies of the dead. Unfortunately, overcoming Gorefiend had been costly, and Auriana had to fight down a sudden surge of fury as she mentally tallied Lunarfall's losses.
"I never believed Gul'Dan would go this far…” Khadgar murmured from somewhere nearby, and Auriana turned to see him staring down at Gorefiend's bloated corpse with disgust. "We must press on. I fear this is but a taste of the madness he intends to unleash."

"Oh, goody…” Auriana said drily, her sarcastic tone managing to draw a very small smile from the older mage. "More fun times ahead."

She gently touched Khadgar's shoulder in what she hoped was a reassuring gesture, and straightened her spine determinedly. Gorefiend had presented a significant challenge, but Auriana would not let herself be cowed, and for that matter, nor would she allow anyone else be consumed by fear or self-doubt.

"Come on,” she said firmly, striding decisively towards the crumbling stairs and beckoning for Khadgar and her men to follow. "We've got a warlock to kill."
Zala'din

After dispatching the massive magnaron, Zala'din turned and led his troops back into the antechamber of Hellfire Citadel. There was nothing more to be gained from staying in the magnaron pit any longer, and Zala'din was eager to keep moving. He assumed that Auriana and the Alliance had proceeded down the larger central corridor, and so decided to take the path opposite the one that had lead outside. As he might have expected, the Horde war band encountered light resistance as they made their way through the crumbling hallways of the Citadel, though nothing that rivalled the fel magnaron.

Eventually, the passage widened into a large, open chamber, and Zala'din instinctively tensed as he realised that the Horde had likely stumbled upon their next significant challenge. Standing on a raised platform at the back of the hall were three orcs, each staring down at Zala'din's Horde with near identical expressions of hatred. The largest of the three was a massive red fel hulk, his shoulders protected by armour spikes that were nearly as long as Zala'din's arms. At his left stood a hooded orc clutching a long, vicious blade; while on his right stood a female orc shrouded in dark, shadowy energies.

Three orcs against the might of the Horde might not have seemed like much, but there was no doubt in Zala'din's mind that these orcs had been both enhanced and corrupted by the power of the Burning Legion. Zala'din exchanged a quick look with Te'Jaia, silently urging her to keep her head, and ordered his troops to fan out and form a semicircle around the back of the open space. The Horde stood weapons free to a man, though their show of strength appeared to have no effect on Gul'Dan's defenders. The two male orcs looked more than eager to spill blood, while the female orc stood silent and inscrutable beneath her shadowed iron facemask.

"Hold," Zala'din ordered quietly, refusing to be baited into making the first move. "None of ya get excited now."

As much as he dearly would have loved to charge forward and wipe the feral grin off the blademaster's face, he knew there was a greater wisdom in patience. The three orcs may have appeared insignificant compared to the vanquished magnaron, but Zala'din suspected that they collectively held much more power than a single stone giant.

For a long moment, Zala'din's Horde and Gul'Dan's orcs stared daggers at one another, before the female orc stepped forwards. As she moved, all the light seemed to get sucked from the air around her, and Zala'din felt a distinct shiver run up his spine.

"Gurtogg!" she crowed coldly, her gravelly voice almost as dark as the shadows that swirled around her shoulders. "Dispatch our enemies."

"Yes, Dark Lady," the hulk replied, gnashing his tusks eagerly and slamming his large fists into the ground.

At her command, he charged forwards, barrelling towards the Horde lines at a greater speed than Zala'din would have believed possible. The Sunwalker who had so bravely stood against the magnaron charged forward to greet him, and the hulk and tauren met with a crash so hard it made the entire room shake. The blademaster leapt into the fray behind his enormous companion, while the she-orc began to pepper the Horde with bolt after bolt of dangerous void energy.

Zala'din hesitated for the briefest moment, unsure which target posed the greatest threat, and finally settled on Gurtogg. His healers and mages seemed to be containing the worst of the female
orc's magic for the moment, while a troll druid had adopted his monstrous bear form so that he might take the blademaster to task.

Gurtogg, on the other hand, could barely be contained. He was a menace by virtue of his sheer size, and seemed to have the ability to use his own fel-tainted blood to corrupt the wounds of those around him. The Sunwalker bravely absorbed blow after blow against his shield, but even though the fight was barely minutes old, Zala'din could see that he was already beginning to suffer from his wounds. Several other Horde soldiers also seemed to be suffering from whatever tainted blood magic was emanating from Gurtogg, and Zala'din resolved to bring the orc down as soon as possible.

Zala'din charged at the hulk's flank in a flurry of blades, hacking into Gurtogg's left flank with as much fury as he could muster. Unfortunately, as he soon discovered, it was rather like hacking at a brick wall. The hulk's thighs were so thick with muscle that Zala'din's swords did little damage, and Gurtogg was so deep within his blood rage that Zala'din doubted whether he'd feel anything anyway.

Grunting, Zala'din doubled his efforts, only to be knocked flat on his back as Gurtogg suddenly roared and leapt away. The movement was far too fast for such a big creature, and the Horde had little time to react. The hulk jumped high in the air, before slamming down on a pair of unsuspecting shaman. The two shaman had been so busy protecting their allies from the female orc's void magics that they failed to notice the hulk's leap in time, and were crushed unceremoniously beneath his massive fists.

Zala'din winced reflexively as he charged back after the hulk, trying not to look down at the bloody corpses of the two pulverised shaman. He slid to the side to avoid a gathering pool of dark purple energy, and pushed hard off his left leg to smoothly change direction. He threw the momentum of his lunge behind his main hand blade, and for the first time he felt as if he were actually able to do some damage. His blade drove deep into the hulk's calf, and Gurtogg stumbled.

Bellowing in agony, Gurtogg whirled, and Zala'din was only just able to wrench his blade out of the orc's leg in time to avoid losing his grip on the hilt. The hulk stared down at him, his eyes ablaze with bloodlust, and bizarrely enough, Zala'din was reminded of Auriana. The look in Gurtogg's eyes was alarmingly similar to the look Auriana wore when her blood was up, and the unexpected thought of the human mage was enough to give Zala'din an idea. He may have been trying to fight against an opponent of far superior size and strength right now, but Auriana fought like that every day of her life. Zala'din remembered back to her impromptu mak'kagor against his sergeant, and he recalled the way she had turned her size to her advantage. The orc juggernaut may have been bigger and stronger, but Zala'din was undoubtedly faster and more manoeuvrable, and it was about time he put his strengths to proper use.

Grinning with sudden inspiration, Zala'din charged backwards, yelling the foulest orcish insult he could think of to keep Gurtogg's attention. As he had anticipated, the hulk leapt into the air a second time, preparing to do to Zala'din what he had done to the two unfortunate shaman. Zala'din crouched down low in wait with his thigh muscles tensed almost painfully, knowing that his timing would have to be perfect. Failure, even by half a second, would mean being crushed beneath fists twice the size of his head.

*Least it would be a quick death,* he thought grimly, as he waited for Gurtogg to reach the nadir of his jump.

At the last possible second, Zala'din propelled himself skyward with an impressive leap of his own. Gurtogg's right fist smashed the ground where Zala'din had been only moments before, and he
roared in agitation when he realised that Zala'din had disappeared. The orc looked up, his eyes burning with hate, only to scream with rage and agony as Zala'din used the power of his jump to drive the point of both his swords straight through Gurtogg's wrist and deep into the floor.

Gurtogg swung his left fist at Zala'din's head in retaliation, but there was little more he could do with his right arm pinioned by Zala'din's twin blades. Zala'din leapt backwards, out of harm's way, and nearly collided with a blood elf paladin sprinting towards the beleaguered hulk. Evidently inspired by Zala'din's example, the paladin used the orc's pinned hand as a platform to launch himself high into the air, where upon he came crashing down on Gurtogg's other side. Gurtogg yowled as his free hand was impaled by the paladin's massive two-handed blade, and he fell forward onto his knees.

"Finish him!" Zala'din hollered. "For da Horde!"

He lunged forward, leaning heavily on his blades so that he might prevent Gurtogg's escape, while the Sunwalker tauren who had endured the worst of the orc's assault charged forwards and slammed his shield into the hulk's face. Dazed, Gurtogg slumped down even further, and the Sunwalker took advantage of the orc's discombobulation to grab him by the ears. The tauren leant back, pulling the orc's neck taut, and leaving it vulnerable to the less than tender attentions of several swords and axes.

Within less than a minute, Gurtogg's neck was nothing more than a choppy mess of bloody wounds; and he fell to the ground, dead. There was little time to celebrate, however, with the female orc and the blademaster still causing all kinds of havoc amongst the Horde. The blademaster, in particular, seemed enraged by the abrupt death of his companion, and with a bone-chilling howl, abruptly summoned a dozen copies of himself at various points around the room. The clones may have looked insubstantial, but it was soon clear that they were just as deadly as their originator, as one abruptly beheaded an undead mage who was unable to move out of the way in time.

With considerable effort, Zala'din braced his foot against Gurtogg's fist and pulled his swords free, then sprinted towards the nearest clone. Between the whirling blades of the blademasters and the relentless shadow magic of the female orc, the entire chamber was chaos, and Zala'din found it hard to maintain his concentration. Every few seconds, he was forced to move to avoid an eruption of shadow, or the slash from a blade, or even a lurking shadow horror, and he nearly lost his head more than once.

One thing at a time, he reminded himself sternly, as he narrowly ducked underneath a sudden flourish from the clone he was fighting.

Of course, it was entirely impossible now to tell which blademaster was the real one, and Zala'din could only hope that he would find the original before his men were entirely overwhelmed. He ducked beneath another slash from the blademaster, and pivoted over his left foot as he caught the blademaster's downward strike with his right-hand blade. The blademaster pressed down on him with the strength of both arms, while Zala'din's arm muscles screamed in protest as he tried to prevent the sharp edge of the blade from splitting him clean down the middle.

Despite his best efforts, however, the blade crept closer and closer to Zala'din's eyes, when he abruptly realised that resistance was not the only path to victory. With a surge of adrenaline, he sheared the blademaster's sword to the left and relaxed his arm, the sudden change in tension sending the blademaster stumbling forwards. At the same time, Zala'din thrust straight upwards with his second blade, catching the blademaster right beneath the chin.

Zala'din let out a brief exclamation of victory, only to cut his celebration short as he realised that he
had slain but a mere clone. The blademaster's image vanished in a haze of green smoke, and Zala'din cursed loudly in Zandali. He vaguely thought he heard someone calling his name, and he whirled just in time to see a blade come flying at his neck. Having no other recourse, he dived to the side, flattening his blades to the ground for safety as he tumbled awkwardly out of the way.

"Don'tcha even rink about it, ya fel monster!" Te'Jaia shouted furiously, advancing on Zala'din's assailant with an enormous lava blast.

The blood was high in her cheeks, and Zala'din thought she looked rather magnificent as she unleashed the full power of the elements on the blademaster's decoy. She sidestepped neatly as the clone targeted her with another blade toss, before finishing him off with a burst of raw lightning. The decoy vanished, much like Zala'din's earlier opponent, and Te'Jaia rushed over to pull Zala'din to his feet.

"Watch dat pretty head of yours, Zal," Te'Jaia said spiritedly. "Dese doubles be all kindsa trouble."

"Den we better get movin', eh?" he replied, gathering his weapons and charging towards the closest decoy.

Of all the original clones, only four remained standing, but it seemed that their defeat had come at a cost. The floor of the chamber was littered with the bodies of Horde soldiers, and quite a few more than Zala'din would have hoped. He knew that casualties of war were inevitable, of course, even with a perfect plan, but it never made losing even a single warrior easier.

Champing his tusks in anger, Zala'din dug deep and resumed his attack with renewed vigour. Together, he and Te'Jaia cut a furious swathe around the room, tearing through the blademaster decoys and the female orc's shadow horrors like a well-oiled machine. Te'Jaia might have some shortcomings when it came to maturity and self-control, but not when it came to battle. She fought like a shaman of many more years' experience, reliably blasting Zala'din's targets with her powerful elemental magic while he cut them down to size.

It was a hard fight, but eventually Zala'din and his Horde managed to successfully dispel each of the blademaster's decoys until only the original remained. The blademaster seemed enraged by the dissolution of his spell, and he responded by sending himself into a whirling flurry of blades that blanketed the area in fel flames.

Zala'din winced as he felt the wave of hellfire wash over him, gritting his teeth to resist the heat building inside his plate armour. He felt as if he were being roasted from the inside out, and it was only through the succour of a shaman's healing rain that he was able to push through and engage the real blademaster in battle once more. At his side ran the durable Sunwalker, bleeding but eager, and together they slammed into the fiercely snarling blademaster.

The Sunwalker cleverly maneuvered the blademaster so that his strikes fell harmlessly upon the paladin's shield, while Zala'din and a pair of orc warriors darted in and out to slash at him. Meanwhile, Te'Jaia, a limping shadow priest, and a handful of Sunreaver mages concentrated their spellpower on him from behind; unleashing bolt after bolt of magical energy on the blademaster's flank. He was strong, and his armour well protected by fel magic, but the Horde sorcerers were determined, and the length of the fight had finally begun to take its toll. Together, they channelled their power into a signal stream of devastating energy, and with a final effort, they simply burned the blademaster out of his armour.

As the blademaster fell, his once wicked blade clattering uselessly to the side, the sole remaining fel orc threw herself into an even greater frenzy. Zala'din and his allies had little time to breathe as the room suddenly filled with more shadow horrors than Zala'din realised could be summoned.
"The void!" she shrieked, sounding entirely deranged. "It hungers!"

Zala'din suddenly felt as if he were burning alive from the inside out, and he fell to one knee as he desperately tried to breathe through the pain. Shakily, he managed to look up, and was horrified to see that he was not the only one affected. At least a score of his soldiers were similarly disabled, and a few had passed out entirely from the pressing force of the orc's magic. A dark purple patch of energy began to spread out from beneath him and the burning intensified to the point where Zala'din could barely move. He felt as if he were drowning in the energy of the void, and he felt his eyes begin to close as the inexorable darkness began to descend.

The pain was not merely physical, and in fact Zala'din found it far more horrifying to find himself falling into the clinging depths of nothingness. Suddenly, however, he heard someone call his name, and he looked up to see the priest Lialdra Dawnshadow standing above him, her entire body blazing with Light.

"Get up, Commander," she said calmly. "The fight isn't over yet."

She offered him a slender hand, and as their fingers touched Zala'din felt the void's hold over him lessen. Lialdra pulled him to his feet, her perfectly formed features sharp and determined as she healed his wounds. Zala'din shook his head, trying to clear the last vestiges of hopeless darkness from his thoughts, and forced his still-trembling legs into action.

"Ta me!" he boomed, as he used what little energy he had left to charge towards the female orc. "We will not fall to the void! We will not fall to the Legion! We are the Horde!"

There were perhaps a dozen Horde still standing, not including Zala'din or Lialdra, but those still on their feet rallied at Zala'din's cry. The brave Sunwalker had at last succumbed to his wounds and collapsed, but the troll druid who had harried the blademaster relentlessly throughout the fight was somehow still standing. Zala'din raced by the druid's side, clinging to the last vestiges of Light awoken in him by Lialdra's spell, and fell upon the shadow weaver with every bit of ferocity he could muster.

The she-orc gathered the shadows around her like some kind of shield, but Zala'din would not be denied. The more he fought against her, the more he felt the power of the Light growing in his chest. He wasn't sure if it was Lialdra's steady healing, or his own rekindled inner strength; but quite frankly, he didn't care. Right now, all that mattered was slaying the female orc before she condemned them all into the void. She was incredibly strong, but Zala'din firmly believed that there was no power in the universe that could withstand the determination of a Horde warrior, and after what felt like a year of fighting, he saw his opening. With a great cry that was equal parts triumph and bone-shaking exhaustion, Zala'din slid his blades cleanly through her neck, and as her body finally tumbled limply to the floor, he couldn't help but to grin.
Auriana

After quickly tallying the wounded and the dead, Auriana lead her troops out of Gorefiend's pit and back up into the antechamber. There would be time enough for mourning later, but right now Auriana needed to stay sharply focused on the task at hand as she lead her men deeper into the Citadel.

It appeared that the Horde had cleared both the side corridors and had moved off deeper into the Citadel, but she couldn't have said where they were fighting currently. Frowning slightly, Auriana paused to consider her next move, only to take a step backwards in surprise as a large portal suddenly opened right in front of her.

"Er… that wasn't me..." she exclaimed. "Khadgar?"

"Nor I. It appears we've been extended an invitation," Khadgar observed casually, his heavy brows drawing together as he studied the portal.

"Gul'Dan offers us challenge," Yrel surmised, lifting her chin imperiously.

"Well, he's welcome to it," Auriana growled, clenching her fists. "Onwards and upwards…"

Never one to lead from behind, Auriana stepped through the portal before anyone else, her fingers charged with magic lest she run into any trouble. Fortunately, the other side of the portal was defended only by the two warlocks who had cast the spell, and she made easy work of the pair. Gul'Dan had to have known that the two warlocks would be killed by the advancing armies of Azeroth, and Auriana flinched inwardly at his callousness, even as she sent the orc's frozen corpses crashing to the ground.

She had little time to dwell, however, as Khadgar, Yrel and the rest of the Alliance troops emerged from the portal a few moments later. Auriana's forces were still mostly intact, despite Gorefiend's best efforts, and as they filed past her, she watched them carefully for signs of battle fatigue. She had no idea how long they would be embroiled in the assault of Hellfire Citadel, but she needed to keep morale high. In anticipation of an extended siege, Auriana had selected only the most experienced and hardened warriors in her garrison, and she was pleased to see that Gorefiend's defeat had instilled in them a fresh confidence.

Much like the lower level of the Citadel, the upper levels had been similarly desecrated by fel magic, and Auriana found herself clambering over shattered stonework and jumping pools of oozing fel sludge as she lead the way forward. Khadgar walked at her side with his usual sense of assurance, though his shoulders were rigid with a restless eagerness that she'd never seen in him before. Although she'd never say it out loud, Auriana was secretly glad to have the older Archmage along during the final assault. He'd been her strongest supporter on Draenor, and somehow he managed to see her potential even when she couldn't see it herself.

Noticing her gaze, Khadgar looked down at her and grinned as they walked further down the corridor.

"Light, you smell," he observed, wrinkling his nose with surprising delicacy.

"My apologies for offending your delicate sensibilities, Archmage," Auriana replied sarcastically. "Would you prefer we put the siege on hold while I head back to Lunarfall for a bath?"

"Oh, no, not at all… it's just… really bad," he said, pulling a face.
"Really, it wouldn't take too long," Auriana suggested lightly. "I could get my hair done, look all pretty for Gul'Dan…"

She cut off as Khadgar swatted her playfully on the arm, his eyes sparkling with gentle good humour.

"I don't think Gul'Dan is going to care how pretty you look," he said seriously. "You're a bit small by orcish standards."

"I'm small by anyone's standards," Auriana retorted smartly. "Except for perhaps a gnome's."

She grinned, resisting a strange and sudden urge to stick her tongue out at Khadgar as he rolled his eyes. Their friendly banter was soon cut short, however, as the Alliance moved into a shadowed hall filled with sargerei. Dozens of the red-skinned fallen draenei loomed out of the darkness, closing in on the warriors of the Alliance with murderous intent. Evidently, while Gul'Dan had not seen fit to defend the portal to the upper levels, the halls themselves were well protected.

Auriana's demeanour instantly shifted, putting aside her brief moment of levity with Khadgar as she resummoned her magic. The sargerei closest to her right was the first to die, a look of surprise freezing on his face as Auriana's spell took him in the chest. Needing no further signal, the Alliance charged forwards, and soon the corridors were chaotic with flying spells and the clash of steel.

It was the kind of fast-paced, close quarters fighting at which Auriana excelled, and she took down more than her fair share of sargerei as the fight wore on. She was so small and fast that she was nearly impossible to hit, and she managed to devastate nearly half the corridor by herself before she was brought up short by the sudden flash of a cutting laser.

With a surprised shout, she threw herself to the side as a sargerei construct sent a deadly red beam arcing in her direction. It cut so close that Auriana could actually smell her own burning hair as she rolled to the side and back to her feet, and she swallowed anxiously.

"Alliance!" she ordered. "Take out those constructs!"

Auriana had fought similar constructs before, during the liberation of Auchindoun, and she knew full well how dangerous they could be. They were heavily armoured, and more often than not carried a deadly and varied arsenal of weaponry.

Including lasers, apparently, she thought ruefully, as she was forced to dodge another devastating salvo.

She caught Khadgar's eye as she channelled a beam of solid ice at the nearest construct, forcing the metal monstrosity to a grinding halt. Fortunately, the Archmage was quick on the uptake, and soon his own formidable powers mingled with Auriana's own. Together, they were able to completely encase the construct in ice, leaving it as easy prey for the weapon strikes of Yrel, Ironfist, and the other heavily armed soldiers of the Alliance.

Having established a method of destroying the constructs, the Alliance surged forwards, and soon there was little that remained of the sargerei forces save for twisted metal and dozens of charred corpses. The was no time to savour such a small victory, however, and Auriana had her men up and moving again within a handful of minutes. She could now feel some kind of powerful magic building nearby, and had no desire to allow whatever it was to reach its full potential. Khadgar seemed to agree, judging from the worried look on his face, and together they led the way down into a large, open chamber in the centre of sargerei territory.
As it turned out, the sargerei and their constructs were protecting something far more important
than the passageway to the heart of the Citadel. At the centre of the room stood the biggest
construct Auriana had yet seen; an oddly elegant amalgamation of iron and fel. It was vaguely
draenic in shape, with the characteristic broad shoulders and backward bending knee joints of a real
draenei. That said, there was certainly no living draenei who had cannons for arms or blood of
liquid felfire, nor towered more than fifteen feet at the shoulder.

Despite the construct's intimidating appearance, Auriana stepped heedlessly forward into the
chamber, only to pause in surprise as it began to speak.

"The construct is fully powered... the final binding will have to wait," it rumbled, shifting about on
heavy legs. "For now, I believe we have a score to settle, fleas!"

Auriana gasped softly as she realised the truth; that this was no hunk of mindless metal, but a living
soul encased within bonds of fel iron. Its voice was even somewhat familiar, though it was Yrel
who first realised the truth of who they now faced.

"Socrethar..." she murmured sadly, as recognition dawned slowly across her elegant lilac features.
"What have you done to yourself? You were one of us. An Exarch."

"I am an Exarch no longer!" the twisted spirit of Socrethar roared, as he began to draw on his vast
reserves of raw fel energy. "You will regret coming here, little girl. The Legion will turn this world
to ash!"

"I regret only that I am forced to slay you, old friend," Yrel said darkly. "May the Light have
mercy on your soul."

The draenei raised her hammer with a sense of grave inevitability, but before she could strike, half
the floor was suddenly crisscrossed with deadly, glowing rivulets of fel magic.

"Move!" Auriana shouted, already sprinting to the side as she gave the order.

Yrel, however, seemed stunned to have seen her former comrade fallen so low, and was a good deal
slower on the uptake. With a growl, Auriana changed direction, and managed to tackle the draenei
woman out of the way at the last moment, just as a massive fel explosion detonated behind them.
She covered Yrel's head protectively with one arm, gritting her teeth as heavy stone shrapnel rained
down upon her back.

Unfortunately, it seemed that Auriana had only replaced one of her problems with another. In their
hasty flight, she and Yrel had slid across the yawning entrance of a fel prison. With a wordless
shout of warning, Auriana rolled to the side just in time to avoid activating the trap, but Yrel wasn't
so lucky. Incorporeal bars of fel snapped up around her, holding her in place as firmly as if she
were encased in irons. The draenei winced as the fel energy began to drain her life force, and she
grit her teeth as she summoned a protective shield made of pure Light.

"Help me!" she cried, her bright eyes fixed desperately on Auriana.

"I can get you out!" Auriana assured her. "Just... hold on..."

With an uncharacteristic carefulness, Auriana slowly fed a tendril of her magic into the trap.
Normally, she might have simply exploded the spell with her superior strength, but she dare not
take such a risk with Yrel's life. Instead, she increased the power of her sorrel gradually, pulling
apart the internal architecture of the fel prison's magic until the whole thing simply faded away.

Now free, Yrel paused only for a second to offer Auriana her thanks before storming into the melee
with her hammer raised high. Her entire body blazed with Light, but Auriana soon realised that even the talented exarch would have little success against the seemingly indestructible construct. While she had busy been rescuing Yrel, Socrethar had turned his fury on the rest of the Alliance. He continued to tear up the floor with massive slashes of fel magic, and Auriana's juggernauts and other fighters were forced to move constantly to avoid being annihilated. The heavy iron construct provided him with ample protection, and there was so much fel flying around the room that the Alliance could barely stay in range for longer than a few seconds.

Even as a caster, Auriana was forced to move continuously to avoid certain death, and she found it nearly impossible to keep up continuous spell pressure. As she looked about, she realised that her other ranged soldiers seemed to be having similar problem, and she ground her teeth in frustration as she tried to come up with a plan of attack.

Before Auriana could think of anything, however, Socrethar fixed his attention on her position and powered himself across the room in a blazing charge. Despite his speed, Auriana was able to blink out of the way with little effort, though the hunter next to whom she had been standing was not so lucky. Socrethar's mighty construct hit the worgen male full on in the chest, and he was thrown a good twenty feet backwards in an explosion of fel flame. Auriana winced as she watched him die, wondering if there had perhaps been something she might have done to save him. She could not dwell on his death for long, however, as she was forced to blink away from a massive orb of fel magic that seemed to determined to hunt her down.

Her precipitous flight took her past Khadgar, who used a clever spell of his own to counter the fel orb's magic and turn it in upon itself. Auriana flushed in embarrassment as she slid to a halt, realising she probably should have thought of such a spell herself, but Khadgar seemed unphased. His attention was entirely focused on Socrethar and the construct, his brow beading with sweat as he considered their options.

"We have to get him out of that construct," he told her. "I believe it to be more a matter of magic than might, however, which gives us the advantage."

Auriana nodded her agreement, and together they began to pool their power. It was as difficult to exercise the necessary amount of concentration so in the middle of a pitched battle, but Auriana forced herself to stay calm and focused as she reached out towards the construct.

Upon closer inspection, it appeared that Khadgar was, as usual, quite right. Socrethar was held in his construct by powerful binding magic, but at the end of the day a spell was just a spell, and as far as Auriana was concerned, all spells could be broken.

Keeping one eye out for any sign of fel assault, Auriana began to cast a spell of breaking and unmaking. She was soon joined in her efforts by Khadgar, and later Calandra and the other mages of the Kirin Tor who still remained in the fight. Together, they began to cast in perfect concert, until at long last they released their spell and tore all of Socrethar's careful bindings asunder.

With a furious cry, Socrethar was unceremoniously ejected from his construct in a blaze of arcane light, though he was certainly not the kind of person to take such a blatant challenge lying down. The construct was not his sole means of defense, however, and the chamber was thrown into sudden chaos as he tore open a number of portals behind the Alliance forces. Dark, eerie spirits began to flood endlessly towards the Alliance forces, draining their strength and will to fight, while a number of sargerei rushed to Socrethar's aid.

Instead of focusing their efforts on Socrethar himself, the Alliance were now forced to fight almost man to man, and more than one good soldier fell before the red tide. For her part, Auriana tried to be everywhere, taking down as many shadowcallers as she could before they could do the same to
her men. She blinked across the chamber over and over again, calling terrible blizzards and showers of icicles down upon her enemies, but it never seemed to be enough. For every sargerei that fell, however, another would soon take its place, and somewhere deep in her heart Auriana began to doubt that they would ever be overcome.

After freezing one particularly troublesome sargerei in place and lodging a sharpened icicle in his throat, she spun to her left and abruptly realised that Socrethar's construct was still blazing brightly in the centre of the room. When the Kirin Tor had broken the spell binding Socrethar's soul to his manufactured shell, Auriana had assumed that the construct would be rendered inert. Instead, she was surprised to see its fel heart still flickering brightly, and in a rush of inspiration Auriana realised she may have just been handed the means of Socrethar's downfall.

"The construct!" she screamed, hoping to get the attention of Ironfist, Yrel, or any other of her heavily armoured juggernauts. "We can turn it against him!"

Unfortunately, in the frenzied fighting it seemed that not a single person among her troops had heard or understood her suggestion. Between the spirits, the sargerei, and Socrethar himself, the Alliance were very nearly overrun, and Auriana's desperate shouts seemed doomed to go unheard.

I guess if you want something done, you have to do it yourself, she thought grimly.

She blinked forwards again, leaping clean over the body of a fallen draenei shaman, and clambered up the back of the construct. The thing was absolutely enormous, but Auriana was deceptively strong, and she was able to pull herself upwards with little effort. Despite the fact that the construct had been made to house a being much larger than herself, Auriana was able to settle herself with only a little bit of adjustment. Her hands slipped neatly into the constructs arm cannons, and she took a deep, shaky breath as she spoke a quick spell of binding and allowed the fel magic of the construct to mingle with her own considerable powers.

Fel and arcane were polar opposites: where arcane was a force of order and stability, fel was pure chaos. Mastery of the arcane required strict discipline and patience, while fel demanded only single-minded determination and a lust for power. Fel was by far the quicker path, and Auriana had known more than one mage who had been seduced by the siren call of demonic magic. Of course, there were warlocks who managed to walk the fine line between chaos and control, and who were able to turn their powers to the service of the Light, but Auriana knew she would never be one of them. She needed the arcane; needed the comfort of its rigid structure, so that she might keep a tight leash on the more chaotic side of her own nature.

That said, there was a time and a place for caution, and now was not necessarily that time. Auriana allowed herself to merge fully with the construct, and found herself suddenly embroiled in an epic three way tussle between the construct, her rage, and her better self. Both the fel and her fury were screaming at her for release, and Auriana was forced to use every last trick and technique she'd ever used to maintain control. She felt as if every fibre of her being was on fire, and for a single, heartstopping second, her waking mind disappeared entirely.

Biting down on her lip so hard that it bled, Auriana reasserted herself with a terrible act of will, and regained just enough control to get the construct moving. The whole thing was one horrible balancing act, but if walking on a knife's edge was the price of victory, then she was more than willing to pay. She spun the construct to the left, and with a mere thought sent a barrage of fel energy slamming into a group of sargerei. The fel flames disintegrated them in mere moments, and Auriana couldn't hold back the savage cry of victory that tore from her throat.

With a growing sense of recklessness, Auriana turned the construct on another pair of hapless sargerei. Her blood ran hot, and with the considerable power of the construct at her disposal, she
felt as if she was rather less a mage and more a force of nature.

It was then that she noticed a sargerei dominator bearing down on Khadgar from behind. Consumed by his own fight with a sargerei caster, the grey-haired Archmage had failed to notice the fact that he was in imminent danger, and had left his flank extremely vulnerable. Bellowing in fury, Auriana charged for her friend, pushing the construct into a full sprint and swinging one of its enormous arms into the side of the sargerei's head. She heard his spine break with a satisfying crack, even as she simultaneously swept Khadgar out of harm's way.

"Auriana?" he breathed, staring up at her newly acquired construct in shock.

He quickly recovered his composure, however, and pointed to where Socrethar now floated several feet above the floor of the chamber. Despite the loss of his construct, he was still more than capable of wreaking havoc on the Alliance lines; blasting away at Auriana's soldiers with continuous bursts of deadly fel energy.

"He's shielded by those sargerei!" Khadgar shouted. "We can't get to him through his defenses!"

"Hold him," Auriana ordered, her voice sounding strangely tinny from inside the construct. "Worry about keeping yourself alive, I'll take out his little friends."

True to her word, she spun the construct around once more, and launched herself at the sargerei in a frenzy of magic and cold iron. Her fury was well and truly up by now, and while she was ostensibly still in control, it was nearly impossible to resist the twin lures of her rage and the fel. She found herself laughing madly as she tore through the sargerei lines with ease, closing in on the dominators and ripping them apart one by one.

Socrethar roared with in surprise and anger as his shield abruptly fell, and he turned his attention fully on Auriana. It appeared that he had not considered the possibility that someone might master the construct, and he now stood alone and unprotected before Auriana's unshackled rage.

"How dare you?" he spat, his once-refined features twisting into an ugly snarl. "You will not turn my own vessel against me!"

With a deranged cry, the fallen exarch channeled what remained of his energy into a single burning beam of raw fel magic. Normally, such a flatline concentration of power would have been enough to tear just about anyone or anything apart, but Socrethar may as well have been an ant trying to smite a god. With her fury up and the latent power of the construct at her command, Auriana was nigh on unstoppable, and she had every intention of punishing Socrethar for his cruelty and arrogance. She easily split her focus, calling on the arcane to form a protective barrier between Socrethar and the Alliance, whilst at the same time channelling the power of the construct into a deadly spell of her own.

Auriana's spell slammed into Socrethar's own, and for a moment the entire chamber was illuminated with blinding green light. Laughing wildly, Auriana poured more of her raw power into the spell, and was well rewarded as the last of Socrethar's defenses crumbled before her. He held up a weak hand to fend her off, but it did little to prevent the monstrous green beam from taking him in the chest. Fel energy radiated out from the impact point on his chest, and with a horrible, gurgling cry of pain, he was forced to his knees.

"No!" Socrethar gasped, his once vibrant red skin already fading and withering before Auriana's very eyes. "The binding… I cannot… control…"

His fingers scrabbled pathetically on the floor as his last breath rattled in his throat, though it was
some time before he finally went limp. Auriana walked the construct over so that she loomed above him, feeling the blood sliding over her teeth as she watched his slow demise. Her rage loved nothing more than the sweet thrill of victory, and her current connection to the fel only made it worse. She desperately wanted more, and it was only with great reluctance that she was able to sever her link with the construct and force herself to eject.

Auriana landed heavily on the stone floor of the chamber, her legs surprisingly shaky, and choked down her fury as she turned to face down the now-abandoned construct. The temptation to climb back in and destroy anything that stood in her way was strong, and it was only by calling up an image of Varian her mind's eye that Auriana was able to turn and walk away.

"Destroy it," she muttered hoarsely, as she stalked past a number of stunned Alliance soldiers. Khadgar and the Kirin Tor complied with her order immediately, converging on the empty construct with spells of breaking at their fingertips, and Auriana shivered as she felt the last vestiges of her connection to the fel slip away. She deliberately stayed out of the way as the Alliance tallied the cost of their most recent battle, trusting that her soldiers knew their business. For their own good, she concentrated solely on keeping her anger under control, though even with her full concentration it was an uphill battle.

Lost as she was in her own thoughts, Auriana started as she felt a soft hand upon her shoulder, and she looked up to see Khadgar towering over her. The compassionate look in his eyes was inexplicably infuriating, and something about the sight of him kindled the still-smouldering embers of her rage.

"What?" she snapped, a good deal more sharply than she had perhaps intended.

"It would appear that we're ready to move on, although..." Khadgar said gently. "If... if you need more time to gather yourself... or if you need stop, even..."

"I'm fine," she muttered coldly. "I'm not some wild animal, Khadgar, and I'm certainly not incapable."

"I didn't say you were," the Archmage said carefully, his blue eyes very bright. "But piloting a construct like that is no easy task for anyone, let alone someone of your... nature. You're angry, and I know what happens when you get..."

"You know nothing," Auriana hissed, her eyes blazing. "I struggle with this every day of my life, and I know my capabilities better than anyone. Tell me, Archmage, are you speaking to me out of concern for my well-being, or because you're unable to control your jealousy over my talent?"

The moment the words left her mouth, Auriana knew she was being horribly unfair, but in her highly aroused state, she didn't really care. In her rage, she saw Khadgar only as a challenger to be bested, and not as her friend or mentor.

"My... what does that mean?" Khadgar asked, looking thoroughly bewildered.

He stared down at her levelly, and Auriana found herself hating him for his endless, impossible sense of calm.

"Nothing," she growled bitterly. "It means nothing. I came here to defeat Gul'Dan, not play into your hero complex. So if you're quite done lecturing me, I've got a siege to continue."

Without waiting for a reply, Auriana turned on her heel and made swiftly for the chamber exit. She still had herself under control, if barely, but continuing to push an issue when she was still coming
down from a blood rage was never going benefit anyone. Right now, she needed to stay razer-focused on the task at hand… and as far away from Khadgar as possible

"Alliance!" she snapped, her boots ringing sharply with the speed of her fury as she eagerly sought her next battle. "Move out!"
Zala'din

After defeating Gul'Dan's deadly council, Zala'din continued to press his troops onwards through the Citadel. The Horde had taken a beating, but morale remained high as they ascended the upper levels. The warriors that Zala'din had chosen for this mission were well experienced, and they understood the value of sacrifice. While losing comrades in arms was always hard, their deaths would not be in vain, and would only serve to fuel the fire that burned deep within the hearts of every single member of the Horde.

Occasionally, Zala'din heard the sounds of fighting elsewhere within the Citadel as they moved, and he hoped that Auriana and the Alliance were faring well. He hadn't actually seen her since the initial breach of the Citadel, though he figured their paths would eventually converge as they closed in on the final battle against Gul'Dan.

As it turned out, he didn't have to wait long. After dispatching a dangerous, fel-corrupted arakkoa, Zala'din had his troops continue to climb further upwards through the ruined Citadel. He had just lead his troops into another long, devastated corridor, when he heard the echo of dozens of footsteps coming up from behind. Zala'din instinctively went for his weapons, only to relax almost immediately as Auriana rounded the corner at the head of her army.

It seemed that the Alliance had been similarly startled, judging by the bright steel that flashed in Zala'din's direction, but they, too, stood down upon recognising the Horde. The exception, surprisingly, was Auriana. Zala'din immediately sensed something off about her as she stared at him ferociously, her eyes blazing unfamiliar white instead of their usual blue; and for a single, terrifying moment, he genuinely believed she might attack.

After what seemed like an eternity, however, she lowered her arms and gave Zala'din an almost reluctant nod. Zala'din realised that he was not the only one who had seen the fierce aggression in her posture, as both the Alliance and the Horde let out a collective sigh and some of the tension in the corridor released. Khadgar, in particular, looked rather relieved that she had chosen to stand down, and Zala'din couldn't help but wonder what had happened to the Alliance in the Citadel below.

"Little lion?" he asked, watching Auriana closely as he carefully closed the distance between them.

Up closer, Zala'din could see a distinctly feral gleam in her eyes, and he could hear the steady, continuous grinding of her teeth. While he had heard rumours of her berserker tendencies, he had yet to see her truly surrender to a blood rage. She wasn't entirely gone, judging by the fact they were all still standing, but Zala'din found himself surprised by the heat in her dark eyes. He got the distinct impression that she would have quite happily taken on Zala'din's entire Horde were she so provoked, and he could only hope that she would be able to keep herself in check.

"Don't call me that," she growled dangerously, rolling her eyes without the slightest hint of amusement. "How did you fare below?"

She looked towards Zala'din's Horde, her eyes sharp as she expertly tallied the strength of his forces. Even though she seemed to be on the very edge of control, her rage evidently hadn't affected her tactical mind, and Zala'din could practically see her thinking.

"Killed some of Gul'Dan's lieutenants. We got Kilrogg Deadeye, too. Of course, I suppose he just be plain dead now, forgettin' da eye..." Zala'din said slyly.
He had hoped that the admittedly sad joke might lighten Auriana's mood, but her expression never wavered. She stared up at him with eyes as hard as diamond, and he could see neither humour nor mercy in their crystalline depths.

"Er… den some nasty bird ting tried his best ta push us all off da edge of the Citadel," he added hurriedly. "You?"

"Oh, you know…" she growled, ticking names off on her fingers as she went. "Killed Gorefiend. Killed Socrethar. Killed some nasty sargerei bitch just before we stumbled across you. Three more for my list."

"Casualties?" Zala'din pressed, trying to get some idea of the strength of her forces.

The fighting had been hard, and while it seemed that both the Alliance and Horde had emerged victorious thus far, Zala'din knew they had not yet seen the worst of what Gul'Dan had to offer.

"Just over a quarter," she said, glancing back over her shoulder to where the Alliance troops watched on with great interest. "We've been… lucky… so far."

"We lost more den a third," Zala'din admitted. "We been winnin', but it not been easy."

A brief flicker of sympathy flashed across Auriana's face, but it vanished before Zala'din could even be entirely sure of what he'd seen. She opened her mouth to say something further, perhaps to offer him comfort, when a sudden noise made Zala'din snap his head around to the right.

"Didya hear that?" he asked.

He was certain that he had heard what sounded like an anguished roar, and judging from a sudden nervous shuffling of feet amongst the Horde and many of the Alliance, he wasn't the only one. Auriana however, shook her head, and gestured briefly to her left ear.

"Hearing isn't exactly my strong suit," she explained. "Not after Blackhand, in any case."

"I can hear someone screamin'," he told her. "Someone's bein' tortured, I be sure of it."

Auriana's expression somehow darkened even further, but she was far too practical to dwell overlong. She squared her jaw determinedly, and signalled her men to retake their arms.

"By all means, lead on," she said. "Alliance! With me!"

She turned to follow him, her expression set and almost rabidly eager, and together they walked in lockstep at the head of their combined armies. Zala'din pulled slightly ahead of her as they came to the end of the corridor, his long ears twitching, and lead the way out onto an exposed platform clinging to the side of the Citadel.

Much as it had in the pit below, the air outside still smelled stale and tainted. Similarly, the platform itself had been warped and twisted by the magic of the Burning Legion, and great green spikes rose from every corner. At the edge of the open space, Zala'din could also make out the shape of a tortured orc. The orc was held spread eagled above the floor by four heavy iron chains, his position leaving him entirely at the mercy of an enormous grey-skinned fel lord.

The demon's arms were as thick around as Zala'din's torso, which Zala'din supposed was necessary to be able to lift the savagely curved polearm that the creature held tightly with both hands. Monstrous red and green spikes rose from the fel lord's back and his heavy plate helm, and eerily glowing faces on his belt and greaves stared up at Zala'din with wicked grins.
The fel lord seemed not to have noticed the sudden arrival of the Azerothian army; or if he had, he
appeared not to care. His attention appeared to have been completely consumed by his prisoner;
whom upon closer inspection Zala'din realised that was in fact none other than Grommash
Hellscream. Beside him, he heard Auriana breath in sharply as she, too, recognised the fallen
warchief's distinctive features, and she took an unconscious step forwards as the demon continued
to torment Hellscream with his dark powers.

"Hellscream… Grommash bloody Hellscream..." she breathed, looking up at the bound orc with an
expression that was at once both thoughtful and furious. "So he was betrayed by Gul'Dan..."

"Well, dat's a surprise..." Zala'din quipped sarcastically, and this time Auriana gave him a very
small smile.

As they watched, the fel lord abruptly moved closer to Hellscream, fingering the sharp edge of his
blade as he leered menacingly at the warchief.

"Still holding out hope, Hellscream?" he growled, his grating voice echoing unpleasantly through
the air. "Your precious Horde will serve the Legion."

"We… will… never be slaves!" Hellscream panted.

The fel lord laughed cruelly, and carelessly sent another blast of fel energy arcing into
Hellscream's chest. The orc arched against his restraints, gnashing his tusks in pain as the fel
energy ripped through his body. It was clear that the fel lord had no intent of
actually killing Hellscream just yet, not when there was so much sweet torture to be had.

Zala'din growled low in his chest, not willing to abide any kind of demonic torture, only to find that
Auriana was already ahead of him. She took several more steps forwards and coughed delicately, as
if she were inserting herself into a polite dinner conversation instead of a torture session. The
demon whirled instantly at the sound, his eyes widening gleefully at the sight of so many more
potential victims arrayed before him. He strode forwards eagerly, swinging his polearm in a
menacing circle before resting its length along his broad shoulders. The Horde and the Alliance
were well trained, however, and appeared entirely unimpressed by the mighty demon's show of
strength.

"My apologies for interrupting," Auriana called lightly, "But I thought you might prefer to pick on
someone who can actually fight back."

"Who are you?" the fel lord spat, standing up to his full height and looming menacingly over
Zala'din and Auriana.

"We're the last thing you're ever going to see," Auriana informed him matter-of-factly, her eyes
coming alive with power once more.

The fel lord flexed against his polearm almost lazily, and gazed down at her with a distorted grin
that was far too wide for the size of his head.

"You are quite amusing, little one," he rumbled. "Not amusing enough to live, of course, but it will
give me great pleasure to hear you scream before I gut you."

"Oh, yes," Auriana said sarcastically. "I'm hilarious. Ask anyone."

"Yeah," Zala'din added, casually slipping his weapons and readying himself for a fight. "She be a
funny one, alright."
During the course of the short exchange between Auriana and the demon, he had silently signalled his company to move into a flanking position on the fel lord's right hand side. The Alliance had done the same on the left, and the moment they were in position, Auriana unleashed a monstrously large pyroblast without hesitation. The demon took the full brunt of the hit to his chest, and while the foul fel enchantments woven into his armour provided ample protection from a single blow, Zala'din saw a flicker of genuine surprise and perhaps even fear in the fel lord's eyes.

"You will regret that, little one," he roared. "Come! Test your meagre might against the Legion! We will reap your souls!"

Auriana blinked forwards and readied another powerful magical attack, but before she could release the spell, the ground beneath her feet abruptly exploded. Fel energies swirled around her slender ankles, and it was only by virtue of her uncannily quick reflexes that she managed to dodge to the side. More fissures began to open at random, and the platform became some kind of hellish obstacle course of dark rifts and fel magic.

Zala'din joined the charge with his swords raised high, only to realise that getting within range of the demon would probably more of a challenge than actually killing him. The fel lord may have fought alone, but there was hardly anywhere clear to stand, and Zala'din was forced to move continually to stay alive.

As he ran across the shattered ground, he saw that at least a few soldiers had managed to engage the fel lord directly. Most of the rest of them, however, were locked in the same frantic dance of avoidance as he, and were forced to concentrate more on their own safety than on killing the fel lord. Zala'din slid to a stop as one of the fissures ahead of him suddenly exploded, sending a massive fel crystal spike rocketing to the sky right in front of him. He was too slow to avoid the object entirely, however, and he had to turn at the last second to take the brunt of impact on his shoulder. He felt the fel energies begin to leach away at his life force almost immediately, though he had certainly fared better than a nearby blood elf, who had actually been impaled by the sudden eruption of a spike.

Zala'din winced in sympathy, but he had little time to dwell on his ally's death. No sooner had the platform become a maze of crystals spikes than the fel lord whipped his polearm around in a wide circle and sent waves of destructive shadow energy radiating out from his position. Out of the corner of his eye, Zala'din saw a pair of dwarves simply crumple in screaming agony as they were consumed by the powerful energies, and he only barely managed to awkwardly roll to the side and avoid being disintegrated himself.

Auriana, too, had noticed the demise of her comrades, and Zala'din saw her eyes narrow furiously as she watched them die. Somehow, she had managed to rally a small group of Horde and Alliance casters off in a corner, safe from the erupting fissures and spikes, but their position had now been compromised by the devastating onslaught of a shadow wave. With a shout of alarm, she raised her arms and muttered a desperate spell, and a second later the entire group of casters vanished and reappeared behind Zala'din's current position.

Zala'din breathed a sigh of relief, knowing that the loss of that many casters would be a significant blow, but there was little time for rest. While he, Auriana, and most of the other warriors of Azeroth had avoided the shadow waves, the inanimate fel crystals remained in their path. Zala'din didn't think much of it at first, instead concentrating on regathering both his feet and his swords, when he was suddenly stricken by an incredible surge of pain.

He fell to his knees, and was unable to hold back the scream that tore from his lips. The air rang with similar cries of agony, and indeed only a handful of soldiers now remained on their feet. For a
long, horrible moment, the pain was so intense that Zala'din could barely see straight, let alone figure out what in earth had figure out what had just hit him. He was certain that he had avoided the nearest wave, certain that other waves could not have hit everyone…

"Da crystals!" he realised, though he thought it unlikely that he would be heard over the horrific screaming. "Can't let da waves hit da crystals!"

Zala'din's desperate gaze fell upon Auriana, who was one of the few people who had managed to stay standing. Despite her size, she apparently had an enormous tolerance for pain, and she had somehow managed to keep both her balance and her wits. She was, admittedly, leaning heavily on a piece of masonry, but her eyes were still bright, and it seemed that she was the only one who had heard Zala'din's frantic plea.

She raised her arms, and turned not on the mighty demon, but rather upon the nearest fel crystal. A deadly torrent of fire spewed forth from her outstretched hands, and the crystal simply exploded. Large shards as sharp as glass sprayed across the courtyard, and mercifully Zala'din felt the pain in his body lessen. It was enough that he was able to regain his feet, his head still ringing from the pain, and he gave Auriana a grateful nod.

Across the platform, several of the stronger soldiers began to follow Auriana's lead, and set about destroying whatever crystals they could before the fel lord could cast his shadow wave spell a second time. Enraged, the demon bellowed and swung his polearm in massive arcs before him, but the Horde and the Alliance had rallied, and they weren't about to give up now. Now that they had a strategy for dealing with the fel lord's magic, they fell upon him with renewed vigour, and slowly, costively, began to force him back.

It appeared that Zala'din was not the only one who had noticed the tide turning in Azeroth's favour. Grommash Hellscream was watching the raging battle with great interest from above, straining his muscles in eager anticipation with every step and blow.

"Heh," he coughed, some of his legendary fire returning to his eyes. "They are besting you, demon."

"No matter," the fel lord hissed. "We will crush you all!"

As he spoke, he swung his polearm around so fast that the blade's passage made an eerie, high-pitched whistling sound as it wiped through the air. Zala'din tensed, expecting another wave of shadow magic, only to quickly realise that his warriors were about to experience something far worse. The mighty weapon imbedded itself in the ground with a deafening crack, and a massive series of explosions spread outwards from the epicentre of the impact.

Both the healers and the casters had their hands full trying to protect the Azerothian army from the explosions, but they had learned their lesson from the shadow waves. The air practically sang with their combined magic, as Zala'din was suddenly enshrouded by more shields, healing spells, and defensive charms than he could count. Much to his surprise, few people seemed to much care whether they targeted Horde or Alliance, having united together in the interest of defeating their common foe.

Grinning, Zala'din took advantage of his heavy protections to charge directly at the fel lord himself. The demon's pulsing weapon may have done great damage to the Horde and Alliance forces, but loosing it meant he was now undefended. He leapt over a fissure, feeling its heat singe the soles of his feet, and fell upon the demon in a flurry of blades. He was joined on either side by some of the finest armsmen of the Horde and Alliance; ducking and weaving amongst them as they sought to bring the demon to heel. Maces, swords, and great axes flashed past his face at incredible
speed, and Zala'din was soon completely consumed by the rhythmic dance of death.

"Finish him, heroes!" Hellscream bellowed from above. "Finish him, that I may drive that cursed axe down his throat, and cut out his fel heart!"

Zala'din certainly needed no encouragement, and with a twist of his main hand sword, he cut clean through the demon's hamstring. The fel lord had realised far too late that the protections of his armour and the power of his fists could only go so far without the power of his ensorcelled weapon. It seemed that most of his more deadly skills had been tied up in the polearm, and without it he was all but defenseless. Zala'din gripped his sword tightly, using the pressure of his bodyweight to force the demon to his knees, while an orc warrior and Auriana's dwarf bodyguard took full advantage of the opportunity to drive their blades through the fel lord's chest and neck.

"We are… bested…" he gurgled bloodily, making one last valiant but futile effort to remain standing.

The demon stared up at Zala'din with eyes of pure hate as Zala'din withdrew his sword and stepped away; but even a lord of the Burning Legion could not live on hatred alone. He slumped forward, the sound of steel ringing out through the air as he fell to his knees and his plate greaves slammed into the ground. His gauntleted fists reflexively fell open to catch his fall, but it was all for nothing as he finally expired with a last, ear-splitting wail of fury and disbelief.

A great roar went up from every warrior still standing as the demon died, and even a fair few of the injured took up the cry. For his part, Zala'din simply leant up against one of his swords worth a weary sigh, only to abruptly remember that he stood in the shadow of one Grommash Hellscream.

"Loose dem chains," he commanded, struggling to make himself heard over the din of victory.

He waved to where Hellscream still hung over the battlefield, and a pair of orcs moved instantly to comply with the order. While this Grommash Hellscream was not the Hellscream who had earned redemption through the death of Mannoroth, his name still carried a certain respect amongst the orcs. Throughout the Draenor campaign, Zala'din had heard the whispers amongst his men, mostly from the younger orcs, who had held out hope for a second act of redemption from the legendary war chief. Zala'din himself was not so optimistic, but he supposed that stranger things had happened.

Hellscream rubbed his wrists gratefully as he was freed, and slowly moved to collect his discarded weapon. It was clear that he had been tortured, and badly, but an orc as proud as Hellscream would never allow his weakness to show. He gripped Gorehowl with his usual searing intensity, and his eyes were keen as he turned back to face the Horde and the Alliance.

"My thanks to you," Hellscream rumbled, inclining his head in a rarely given genuine expression of respect. "Now leave me. I have a trophy to carve."

He took an eager step towards the fallen fel lord, when Auriana's voice suddenly rang out sharply across the shattered courtyard.

"Excuse me?" she demanded, approaching Hellscream with Yrel, Khadgar, and Durotan in tow.

They were each of them bloody and battleworn, but none appeared critically injured; a fact for which Zala'din was immensely grateful. He did not have time to study his allies closer, however, as Auriana continued to advance on Hellscream with a furious colour rising high in her cheeks.

"Do you think it that simple?" she roared. "After all you've done to this world… do you think we're
just going to walk away?"

She had a deceptively commanding air for someone so small, and her ferocity was only enhanced by the way her arms and eyes glowed with arcane might. A flicker of surprise crossed Hellscream's face, and he moved to hold Gorehowl defensively across his body.

"And what trophy? We slew the demon, not you," Auriana added, gesturing furiously to the far too numerous bodies of the wounded and the dead. "You have no right of conquest here."

"The Legion slew many of my clan, and corrupted many others," Hellscream growled angrily. "Vengeance is my due!"

"Have you conveniently forgotten that you slew thousands of draenei, and orcs who did not wish to join in your genocidal crusade? What of their rights?" Auriana countered, her voice cracking through the air like a whip. "You should pay for your crimes with your life."

There was a great deal of nodding and murmured agreement at her words, and privately Zala'din agreed. Hellscream had caused great damage to the people of Draenor and Azeroth, and Zala'din didn't feel it was entirely fair that he should walk away without reprisal. It seemed that the issue was not as black and white as Auriana might have thought, however, as Yrel and Durotan exchanged a telling look.

"Grommash was an honourable orc once," Durotan said quietly, his expression thoughtful as he stared across at the older warchief. "He has seen the truth of Gul'Dan, of the Legion. We need the full strength of Draenor to fight back the fel. If Hellscream were to fight with us, we would gain a powerful ally."

"You may have honour, Frostwolf, but the Hellscream line is tainted," Auriana snapped, as if she were unable to believe what she was hearing. "Not a single one of them is redeemable. My people learned that lesson the hard way, with Garrosh. I will not make such a mistake a second time."

All pretence of control abandoned, Hellscream lunged forward angrily at the insult against his name; Gorehowl raised threateningly. The orc would have outweighed Auriana by three hundred pounds, at least, but she looked about as threatened as if he had been a fly. She barely moved a muscle as he leered down at her, his snarling tusks twitching barely an inch away from her nose.

"Try me," she growled. "Please, Hellscream, I'm begging you. Give me a reason. Give me an excuse."

Her hands sparked with raw power, and Zala'din would not have been at all surprised if they came to blows. Personally, he would have put his money on Auriana, but it seemed as if the question was doomed to remain unanswered.

"Enough!" Khadgar interjected, placing a gentle but determined hand on Auriana's shoulder and ever so slightly pulling her back. "We are here to fight Gul'Dan, not each other. Commander… Auriana... please."

Zala'din twitched his tusks but remained silent, finding it interesting that out of the infamous Grommash Hellscream and the Alliance mage, Khadgar also considered her the greater threat. For a moment, he wasn't sure if Auriana would listen to her older mentor, but with a disgusted shake of her head, she complied with his request and stood down.

"Yrel… Durotan," Khadgar continued placatingly. "It is your peoples that have suffered most from the Iron Horde's aggression. I believe it is only right that you decide what to do with his life."
Auriana scoffed slightly, her displeasure abundantly but clear, but she made no further attempt to move or provoke Hellscream. In stark contrast, Yrel and Durotan looked merely thoughtful as they considered both Khadgar's suggestion, and each other. While they had fought as allies in the Citadel, they were still strangers for all intents and purposes, and were clearly uncertain as to where the other stood.

"The Light teaches forgiveness," Yrel said finally, after some careful consideration. "Hellscream has committed grave crimes against the people of Draenor, yes, but I do not believe that anyone is beyond redemption."

"We are orcs. Conquest is our lifeblood," Hellscream insisted, clearly aware that his life was very much at stake. "But… perhaps… there may be honour in another way."

"The Frostwolves have not forsaken orcish tradition," Yrel pointed out, her soft voice a sharp contrast to Hellscream's gravelly growl. "The orcs of Durotan's clan have won many battles, and yet they have never resorted to killing innocents."

Durotan looked at the draenei Exarch in mild shock, clearly surprised to learn that she thought so highly of him. He quickly recovered his composure, however, and turned his full attention back to Grommash Hellscream.

"I, too, am willing to forgive… in honour of who you once were, and who you could be again," he conceded. "You have the potential for greatness, Grommash, son of Golmash, but there is no greatness in mindless slaughter. A hunt is a matter of purpose, not pleasure. Having said that... I am willing to spare your life, if you are willing to seek atonement for your sins against this world. Starting with the death of Gul'Dan."

"You can't be serious…" Auriana muttered under her breath.

"Zala'din?" Khadgar asked, pointedly ignoring her. "You've remained quiet."

"Gul'Dan needs to die. Ya either wit us, or against us," he said truthfully. "It be dat simple... and da sooner we get movin', da better."

"I will tear Gul'Dan's heart from his chest for his betrayal!" Hellscream said hotly, and beat a hand against his breast for emphasis.

"Commander?" Yrel pressed, turning to Auriana and touching her forearm gently. "You have done much for my people. I would not have you think your opinion on this matter is meaningless."

"Draenor is your world, not mine. The decision is yours," Auriana relented, her eyes narrowed. "But know this - when Hellscream turns on you in his eternal quest to stroke his own ego, do not come running to me. I will not risk more Alliance lives to save you from a disaster of your own making… and I assure you, the High King will agree with me."

Without waiting for any sort of reply, she turned sharply on her heel and stalked back to her troops. The Alliance followed her back into the Citadel as one, and from the looks on many of their faces, Zala'din could see they agreed with their passionate young commander. Hellscream lunged forwards, as if to follow her, only to still at a warning look from Khadgar. While the Archmage seemed intent on arguing for unity, it was clear that he did not entirely trust Hellscream, either. Khadgar was a practical man by nature, and would forgive much for the greater good, but that did not make him in any way stupid or naive. Hellscream might be forgiven, for the sake of the campaign against Gul'Dan, but he would earn his life the hard way, and Zala'din supposed he would have to be content with that.
"Your commander has enough fire in her belly to be an orc," Durotan observed, as he watched Auriana leave. "I will admit, understand her sentiment, but I do not wish to prolong this war any longer. Against Gul'Dan, we can use all the help we can get. Thank you for your support, Commander Zala'din."

"Don'tcha tank me, Durotan," Zala'din told him, shaking his head firmly. "I agree wit her. But as da little lion said… dis be ya world. Justice be yours ta decide."

"Then we're in agreement?" Khadgar pressed. "Grommash lives, so long as he is willing to fight Gul'Dan alongside our coalition?"

Durotan nodded, and extended his arm to Hellscream.

"Will you stand with us against Gul'Dan?" he asked. "Know that if you turn against us, or fail to fight with honour, your life will be forfeit."

Durotan's voice was surprisingly warm, but in truth, Zala'din knew that Hellscream had little choice. He was vastly outnumbered, and if he refused the one time offer of clemency, he would likely be dead before he could raise his axe. Still, Zala'din knew that a strong sense of honour was hidden somewhere deep within the warchief's conscience, and he could only hope that Hellscream would recall his better nature before the end.

As it stood, Hellscream appeared to be considering Durotan's proposal seriously, and several tense minutes passed before he finally reached out to clasp Durotan's proffered arm at the elbow.

"I accept your terms!" he declared boldly, his heavy brow furrowing in determination. "The Legion will not take this world, I swear to you. Let us slay Gul'Dan, and mount his head upon the walls! For the Horde!"
Unable to believe her allies' willingness to forgive Grommash Hellscream's crimes so easily, Auriana found herself shaking with anger as she led the Alliance back into the dark of the inner Citadel. She knew that challenging Hellscream and storming off had been far from diplomatic, but quite frankly, she didn't care. For over a year, Auriana had poured her blood, sweat, and tears into the Draenor campaign; had given almost everything save for her life, and yet it seemed all her efforts would be for naught. The very idea of permitting Hellscream to walk free was like a slap in the face, and Auriana found her anger growing with every step she took.

Fortunately, she found an outlet for her rage before it bubbled out of control; in the form of a strange void creature that had been twisted beyond any natural form by Gul'Dan's magic. Hidden away in its own large chamber, the creature possessed a singular ability to open portals into both the Twisting Nether and the Void, from which it called forth demons, void beings, and dangerously unstable magic. The Alliance were the first to engage, of course, having followed Auriana faithfully after she had turned her back on Grommash Hellscream, but Zala'din and the Horde were only moments behind.

While the united forces of Azeroth and Draenor eventually stood victorious, the battle against the portal creature nevertheless proved costly. Auriana stood off to the side as she surveyed the aftermath of the battle, wondering how many more obstacles they would have to overcome on their quest to stop Gul'Dan. To her left, Zala'din was doing his best to comfort a young orc who had lost the lower half of one of his legs in a collapsing portal, while Auriana's own lieutenants were busy evacuating the worst of the Alliance wounded. Yrel's forces in particular had suffered the brunt of the attack, and she was left with only a handful of vindicators for the remainder of the siege.

Auriana folded her arms across the chest as she watched the wounded depart, knowing full well that she, too, was now fielding less than half of the original force that she had brought into the Citadel. Even amongst the Alliance soldiers who remained to continue the fight, most had been wounded in some way, and the Horde had fared little better. Even Khadgar himself was limping, and Auriana could see Delvar Ironfist trying very hard to pretend that his left arm wasn't covered in the sticky ichor that passed for death knight blood.

Somewhat unusually, Auriana herself had largely escaped injury thus far, save for the usual bumps and scrapes she expected to receive during a battle. The worst of it all was a rather nasty fel burn on her forearm, which she rubbed at it absentmindedly as she watched over the evacuation procedures.

"You shouldn't worry at it like that, Commander," said a lilting voice from Auriana's left, and she turned to see Yrel walking towards her with a concerned frown. "May I?"

"I'm perfectly well," Auriana insisted. "And better than most."

"Still, we need you at your best," Yrel said, gently taking Auriana by the elbow and infusing her arm with Light. "Please, allow me."

There was the slightest hint of reproach in the Exarch's tone, though Auriana wasn't sure if it was due to Auriana's dismissive attitude towards her own injury, her confrontation with Grommash Hellscream, her tense exchange with Khadgar, or even a combination of all three. Privately, Auriana was quite surprised that Yrel had elected to spare the warchief's life, but she had no interest in reigniting the argument right before fighting Gul'Dan. Auriana was finding it hard enough to stay on top of her rage as it was, and she hoped Yrel would be wise enough not to press.
the issue.

The Exarch, however, seemed to have other ideas, and fixed Auriana with her typical bright-eyed stare.

"I know you aren't entirely certain of my decision to spare Hellscream..." she began tentatively.

"Well, I suppose that's the diplomatic way of putting it. Are you entirely certain of your decision?" Auriana shot back, her voice cold.

Auriana knew that she was not a particularly forgiving person by nature, but she hadn't felt that her call for Hellscream's death had been unwarranted. After all, they had literally spent *months* and countless lives trying to bring him down, and here, at the end of it all, not a single person had the courage to give Hellscream his due. With her fury still simmering from her time in Socrethar's infernal machine, Auriana had been sorely tempted to simply finish him herself. Of course, her respect for her allies had won out in the end, if only narrowly, but she would be damned if she wouldn't make her displeasure known.

Yrel watched Auriana carefully, her eyes somehow even glowing even brighter as she considered the question.

"No," the Exarch admitted finally. "I'm not."

"Then why?" Auriana demanded heatedly. "You know what Hellscream *is*, what he's *done*..."

"I... I tried to act as Velen would have," Yrel murmured. "You must understand... all of this... becoming an exarch... having to *lead* the draenei in this war, alone... everything's happened so fast, and most of the time I feel as if I'm simply stumbling from one disaster to another."

She looked down at the ground, looking more vulnerable than Auriana had ever seen her. Yrel had such an air of wisdom about her, it was easy to forget that she was still young and relatively inexperienced, and Auriana found that she was more than able to sympathise with the Exarch's feelings.

"I can appreciate that," Auriana confessed, her tone softening. "Honestly... I feel much the same way. I came to Draenor prepared to fight... but not to lead a garrison. There isn't a day goes by that I don't question every single decision I make."

Yrel looked up in surprise, and she leaned towards Auriana with an almost conspiratorial air.

"But... you always seem so... self-assured," she said softly.

"I'm a leader," Auriana said firmly. "My doubts have to remain my own. You can't ask men to fight and die for you if you lack conviction."

"Then you understand why I must stand firm," Yrel said, nodding very seriously.

"In this case, I'm not so sure. What Hellscream's done..." Auriana countered. "The suffering he's brought to your world, and to mine... why not kill him and have done with it?"

"Because killing him is irreversible. The moment that axe falls, there is no coming back. I was uncertain... and so I chose the less final of the two positions," she said, her brow creasing slightly. "Look around you. Our forces have been greatly weakened, and whatever else Hellscream may be, he *is* a talented warrior. For now, I will put my faith in his better nature. If he betrays that trust, executing him still remains an option."
"I hope you don't have to pay for that decision," Auriana said sincerely, though she could begrudgingly admit that Hellscream had fought well against the portal demon. "I mean that; I hope he proves worthy of your trust."

Yrel sighed, and she rubbed a hand wearily across her eyes. It had been a long day, for all of them, and Auriana could see that the decision was weighing heavily on her mind.

"I know that it is difficult for you to understand my position," Yrel said quietly. "You don't trust anyone."

"That's not true," Auriana retorted hotly, her thoughts turning briefly to Varian.

"Are you certain? I couldn't help but notice that you didn't select Garona Halforcen for this mission, for example. She would have been a valuable asset," Yrel observed.

"We may be allies, Yrel, but how I choose to allocate my troops is none of your business," Auriana said sternly. "And I do trust people, I do. I trust Khadgar."

"Are you sure he knows that?"

Auriana's ears went suddenly hot with embarrassment, and she was forced to look away. Yrel was never one to offer outright judgement or censure, but it was clear from her tone that she had overheard the earlier heated exchange between the two mages. Auriana knew perfectly well that she had both spoken out of turn and injured Khadgar's feelings, and she only hoped she would get a chance to speak to the Archmage at some point after the battle was over.

"This is neither the time or the place for this conversation, Yrel," she said peevishly, though her tone was motivated more by shame than anger.

"Of course," the Exarch said smoothly, once again regaining her air of otherworldly poise. "Just... you spend so much of your life looking at the worst of people, Commander. Sometimes you need to remember to see the good in them, too."

She gave Auriana a gentle and all too-knowing smile, before turning and walking back to what remained of her people. Auriana watched her go, silently wishing the she had even a quarter of the draenei's poise and even temperament. As she had told Yrel, however, now was certainly not the time to dwell, and she permitted herself only the briefest of sighs before she was all business once more.

Most of the injured Alliance and Horde forces had already been evacuated, and from the looks of it Zala'din and the others were preparing to move on. Somewhat ominously, a new portal had appeared immediately after the void creature's demise; an ominous invitation to whatever Gul'Dan had in store for them next. Auriana strode swiftly over to her allies, pointedly ignoring the thoughtful look Grommash Hellscream shot her way, and after a brief discussion, she was the first to step through the portal and towards whatever lay beyond.

The world spun wildly, and a few moments later Auriana and the others found themselves standing on a massive open platform on the very top of Hellfire Citadel. Up this high, the air should have been cold, but all Auriana could feel was the faint burn of hellfire on her skin. She looked skywards, and felt a wave of nausea wash over her as she beheld the swirling chaos of the sky above. Gul'Dan's infernal machinations had allowed the Twisting Nether to bleed through reality, blocking out Draenor's sun with a storm of unnatural fel green and bruised purple.

At three equidistant points around the platform, Gul'Dan had summoned more of his massive fel
spikes; even bigger than those they had seen the fel lord's platform below. The spikes themselves seemed to be powering three portals, each one protected by its own hunched fel summoner. Gul'Dan himself hovered a good twenty feet above the floor, encased in a bubble of protective fel energy, and he stared down at the Alliance and Horde with an air of supreme contempt. From his utter lack of surprise, it was clear that they were expected, and the thought was not comforting in the slightest. At the centre of the platform lay a pool of some fetid fel liquid, corrosively eating at the bones of some enormous dead creature. Curious, Auriana exchanged a reflexive glance with Khadgar, but he seemed to be just as nonplussed as she.

The three summoners did not seem to share Gul'Dan's sense of calm superiority, however, instead looking rather disturbed by the abrupt appearance of entire army in front of them.

"They are here!" one shouted, redoubling his efforts to aid Gul'Dan. "Hurry!"

"Kill them," Auriana countered, stepping forwards without hesitation. "Do not let them finish that ritual!"

Auriana thought she might be lucky enough to get a clear shot on one of the summoners before they were able to raise their defenses, but it was not to be. The very moment the Alliance and Horde attacked, the summoners drew on the power of the fel spikes and called up dozens of demons in their defense. Imps, doom lords, and infernals suddenly swarmed the platform, forcing the soldiers of Azeroth away from the summoners, who were frantically attempting to complete their summoning spell before they were overrun. Meanwhile, Gul'Dan himself seemed supremely unconcerned by the chaos raging beneath him. Safe within his protective fel shield, he could perform his dark rituals without fear of interruption, and Auriana knew it was only a matter of time before whatever dark thing he was summoning came to life.

Unfortunately, while she would have dearly loved to turn her not-so-tender attentions on Gul'Dan, the unprotected fel summoners presented far easier targets. It seemed to stand to reason that he could not complete the ritual alone, and it was Auriana's full intention to deprive him of his three allies as soon as possible. She sprinted forwards with her hands raised, ducking beneath the swinging arm of a huge infernal as she ran. Her arms prickled with heat as it expelled a wave of hellfire in her direction, but she simply ignored the pain as she closed in on her target. The demons were admittedly troublesome, but at the end of the day they were merely distractions - the real problem was the summoners.

Trusting that her allies could contain the demon swarm, Auriana keep moving, running along an angular path that would bring her alongside one of the summoners. She peppered the orc with three quick fireballs, forcing him to turn his attention from the summoning ritual to Auriana herself. He met her fire with a burst of his own, and she quickly summoned a shield of protective ice in answer. Auriana smirked as she continued to advance, watching with cold amusement as the orc's green fire swirled harmlessly around her shield. His eyes widened in disappointment, and Auriana took advantage of his surprise to punish him with a roaring pyroblast. The orc quickly raised defenses of his own, but in the end, it did him little good against Auriana's increasingly relentless assault.

One down, she thought grimly, as she finished the orc off with a fireball that burned clear through his left eye.

Auriana spun to the left, setting her sights on a second orc summoner, and she began to cut a swift path across the platform. In an effort to delay her, chattering imp suddenly jumped in her direction, only to meet with the swiftly moving toe of a boot as Auriana unleashed a vicious kick in its direction. She then blinked past another pulsing infernal, before running straight into the arms of a doom lord who had seen her coming and correctly anticipated the direction of her movement.
Surprised, Auriana cried out, only to choke on the sound as the doom lord smothered her mouth with a single, massive fist. His other hand closed forcefully around her upper arm, and she grunted in pain as he squeezed it almost to the breaking point. Furious, she aimed a quick blast of fire at his head, but the doom lord was surprisingly clever for a demon, and twisted her by the arm at the last minute to send the spell flying wide.

Roaring maniacally, the demon forced Auriana to her knees with a twist of his impossibly heavy muscles, and he was just about to cave in her skull when two swords suddenly erupted through the centre of his chest.

"Careful, little lion," Zala'din said, kicking the demon's corpse to the side and hauling Auriana back to her feet. "Don't wanna lose dat pretty little head."

"Worry about your own head, Zal," she retorted, leaning around him to shoot an explosive fire blast at a pair of imps closing in from behind.

Zala'din grinned broadly, and together they wasted no time charging down the second summoner. Two doom lords moved instantly to their master's defense, flexing their bat-like wings threateningly, but Auriana paid them little mind. She nodded briefly to Zala'din, trusting that he would have her back, and blinked right into the space between the two enormous doom lords. Sending out a wave of ice to freeze them in place, she left them for Zala'din to kill while she pressed onwards to engage the summoner directly.

After another quick and explosive duel, Auriana claimed her second orc summoner of the day. Although he put up more of an impressive fight than the first, he was clearly exhausted from his participation in Gul'Dan's summoning ritual, and he was hardly a match for the furious Auriana. At the same time, far across the platform, Yrel's draenei vindicators had managed to behead the third and final summoner, sending his limp body crashing unceremoniously to the floor. Auriana couldn't help but to grin as his death caused the oppressive stench of fel magic to fade, and for a split second she genuinely believed that her forces had been able to defeat the summoners in time.

Her burst of glee was short lived, however, as she remembered that Gul'Dan still hovered over the platform, his entire body aglow with deathly green. Apparently, the death of the three summoners was enough to finally attract the hunched warlock's attention, and he paused his spellwork long enough to look down at the army assembled before him with a cruel grin. Disturbingly, Gul'Dan did not seem rattled by the loss of his allies, and Auriana began to get the distinct feeling that they were being played.

"Gul'Dan!" Khadgar shouted, boldly stepping forward to address the orc directly. "You have wrought havoc on this world long enough. Today you will face justice for your crimes."

Auriana moved silently to take her place at her mentor's right hand, while Yrel, Zala'din and Durotan took up position on his left. She drew on as much magic as she was able, ready to fight back immediately, although she had no idea what she might have to defend against. Beside her, she felt Khadgar gather his own formidable powers, while Yrel, Zala'din, and Durotan all raised their weapons. In stark contrast, however, Gul'Dan did not seem remotely concerned by Khadgar's threat, and if anything seemed rather bored by the whole conversation.

"I very much doubt that..." he said slowly, the words practically slithering out from between his cracked lips. "Who are you to stand against me? A fool of an Archmage, a poor imitation of the Prophet Velen, a troll who dares claim to lead warriors of the Horde, and an orc entirely undeserving of the name..."

He narrowed his focus to Auriana, his face contorting into something that might have once
resembled a smile. Something dark and unsettling shifted in the depths of his terrifying red eyes, and he stared down at her with a curiously satisfied expression.

"And you, little berserk. I've wanted to meet you for some time now," he murmured, his disturbingly mellifluous voice making the hairs on the back of Auriana's neck stand up. "You would make a fine servant of the Burning Legion, yes... a fine servant indeed. I could make you powerful beyond even your wildest dreams."

"I don't..." Auriana started, only for Gul'Dan to cut her off with a loud hiss.

"Do not lie! I can see your soul, girl," he spat. "You crave magical power; you cannot hide your lust from me! Tell me... why deny yourself? Why turn your back on who you really are? Give yourself to me, and I will make you a god."

Auriana met Gul'Dan's gaze levelly, though she had a sneaking suspicion that the orc could sense the sudden turmoil that had arisen within her heart. Of course, most of what the orc warlock had said was true. She was powerful, and she didn't doubt that the Burning Legion could teach her all sorts of spells that she could never learn from the Kirin Tor. More worryingly, Gul'Dan had also seen the truth of her desire for power, though there was one thing he would never truly understand. As much as Auriana loved the sweet thrill of magic coursing through her veins, she loved Azeroth and its people more, and she would never willingly do anything to cause them harm. More than that, she would rather die herself or endure torture for a thousand, thousand years than betray Varian to a monster like Gul'Dan.

The warlock's grotesque smile widened impossibly as Auriana abruptly took a step a step forward, trying to ignore the near deafening pounding of her heart.

"Yes... yes..." Gul'Dan crowed. "Come to me, girl, and we will unlock the secrets of your fury. Your rage will set fire to the cosmos, I promise you..."

He had clearly taken her forward movement as a sign of agreement, and his hateful eyes suddenly took on a triumphant gleam. He was also not the only one who had interpreted her action in such a light: Auriana distinctly heard a sharp inhalation of breath from Khadgar, and Zala'din took a desperate, stumbling step forwards.

"Little lion..." he whispered disbelievingly. "No..."

Auriana ignored them both, and slowly continued forwards until she was standing just below Gul'Dan's position. In truth, there was a small voice within her that urged her to take advantage of the orc's offer, but she savagely banished it into the darkest depths of her soul.

"The only thing that's going to burn is you," she said coldly, her hands suddenly alive with flame as she whipped a vicious firebolt at his head.

Auriana was afforded a single, glorious moment of triumph as Gul'Dan's eyes widened in genuine shock, though his face soon resumed its usual expression of horrible self-assurance. She knew she would be unable to penetrate Gul'Dan's shield alone, or at least not without serious time and planning, but so long as she was attacking him directly, he would have to focus on maintaining his defenses against her. She had no idea what he was summoning, only that it couldn't be good, and she only hoped that she could delay the process for as long as possible.

"So be it..." Gul'Dan growled, abruptly shattering one of the fel spires and sending a stream of fel energy hurtling towards the pool in the centre of the platform. "You are too late, mortals! Return, Mannoroth... your masters call you to this world once more!"
"Er… did he jus' say…" Zala'din murmured, shooting Auriana a look of great concern.

"Mannoroth…" Durotan repeated, the colour draining from his normally ruddy face. "No…"

As one, the war leaders of the Alliance and the Horde turned to face the fel pool at the centre of the platform, and watched in horror as the green liquid began to bubble ominously. Slowly, but with increasing rapidity, the massive bones began to reassemble themselves under the power of Gul'Dan's magic. Each bone made a horrible grinding noise as it met with another, and in no time at all a skeletal Mannoroth stood whole before them.

"What… what is this?" he rumbled, laboriously gathering his skeletal legs beneath him. "Gul'Dan! What have you done? I am… so… weak…"

The pit lord seemed disoriented by his abrupt reincarnation, and Auriana could only hope it would give her forces an advantage. He was still huge, as pit lords were wont to be, and his the swirling green magic of his newly formed heart was protected by both a heavy breastplate and the enormous fel glaive in his right hand.

"Deal with our guests, Mannoroth, and I shall make you powerful beyond imagining," Gul'Dan ordered, gesturing to the Azerothian soldiers arrayed around the platform. "Leave none alive."

Despite having only just awakened from death, Mannoroth appeared rather eager to take Gul'Dan up on his offer. He flourished his glaive, sending a wave of fel energy lancing towards a nearby group of night elves, and Auriana was once again forced to turn away from Gul'Dan to focus on the more immediate threat. If she had thought the platform was chaotic before, it was nothing compared to the mayhem Mannoroth now unleashed. Worryingly, a lack of skin and flesh did not seem to be hindering the demon in the slightest, and he fought with as much as ferocity as he had during his first life. As imps continued to pour from the portals, Mannoroth began to call down entire meteors from the Twisting Nether, all the while continuing to blast away with his glaive.

Auriana managed to get off a few clean shots on his flank, only to immediately realise that there was little point throwing fire at a skeleton. Even her more powerful spells left little more than scorch marks on Mannoroth's bones, while other spells simply slipped into the spaces between ribs or leg joints and missed entirely. Glowering furiously, she then decided to instead turn her attention to the imps swarming the platform. Dozens upon dozens of the creatures had appeared during Mannoroth's summoning, and were now causing all kinds of trouble for the soldiers of Azeroth. Unlike their master, however, the imps were most certainly not immune to her magic, and she picked off four of the things in quick succession.

Auriana had just turned towards a fifth imp, when she heard a strange whistling noise from somewhere overhead. She looked up in alarm to see a fel meteor hurtling towards her at tremendous speed, and it was only by virtue of her uncannily quick reflexes that she was saved. She blinked sideways at the last moment, tumbling to the ground and rolling head over heels across the platform. Her legs tangled in the lengths of her robes, and the moment she came to a stop she was set upon by three imps.

One of them went straight for her face, opening a long gash in the side of Auriana's face. She tasted blood, and irritably shot a fireball at the imp at point blank range. The creature was thrown clear, its face completely destroyed by the blast, and the air was suddenly thick with the scent of burning flesh and Auriana's own singed hair. She grunted in pain as a second imp then cast a fireball of its own, burning clear through her protective robes and leaving the pale skin of her stomach exposed. The imp cackled gleefully as it prepared to hit her again, only to choke horribly and swear at her in demonic as Auriana closed her fist around its throat. She punched the irritating creature in the face as hard as she could and hurled it clear, before rounding on the third and final imp. The little
demon had attached itself firmly to her left leg, scratching and tearing at her robes in an attempt to break through to the flesh beneath. Growling, Auriana sent a wave of frost racing down her own leg in order to force the imp to loosen its grip, then dragged herself back to her feet as fast as she was able. She spun to the right as she rose, unleashing a brutal kick and sending the screaming imp sailing off the side of the platform.

Now free of the imps, Auriana managed to reassert her balance and shake the ice from her leg, when she felt a sudden wave of dread wash over her; the kind of dread that festered deep within the soul and drove one to madness. She staggered slightly under the power of Mannoroth's unexpected spell, and her heart began to race in terror. Her hands became rapidly slick with sweat, and her mind began to turn to thoughts of death and darkness.

Gasping, Auriana looked about frantically for any kind of help, only to come to the horrifying realisation that she was not alone. Everyone she could see seemed to have been affected some degree, and in fact Auriana was one of the few people who had remained standing. Many soldiers had fallen to their knees, while others had been driven to such a state of despair that they had literally run off the edge of the platform, screaming all the while.

_Fight it_, a voice inside her suddenly whispered; a voice that sounded so much like Varian. _You are stronger than your fear._

Auriana grithered teeth, and forced herself to remember that it was only a spell. The dark visions tearing at her mind were not real in the slightest, and had only the power she chose to give them. What _was_ real, however, was the deadly pit lord standing in front of her, and the necessity of his death.

"For Azeroth..." she choked, her voice so hoarse and small that she wasn't entirely sure whether she'd actually made a sound.

A nearby tauren druid seemed to have heard, however, and her words seemed to shake him out of the haze of his own terror.

"For Azeroth," he echoed, his rumbling voice deep and oddly comforting.

The simple fact that there was someone else out there fighting was enough to kindle a fire in Auriana's chest, and she clung to the druid's voice like a lifeline. Shaking her head to clear her thoughts, she managed to get her legs moving again. Mannoroth's cruel spell threatened to overwhelm her at every step, but Auriana was far too stubborn to let him win. Her hands now shone fiercely with the power of her own magic, the glow growing brighter and brighter until she finally unleashed, hurling a complex counterspell directly at the pit lord.

The oppressive cloud of fear dissipated instantly as Auriana's spell struck true, and her heart suddenly felt a thousand times lighter as she was freed from the powerful fear. Mannoroth roared his fury and turned his glaive on her immediately, but the damage was already done. All around the platform, soldiers were regaining their wits, and they moved to reengage Mannoroth with a vengeance.

Despite the extent of his powers, the pit lord began to falter, and Auriana thrilled as she began to sense victory. Fear alone was not enough to break the warriors of Azeroth, and with each blow struck and every imp that fell, the momentum of the battle turned in their favour. Mannoroth became sluggish and slow, and he began to swing his glaive more wildly the more punishment he took. Most tellingly of all, Gul'Dan too seemed to have noticed the turn of the tide, and he once again paused in his summoning to aid his demonic ally.
"Fear not, Mannoroth!" he yelled, power crackling between his fingertips as he shattered a second fel pillar and drew deeply on its magic. "The fel gift empowers you… make them suffer…"

A fog of eerie green fel magic suddenly swirled around Mannoroth's legs, and Auriana looked on in both horror and amazement as flesh began to reattach to Mannoroth's skeletal frame. It was like watching someone being flayed in reverse; the veins, tendons, muscle and skin resewn by a precise, invisible hand. Despite herself, Auriana's mouth dropped open, and in her stunned state she briefly broke the practiced rhythm of her casting. She was not the only one thrown, either, judging from the number of soldiers who had inadvertently stepped back or ceased their attacks so that they might watch the bizarre spectacle. The magic was far beyond anything Auriana had ever attempted herself, and the pervasive unnaturalness of it all made her arms shiver with gooseflesh.

"My power returns!" the pit lord crowed, hoisting his glaive triumphantly. "I am unleashed!"

Mercifully, the destruction of the second fel pillar had interrupted the ceaseless flow of imps, and the soldiers of Azeroth were now able to devote all their attention to the reconstituted pit lord. *Unfortunately,* however, Mannoroth made up for his sudden lack of allies with vastly increased power. Where his fel glaive had been dangerous before, it was now absolutely deadly, and he wasted no time putting the weapon to work. He shot a sobering blast of fel energy into a cluster of Durotan's Frostwolves, and Auriana winced in genuine sympathy as three orcs were vaporised before her very eyes.

Somewhat to Auriana's surprise, however, the Alliance and the Horde did not appear to be daunted by the newly reformed beast. If anything, Mannoroth's reconstituted flesh provided an even better target than his bones, and her soldiers ceaselessly continued to press the attack.

"These mortals cannot be this strong!" Mannoroth bellowed, swatting somewhat fruitlessly at a tauren paladin who was currently giving him a great deal of trouble. "Gul'Dan, do something!"

There was a genuine note of fear in his voice, and Auriana felt a sudden surge of wild hope. Her heart fell a mere moment later, however, as Gul'Dan turned back to Mannoroth, and once again targeted the pit lord with a blinding beam of fel magic.

"Let the power flow through you..." Gul'Dan crooned. "You are the destructor, the flayer of flesh!"

Mannoroth's hulking body surged with sudden power, and he flexed with fresh might. Any wounds he had suffered in the earlier fight seemed to have faded away, and the power of his dark aura swelled beyond what Auriana would have believed possible.

"I… am… *unstoppable!*" he roared, emphasising his words with a glaive blast that instantly claimed a half-dozen lives. "The Legion will burn this world, as it has countless others!"

Gul'Dan grinned with horrible satisfaction, and abruptly opened a portal in mid-air.

"Hold them here, Mannoroth," he ordered, evidently convinced that the demon would now be able to finish the soldiers of Azeroth on his own. "My work is almost done. Our master comes…"

*Master?* Auriana wondered.

Instinctively, she looked for Khadgar, and was concerned to see that he looked just as nonplussed and disturbed as she felt. Mannoroth remained the more pressing issue, however, and Auriana was again forced to ignore Gul'Dan's departure, instead continuing to concentrate her attacks on the pit lord.

It soon became apparent that Gul'Dan's parting gift had provided Mannoroth with an even more
significant boost to his power, and the death toll began to rise more quickly than Auriana could count. It appeared that everything before now had simply been Mannoroth testing his strength, and reacclimatising to his newly reformed limbs. He now struck at her soldiers with seemingly endless vigour, quickly overwhelming her healers and forcing her men to stay permanently on the defensive.

At one point, Mannoroth raised his glaive vertically into the air, and a dark ball of shadow energy began to coalesce at the tip of the weapon. Auriana immediately raised her shield, wondering what he had in store for them this time, when dozens of powerful beams suddenly radiated out to strike at the soldiers of Azeroth. Pain lanced through Auriana's body, but far worse than the pain was the sudden gravitational force that began to shove her irresistibly towards the lip of the platform. Every single soldier around her had been similarly affected, and Auriana heard the screams of more than one man as they were driven clear off the edge of the Citadel.

Luckily, Auriana had been close to the centre of the platform when Mannoroth had begun to channel the spell, but it was soon painfully obvious that it would not be enough. The pain made it nearly impossible to use magic, but Auriana somehow managed to gather her concentration and throw herself forward into a blink. Unhappily, however, her spell had little effect, for as soon as she rematerialised she was forced backward again by the seemingly endless force of Mannoroth's power. A growing sense of panic and inevitability rose in her throat as she frantically tried to think of a way out of her current predicament, when she suddenly felt someone grab at her wrist and hold fast.

Startled, she looked up to see Zala'din doggedly clinging to her arm. He had cleverly driven his blades into the floor to act as an anchor, and had reached out to catch her as she went sliding past. Auriana mirrored his grip, offering him a brief grin of thanks as she lowered her head to weather the storm. Mannoroth could not maintain such a powerful spell indefinitely - or at least she hoped - and right now the best thing she could do was wait until he exhausted himself.

Other soldiers with bladed weapons had begun to adopt Zala'din's strategy, and had set about catching whoever else they could. Several long chains of soldiers had now formed, and the effect would have almost been comical if not for the seriousness of the situation. Auriana was also proud to see that no-one seemed to care much for faction lines, and were grabbing anyone in need, regardless of whether they were Alliance or Horde.

Her brief sense of hope was soon crushed, however, as she realised that one of the people who had not been caught was Khadgar. The Archmage had fallen to his hands and knees, and was now scrabbling desperately for any handhold that he could find. He was swept perilously close to the edge of the platform, and Auriana knew that if Mannoroth's spell persisted for much longer, he would fall.

"Khadgar!" she screamed desperately, and reached an ineffectual hand out towards him.

Auriana strained her free hand towards him, as if it would do any good, but there was at least twenty yards between them. There was no one else within range of him, either, and she knew full well that even his ability to magically slow his descent would mean little if he were to fall from as great a height as the top of Hellfire Citadel.

With little other recourse, Auriana pushed through the almost overwhelming pain once more, and managed to whip a fireball over her shoulder at Mannoroth's head. She grunted in satisfaction as the spell hit him full on in the mouth, and was gratified to see Mannoroth lower his glaive with a furious roar.

It may have been her spell, or perhaps simply a coincidence, but Auriana didn't care. The moment
she felt the pressure of the spell lessen she released Zala'din's hand and blinked towards Khadgar just as he slipped off the edge of the platform. Auriana dived onto her belly, feeling the hard ground scraping at her skin through the hole in her robes, and frantically reached for any part of Khadgar she could find.

She called his name desperately as she fumbled for his hand, and her heart leapt with sudden wild hope as she caught on to the sleeve of his tunic and held tight.

"Auri?" he gasped, his eyes wide with disbelief.

"I've got you," she choked, shifting her grip to the muscles of his upper arm. "I've got you."

Auriana gripped Khadgar's arm so tightly that she suspected she was drawing blood, but there was no chance in hell that she was ever going to let him go. Somehow, she managed to swing one of her legs forwards, and she hooked her boot up against the lip of the platform for balance. Auriana was a small woman, but she was strong, and she braced hard against the edge as she hauled Khadgar upwards with all her might.

In truth, it probably only took Auriana about half a minute to drag Khadgar's arms and upper chest back over the edge of the platform, but to her it felt like an eternity. While he was not as large as man like Varian, Khadgar was not small by any definition, and Auriana's arms were quivering uncontrollably by the time she managed to pull him to safety. For a brief moment, they simply lay beside one another; Khadgar sprawled facedown while Auriana lay spread eagled on her back. They were both breathing heavily: Auriana from exhaustion and Khadgar from fear, and they took a moment to regain their composure before getting back into the fight.

"Come on, old man, we've still got work to do," Auriana panted finally, rolling over and lurching rather inelegantly back to her feet.

Khadgar followed more slowly, though to Auriana's practiced gaze, he did not appear injured. He followed her back into the fray with the vigour of a much younger man, and together they turned on Mannoroth once again in earnest. Auriana had always been something of a loner, even before the incident with Deathwing and the destruction of Theramore, but even she found it comforting to work in concert with another mage. The contrast between the glittering purple of Khadgar's arcane mastery and Auriana's blazing fire was oddly beautiful, and Auriana found herself falling into an almost trance-like state as she worked. Auriana found life most simple when she was fighting, when the entire world condensed into nothing but her target, her magic, and herself. There was no politics, no responsibility, no fear; just Auriana, and whatever thing it was she was about to make dead. Of course, she was still aware of Khadgar standing beside her, and the way their magic intertwined to tear through Mannoroth's defenses, but he became more of a distant figure in her mind the longer the fight wore on.

It seemed that Mannoroth had expended much of his power in his attempt to force the entire Azerothian army off the platform, and he began to once again weaken under the pressure of continuous assault. At some point, though Auriana couldn't have said if it were minutes, hours, or even days later, she realised that Zala'din and a small group of his comrades had managed to close in on Mannoroth's left flank. Between the pit lord's deadly fel glaive, his powerful magic, and his demonic protectors, it had been difficult for melee warriors to fight to their full potential, but they had now found an opening. Sending a burly orc warrior ahead for protection and careful to avoid Mannoroth's writhing, slug-like tail, Zala'din readied his twin blades for an attack on the demon's unprotected hamstring. Sensing his intent, Auriana changed her focus at the last minute; aiming not for Mannoroth's chest and head, but rather for the leg nearest to Zala'din. She sent one of the hottest spells she'd ever cast flying towards the back of the demon, burning and tenderising the
flesh just before Zala'din's waiting blades came crashing down.

Mannoroth roared in anger as his rear leg suddenly buckled, but before he could move to defend himself, he was struck by another half dozen blades. The warriors of the Horde were quick to deepen the wound Zala'din had created, and by the time Mannoroth shot a glaive strike over his shoulder to ward them off, his back leg had nearly been entirely amputated. Bellowing in pain, Mannoroth attempted once again to force his enemies off the platform, but the damage he had now suffered was far too severe, and he was barely able to call so much as a fel bolt to his defense.

"Finish him!" Auriana urged, drawing on as much power as she could to aid in the final push.

In the end, it was one of Auriana's worgen who struck the final blow, driving his massive two-handed sword hilt deep into Mannoroth's throat. The worgen was almost immediately saturated with a torrent of viscous demon blood, and he only just managed to pull his blade free before the pit lord's thick front legs collapsed. Mannoroth gurgled horribly and pressed a slab-sized hand to his neck, but it was far too late. The combined assault of the Alliance and the Horde had become all too much, even for the fel-empowered Mannoroth, and with a last muttered curse, he finally expired.

Auriana did not release her magic immediately, instead watching Mannoroth's body closely for any signs of life. She wouldn't have put it past Gul'Dan to imbue the pit lord with some kind of demonic immortality, but a few minutes later the massive corpse still had not stirred, and Auriana was finally satisfied that he was well dead.

Again, she thought ruefully, hoping that today was the last time she'd ever have to gaze upon the pit lord's ugly face.

Auriana let go of her magic with a reluctant sigh, well aware of the fact that she had been allowing her fury to simmer below the surface for far too long. Stepping into Socrethar's infernal machine had been a mistake, albeit a necessary one, and she was forced to admit that her control was waning. It was telling that she had relied heavily on her fire magic during the last few battles, as she always did when she was angry, and she vaguely wondered how long she could maintain some degree of equanimity. She had no time to rest and gather her thoughts, however, as Khadgar instantly opened a large portal through to far eastern Tanaan. Ideally, Auriana would have preferred to take time to regroup, but she understood Khadgar's urgency. Gul'Dan's oblique reference to a 'master' was very concerning, and if the orc was prepared to resurrect Mannoroth, there was no telling what else he might do.

"Gul'Dan has fled to the Dark Portal!" the Archmage shouted, his expression contorting with unusual ferocity. "Quickly! He has no place left to run - we will finish this. Oh - and save me his skull. For… reasons."

Auriana looked at him with a raised eyebrow, but now was not the time to enquire after the older mage's eccentric fascination with magical objects. She could tell he was tired - as were they all - but the chance to stop Gul'Dan once and for all had infused him with new energy. He met her gaze levelly as she passed, and despite their earlier conflict, he offered her a reassuring nod and a kindly smile.

"Ladies first," he said gallantly, gesturing to the portal lingering in the air between them. "It's time to finish the fight."
Varian

Varian was not a happy man. It was just after midday in Stormwind, and the entire city was on edge. It was common knowledge that the siege of Hellfire Citadel had begun earlier that morning, and he suspected that a good number of his citizens would have at least known someone caught up in the battle. Right now, there would be parents and siblings and friends and lovers all; nervously awaiting any news from Draenor. Even if one had no personal relationship to someone fighting abroad, each citizen was well aware that a failure to contain Gul'Dan and his fel Horde would mean that all Azeroth was in peril yet again. There were still those old enough to remember the horrors of the first invasion from beyond the Dark Portal, and the fear amongst the people of Stormwind was tangible.

Of course, while Varian cared a great deal for his city, he found his concern for the future of his world was rather outweighed by his concern for Auriana. More than almost anyone else, she would be right in the thick of it, and Varian knew there was a very good chance she would not be coming back. He'd awoken several times last night in a cold sweat, and had barely managed to stop himself from screaming her name as he pulled himself from the tormented depths of a terrifying nightmare. Varian had tried to remind himself that Auriana was strong, smart, and capable, and had survived many trials before this, but today… today felt different.

He hadn't even tried to go about business as usual, as he normally did when Auriana was off fighting, and had instead locked himself away in his quarters. He had made a half-hearted attempt to distract himself with some of the work sitting on the desk in his private study, but had soon given up and taken to oiling and sharpening Shalamayne. The familiar, repetitive nature of the task gave him something to focus on, gave him a sense of control, and he found it helped him to silence the dark voice in the back of his mind that incessantly whispered to him of Auriana's probable death. Varian was not a man who needed fancy trappings; and indeed, he often found the accoutrements of kingship rather stifling. He did, however, prize a quality weapon, and there was no finer weapon on Azeroth than Shalamayne. It gave him an immense sense of pride to be the bearer of such a fabled blade, and he treated it with the same amount of care that others might have shown to precious jewellery or a priceless work of art.

Of course, no blade in the world, however fine, needed to be tended to for over three hours, and eventually it became starkly apparent that the blade could not possibly be any cleaner or any sharper. Without something tangible to focus on, however, Varian's mind soon wandered, and all the cold fear that he had been trying to suppress abruptly came bubbling up to the surface. He was suddenly unable to close his eyes without picturing Auriana's lifeless body, and the whispers in the back of his mind became almost overwhelming. No matter how much he tried to argue, tried to list all the good reasons to believe that she would survive, he couldn't shake the icy tendrils of dread that had burrowed firmly into his heart.

"I'm going for a walk!" he announced loudly, though of course there was no one around to hear.

Varian carefully sheathed Shalamayne and placed it back in the war chest he kept at the foot of his bed, before pulling on a pair of boots and throwing a rumpled tunic on over his loose cotton shirt. His normally comforting rooms had become suddenly stifling, and Varian desperately needed to be somewhere, anywhere, else.
He wandered the upper corridors of the Keep aimlessly for a while, paying little attention to his surroundings as he walked. Two of his chamber guards had initially tried to follow him, but he had waved them off with a stern glare. He *had* briefly considered trying to find Anduin, but decided that his long-suffering son had done nothing to warrant exposure to another of Varian's foul tempers.

Eventually, more by accident than by design, he found himself emerging from one of the tallest guardtowers atop the Keep, leaning up against the rampart and staring morosely down at the city below. The weather was almost as grey as Varian's mood, and it was hard to make out some of Stormwind's more distant buildings. The mage district and the harbour were all but invisible, and even the normally vibrant roofs of Old Town looked depressingly dull. The Cathedral spire loomed eerily out of the grim cloud towards him, the lone point of brightness in the gloom. Another man might have seen it as a sign of hope, a metaphor for the triumph of light over dark, but Varian was not a religious man. He believed in the *power* of the Light, of course, having fought alongside too many paladins and priests to think otherwise, but had little patience for notions of destiny or blind faith.

Falling even deeper into his dark thoughts, Varian barely noticed when it began to rain, and indeed only realised when a sudden squall whipped a wet strand of hair into his eyes. Sighing, he slicked his unruly hair back over his head and away from his face, though he didn't consider for a second going back inside. It was barely spitting, and he found it oddly comforting to stand outside in the poor weather. Inside, he felt pressure to be brave and stoic and kingly, but out here, he could simply be.

"Sire?"

Varian started ever so slightly as a soft female voice echoed unexpectedly down the rampart towards him, but he kept his back firmly turned to the guardtower and his eyes on the city.

"I'm not here," he said gruffly, trying and largely failing to keep the irritation from his voice. "Unless you have word from Draenor, I have no wish to be disturbed."

"As you wish, my lord," came the patient reply. "Only… it's raining."

Varian raised an eyebrow, and ever so slightly turned his head.

"You think I hadn't noticed, Ridley?" he asked, recognising her as one of his elite personal guard. "I'm hardly going to catch my death in a light drizzle, in any case."

"Of course not, Your Majesty," she agreed, a little too quickly.

Varian was surprised to hear a distinct timbre of nervousness in her tone, which was most unusual for one of his hand-picked protectors. Despite their professional relationship, Varian's guards saw more of his true self than almost anyone else, save for people like Auriana and Anduin, and he made a point of choosing people who could speak their minds. Ridley, in particular, was refreshingly honest and typically unfazed by Varian's mercurial temperament, and her sudden trepidation struck him as rather out of character.

He reluctantly turned to face her more fully, only to realise that an entire half dozen of his closest and longest-serving guards were crammed into the doorway of the nearby tower behind her, staring out at him with great interest through the rain. Ridley, it seemed, had been chosen to act as their representative, though Varian wondered if perhaps *sacrifice* weren't the better word.

"Am I needed for something?" he asked drily.
"No, sire, I… well, we were simply… er… concerned," she said lamely, shifting her weight awkwardly from foot to foot. "We couldn't find you, you see, and we'd be doing our jobs rather poorly if we were to lose you..."

It was a weak excuse, and they both knew it. Varian did not like to be encumbered by guards when he was moving around Stormwind Keep, and in truth only really permitted them to accompany him outside because it was expected. He was perfectly capable of looking after himself, and hated to be tripping over guardsmen when he was doing nothing more dangerous than taking lunch, or visiting Anduin in the library. His Kingsguard, of course, well understood his proclivities, and mostly stayed out of his way. They normally treated him more like a comrade than a king, though today they seemed to be making an unusual exception.

"Well, as you can see, I'm in great danger…" he said sarcastically, waving his hand out at the grey skies and making Ridley blush.

"Right you are, Your Majesty," she said stiffly, looking back at her fellow guardsmen for support. "I… um…"

"Whatever it is you came here to say, just say it," Varian said tersely. "You know I don't like playing games."

Ridley nodded and straightened her spine, though her dark brown eyes were warm with sympathy. She had the kindly, sombre look of someone attending a funeral, and Varian's entire body tensed as he abruptly realised where the conversation was heading.

"For what it's worth… your friend, your… Commander... she's going to be alright, Your Majesty…" Ridley said, her voice so quiet as to almost be a whisper. "She's t…"

Ridley trailed off at the furious look Varian shot her way, and took an involuntary step backwards. Varian normally might not have minded her interference quite so much - after all, it wasn't really his choice to keep his relationship secret - but he was on his very last nerve. The thought of losing Auriana made him sick to his stomach, and he had largely sort out the solitude of the rampart to avoid unleashing his fear and frustration on the unsuspecting citizens of Stormwind Keep. Ridley, however, had presented him with an unexpected target, and Varian's growing disquiet latched onto her like she was a beacon. He knew it was petty, but right now he hated everything about the guardswoman in front of him. He hated the look of pity in her eyes, hated that she appeared to know his dearest secret, and most of all, hated that she was here, and Auriana was not.

"You need to leave, Ridley. All of you need to leave," he said warningly, biting back the tongue lashing that he would have dearly loved to give her. "If I need your services, I'll ask for them."

"Yes, sire," she said sharply, snapping to rigid attention and wisely choosing not to press the issue...
further. "I apologise if I've overstepped my bounds, Your Majesty. I... we... we only thought to help."

"There is nothing to be helped!" Varian snapped, realising full well that his words were entirely belied by his cantankerous tone. "Leave."

For the briefest moment, it looked as if Ridley might have wanted to say more, but she wisely held her tongue and turned to depart. She moved quickly back towards the guardtower, kicking up small sprays of fallen rainwater with her heels as she went. Varian glared after her as she conversed briefly with her fellow guards, determined to quash any ideas of further conversation, but soon they had all disappeared back into the warmth of the Keep, and Varian was left alone again. As he began to suspect he might always be.
Auriana practically leapt through the portal in her eagerness to kill Gul'Dan and be done with the war on Draenor for good. The orc warlock was now outnumbered and alone, and she wanted nothing more than to finally wipe the smug smile off his fel-pocked face with a burst of raw fire. The rest of the Horde and the Alliance poured through the portal behind her, but Auriana had eyes only for Gul'Dan. She broke into a half-run as she saw him, still floating high above in his protective fel shield, only to come to an abrupt halt as Khadgar's hand closed over the back of her robes and pulled back.

"Careful," the Archmage said warningly. "Look."

The Dark Portal remained shattered from the Iron Vanguard's eventful arrival, but it appeared that Gul'Dan had been busy terraforming the area ever since. Any trace of natural jungle had been beaten back, and the whole area had all but been consumed by Gul'Dan's dark magics. In place of the Dark Portal, the warlock had also constructed a smaller gate out of some kind of viscous black biomass. The new portal seemed almost alive, pulsing with a heartbeat of pure fel as a swell of sickly green energies combined to create a gateway to some distant Legion world.

"We're too late," Khadgar added gravely, and Auriana was shocked to hear genuine fear in his voice.

"What?" she demanded, turning on him incredulously. "He's right there, Khadgar, come on! We can take him!"

"No…” Khadgar said stiffly. "He is no longer alone…"

As if Khadgar's words had been prophetic, Gul'Dan fed one last burst of black power into the gate, before rounding on the armies of Azeroth with a sickening grin. There was something all too knowing in his hard eyes, and Auriana's stomach fell as she realised they'd been had. Every hard-won victory in Hellfire Citadel had simply been a distraction to buy Gul'Dan time to complete his summoning, and by fighting Auriana and the others had played right into his hands.

"You have foolishly rushed to your end, Archmage…” Gul'Dan crowed, his eyes aflame with hateful fervour as he stared directly down at Khadgar. "The Black Gate is whole!"

The warlock lifted his arms triumphantly, and the dimensional gateway behind him suddenly shimmered and swirled with ominous intent. The sky darkened apocalyptically overhead as the ritual was finally completed, as if Auriana's armies now stood in the path of great and terrible storm. This was no natural storm of wind and rain, however, but a storm of hellfire and brimstone from which there could be no escape.

"Behold!” Gul'Dan roared victoriously. "The might of the Legion!"

Auriana's heart clenched as something enormous stirred behind the fel veil, and she actually stopped breathing a second later as a colossal eredar lord emerged from the depths of the Twisting Nether. Behind her, Khadgar gasped, and Auriana abruptly realised that she now stood in the presence of none other than Archimonde the Defiler. He stood at least forty feet tall at the shoulder, his cloven hooves alone extending higher than Auriana's head. There was a touch of the draenei look about him, but any ancestry or spirit he may have shared with Velen's people had clearly been long since forgotten. His skin was an ashen purple-grey, as if all the Light had been sucked out of him, and his eyes burned with a terrible fire.
"Tremble, mortals, and despair!" Archimonde bellowed, the chilling power of his voice echoing within the depths of Auriana's soul. "Doom has come to this world."

He flexed his gargantuan arms experimentally, almost lazily; his muscles moving smoothly beneath his demon-fired armour.

"Gul'Dan! Ready the Black Gate for my invasion," he ordered sharply. "These vermin will not delay me. The last light will fall by my hand!"

"Yes, Master," Gul'Dan crowed giddily, plainly convinced that Archimonde would make quick work of Draenor's defenders.

Privately, Auriana had to agree. She had heard stories from soldiers who had fought with Jaina Proudmoore during the assault on Hyjal Summit, when the Lady of Theramore had helped to repel the second Burning Legion invasion of Azeroth. Auriana, of course, had been much too young to witness the destruction wrought by Archimonde's attack first hand, but many of the guards she had known in Theramore had shed blood against the Defiler. As a child, Auriana had rather enjoyed their stories of the battle and had fancied one day winning glory against an eredar army, but coming face to face with the truth of the demon lord was far beyond anything she had ever imagined.

"Archimonde," she breathed. "Archimonde. What the hell are we supposed to do against that?"

"You do what you always do, Auriana. What you were born to do," Khadgar murmured seriously, placing a hand on her shoulder and squeezing tightly. "You win."

Auriana nodded shakily, and forced herself to stand as tall as she was able. She hadn't been legitimately frightened for a long time, not since Blackrock Foundry, but she couldn't let her men see just how terrified she was. The Alliance needed to believe that they could win, and they would never believe it if Auriana herself had visible doubts.

"Form up on me," she ordered determinedly, coughing slightly to cover the rasp of fear in her voice. "Ironfist, Hafela, take point in the vanguard. Yrel, have your vindicators take the left flank. Calandra, link the Kirin Tor. This is going to take everything we've got."

Auriana's words seemed to rouse her lieutenants from their state of shock, and they complied with her orders immediately. The vanguard came together like a seamless machine, and Auriana felt a familiar tingle rush up her spine as Calandra began to link powers with the rest of the Kirin Tor mages. Part of her longed to join them, to feel the power of more than a dozen mages coursing through her veins, but she felt it was far too great a risk.

Auriana then felt a second twinge to her right, and realised that the blood elf Girana was doing the same thing with her Sunreavers. Zala'din seemed to have reacted to Archimonde's arrival with his usual unflappable cool, and was calmly directing his troops into position. As if he sensed Auriana's gaze, he looked out over his left shoulder, and gave her a steady, reassuring nod. His twin swords were free and his muscles were tensed, but otherwise he looked as if he were off for a pleasant stroll through the jungle, instead of readying to wage war against one of the great lords of the Burning Legion.

Standing at the end of the world, and he's still smirking, Auriana thought, returning his nod with a tight smile.

She took a surprising amount of comfort from Zala'din's small gesture, and it gave her the courage to step forwards.
"Alliance, ready arms," she commanded. "We will not fail Azeroth this day!"

Oddly enough, Archimonde looked somewhat amused by the defiant army amassed before him. Certainly, he showed no sign of fear, and if anything seemed to regard the finest warriors of Azeroth and Draenor as mere annoyances. With an expression of perfect disdain, he beat one of his massive cloven hooves fiercely into the stone ground, and the sky darkened even further as he called bright green demonfire to his hands.

"Let the echoes of doom resound across this wretched world, that all who live may hear them and despair," he intoned, his eyes flashing with the promise of immense pain as the entire world went to hell.

Auriana was a veteran of many battles, but she had never faced an encounter as chaotic as the battle against Archimonde. His power was so great that he was capable of casting many spells in concert, and every single man and woman of Azeroth was pushed to the limit simply trying to keep him contained. Spirits of pure hellfire cut wide paths through Auriana's lines, and each time one was destroyed another spawned to take its place. Soldiers were tossed at random into the air by blasts of shadow magic, only to fall screaming back to the ground and exploding in agony. Archimonde burned a death mark into every soldier who dared come to close, and all the while called deathcaller demons to his aid.

Worst of all, there seemed to be nothing that Auriana or Zala'din's forces could do to bring him down. Archimonde was so strong that he could easily maintain his own protections while wreaking havoc on his assailants, and even after what felt like an eternity of fighting, he didn't seem to have taken any damage at all. Moreover, something about the Defiler's magic made the battle feel incredibly claustrophobic. The darkness of his spells hung in the air even after their power had dissipated, and Auriana suspected her skin would never be truly clean again. She felt as if fragments of her soul were being leached away, and she began to fear that it would not be long before her forces broke under the immense pressure.

The only spot of brightness amid the chaos was Yrel, who along with her vindicators was calling on bright beacons of light to destroy the massive fel spires that Archimonde continually summoned about the platform. Unfortunately, for each spire Yrel's Light destroyed, two more would take its place. The spires pulsed ceaselessly with dark energy, and it was all the healers could do to prevent their charges from falling under the sway of the lingering blight.

"The pitiful Light you call upon is powerless against me, child," Archimonde intoned, laughing coldly as Yrel redoubled her efforts. "End this foolishness!"

"No!" the Exarch cried. "I will never give in to darkness. The Legion will fall."

Her chin was set defiantly, and her eyes blazed pure white as she summoned yet another ball of Light. It smashed through yet another one of Archimonde's spires, and for a moment the oppressive aura of shadow lifted slightly. A second later, however, Archimonde slammed a massive hoof into the ground, and sent a series of fel explosions racing along the ground towards Yrel.

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The Exarch was in no position to dodge, left vulnerable by her efforts with the Light, and one of the explosions detonated with full force under her feet. She was thrown a good twenty feet backwards, her plate rattling painfully across the stonework until she finally came to rest against a chunk of shattered masonry. Auriana instinctively turned towards her comrade, and nearly lost her head for her troubles. The deathcaller she had been fighting took advantage of her distraction to shoot a shadow blast directly at Auriana's face from point blank range, and it was only by twisting herself gracelessly to the left that she avoided the strike. Her back twinged painfully in protest from the awkward manoeuvre, but she quickly hobbled the demon with a fireball to the knee.
before staggering towards the fallen Exarch.

"Yrel!" Auriana cried urgently, but the draenei didn't move.

"Pathetic..." Archimonde muttered, the entire staging area ringing with the sound of his disappointment.

He paused, sneering down at the combined forces of Azeroth and Draenor, and waved a massive hand with an air of stinging finality. Before Auriana or anyone else could react, the patches of flame spread by the fire spirits shifted and erupted, and suddenly the entire world was fire. A least a dozen soldiers were killed instantly, the combination of their earlier wounds and the force of the doomfire too much to handle. Others were tossed around like ragdolls by the rippling explosions, and it was only those who stood on the far periphery of the spell's area of effect that managed to retain their feet.

Unluckily, Auriana herself had been one of those closest to Archimonde when he had called the flames, and she was thrown backwards the powerful spell detonated. She tried desperately to right herself as she tumbled through the air, only to scream in agony as she hit the ground sideways and felt her collarbone break. Her left arm instantly went numb, and it was all she could do not to black out from the pain.

She rolled onto her stomach, inadvertently whimpering as pain lanced through her chest and shoulder, and was horrified to see that only a handful of soldiers were still standing, in either the Alliance or the Horde. The platform was already littered with the bodies of the dead, and most of those still living were writhing in agony as doomfire burned in their veins. Above them, Archimonde simply watched, his once noble features twisted into an expression of the most supreme contempt as he surveyed the results of his catastrophic attack.

Auriana felt the power of the Defiler's stare like a punch to the gut, and for the first time in her life she genuinely felt hopeless. Even in Blackrock Foundry, she had still managed to rally, had still fought to escape, even if escape had meant her life. Against Archimonde, however... she lowered her head bitterly, squeezing her eyes tightly shut, and was all but ready to surrender when a cold hand suddenly closed around her ankle.

Auriana started in fright, only to realise she was held not by a demon, but by Calandra of the Kirin Tor. The warmage looked decidedly worse for wear, her once pretty face bloody and swollen, and her hair singed from hellfire. Her breath rattled painfully in her chest, and Auriana realised that the other mage was barely maintaining consciousness.

"Take... take it..." Calandra murmured, blood bubbling up between her lips as she choked out the words.

"What?" Auriana said, bewildered. "Take what?"

"Highmaul... I know... what you did..." Calandra coughed. "I still... hold... the link... take it. Take it all..."

"I... I can't..." Auriana stammered, finding that her fear of Archimonde was narrowly outweighed by her fear of herself.

"Do it!" Calandra hissed, her face contorting painfully. "No choice... please...

Calandra's strained desperately towards Auriana, and snared her hands with trembling fingers. Auriana could sense the power stirring within the other mage, and the temptation to reach for it
was strong. She shifted her weight, instinctively leaning towards Calandra, only to stop short as memories of Highmaul came flooding back. She clearly remembered the strength of her magic, the pure joy of channelling so much power… but also the sickening guilt and shame that had followed. And yet… Auriana was not the same person she had been when she'd first stepped through the Dark Portal, or when she'd first confronted the true power of her berserker heritage in Highmaul. She was older, more experienced, and while she may not have precisely considered herself wiser, she was no longer the same frightened girl who had fled Azeroth out of fear of her own darker nature.

Gritting her teeth against the pain, Auriana took a deep, steadying breath, and with great effort, she pulled herself free from Calandra's grasp and stood. It was such a small thing, to stand on one's own two feet, but the simple action rekindled something that Auriana thought might have finally been beaten out of her. Archimonde had the ability to drain all sense of hope from the air, and Auriana had been forced to face the possibility of a fight she genuinely believed she would lose. But if she could stand…

*If you can stand, you can fight,* she told herself firmly. *And if you can fight, you can win.*

With surprising sense of calm, Auriana reached out towards Calandra, and entwined the threads of her magic with that of the older mage. The power of the linked Kirin Tor mages rushed through her like lightning, and she drew it close like a shield. Her heart sung with the joy of holding so much of the arcane, and the tiny spark of defiance in her heart swelled into a raging bonfire.

Pure instinct pulled Auriana's head to the right, towards the Horde side of the field, where Girana was trying to rally the remaining Sunreavers. Auriana could feel the strength of their magic, even from this distance, and with little more than a sigh she extended her magic across the field and rudely forced her way into the Horde's wavering link. She watched on dispassionately as Girana started in shock, looked frantically about for the source of the intrusion. Strangely enough, however, the moment the blood elf's eyes met Auriana's, her features relaxed, and Auriana suddenly felt full power of the Sunreaver's magic surge through her bones.

The sensation was dizzying, and Auriana stumbled sideways as if she were drunk. What mattered most, however, was that she had them both now, the Alliance *and* the Horde, each feeding her the heart of Azeroth's magic - and she wasn't done yet. Holding so much power made her feel strong, giddy even, and with a growing sense of recklessness she plunged her hand into her robes, her bloody fingers slipping over the cool metal of the powerful artifact hidden within.

Nithramas shone with power as Auriana brought it out into the light, and it called to her as strongly as any siren. There was no turning back now, even if she had wanted to, and with a final whispered farewell to Varian, Auriana slipped Nithramas onto the middle finger of her right hand. She shook violently as she called on the power imbued within ring, and at the same time she finally gave herself what she'd always secretly wanted - permission.

Time stopped, and for the longest moment, Auriana couldn't breathe. She had fought her rage so desperately, and for so long, but now they greeted one another like old friends. The fire within her was not something to be beaten down and stamped out, it was something to embrace. It was joyous, and terrible, and beautiful all at once, and it filled her to the point of overflowing. Auriana almost felt as if she were floating, weightless, in some realm far beyond fear and pain and war. There was no Draenor, no Azeroth, no consequences… just Auriana, her magic, and the demon she had to kill. Distantly, she was aware of a throbbing headache building behind her eyes, and the taste of her own blood on her lips, but she didn't remotely care. The entire universe now flowed through her veins, and against all that power, all that endless, magnificent wonder, Archimonde simply looked small.
Auriana narrowed her eyes.
Khadgar

Khadgar was in a world of pain. His hands had been badly burned by Archimonde's devastating flames, and his head pounded painfully as he tried to summon as much magic as he was able. He had seen and experienced much in his life as a mage, but fighting against Archimonde was something else entirely. The sky overhead was almost black with menace, though the bright flashes of Archimonde's fel fire were more than enough to light up the battlefield in terrifying colour. All his carefully laid plans were unravelling before his very eyes, and worst of all, he had likely led hundreds of brave men to their deaths. Everywhere he looked there was nothing but the dead and the dying, and it seemed to Khadgar as if Archimonde's powerful flame attack would be the end of them all.

Unhappily, none of Khadgar's allies seemed to have escaped the wrath of the eredar. Durotan was nowhere to be seen, which did not bode well for his survival. Yrel lay unmoving to Khadgar's right, while Zala'din was having a hell of a time fighting against pack of vicious deathcallers. Grommash Hellscream was crouched low on the ground, struggling to stand with his face a bloody mess, and Auriana…

Khadgar looked around for his slender protégé, and his heart sank as he found her, standing alone amidst a pile of bodies. The entire left side of her face was covered in blood, and he could tell from the awkward way she held her left arm that she was badly injured. Curiously, however, she seemed to be limping towards Archimonde, her movements slow but determined. For his part, Archimonde stood alone, lording over the destruction he had wrought with his fire spell and staring down at the Alliance and the Horde with utmost contempt. It was clear both that the armies of Azeroth were at their breaking point, and that Archimonde was the kind to savour a slow victory.

Auriana, however, seemed to have other ideas, and she approached the eredar without a hint of fear. Khadgar struggled to one knee, reaching a vain hand in her direction, but he was far too far away to stop her even if he thought she could be dissuaded. Her courage was certainly admirable, though Khadgar couldn't help but wonder if she were simply walking heedlessly towards her own death.

Archimonde roared with sudden laughter as he noticed Auriana's approach, but it was no pleasant or joyful sound. It grated like steel on stone and nails on a chalkboard all at once, and it made the hairs on the back of Khadgar's neck stand right up.

"What is this?" the demon lord bellowed, leaning down to glare at his miniscule challenger. "You are bold, little one, but a bold insect is an insect nonetheless. You exist only to be crushed."

Archimonde whipped a casual fel bolt in Auriana's direction with as much regard as he might have shown a fly, and Khadgar reflexively cried out for his friend. The fireball was as easily large as a horse, and it burned almost white hot as it barrelled forwards at tremendous speed. Khadgar flinched, expecting Auriana to be entirely consumed by the fel flames, only to recoil in utter shock as she deflected it with a mere wave of her hand.

Impossible, he breathed inwardly. That... that's impossible.

A flicker of genuine surprise crossed Archimonde's ancient face, and his lips split into a grin of cruel amusement.

"Well, well..." he rumbled. "I will admit, you have some small talent, mortal, but you must understand that you cannot win. You stand against Archimonde, against the sword of Sargeras
himself! I will not lose!"

He bared his teeth, towering over Auriana ominously, but she didn't move. She stared up at him calmly, and Khadgar could have sworn that she looked as if she almost pitied the Legion lord. Of course, he couldn't really be sure of anything at this distance, and he could only hope that she had some kind of plan beyond that of displaying astonishing bravado.

"Don't you ever get tired of the sound of your own voice?" Auriana said levelly. "Does it not bore you to spout the same self-important bile on world after world?"

Khadgar involuntarily barked a nervous laugh, though Archimonde did not seem to find her comment nearly as amusing.

"Curb your insolence, little wretch!" he roared, clenching his massive fists as if to pound Auriana into dust.

"You know, people have been telling me to do that my entire life," she replied, shaking her head. "Hasn't changed me much."

She took another step forward, seemingly ignorant of the danger Archimonde posed, and cocked her head to the side.

"You're a fool. A powerful fool, but a fool nonetheless," she added coldly, throwing the Defiler's own words back in his face. "You may have seen much of the universe, but you understand nothing. You know nothing of what it means to live... to love... to fight for something greater than yourself. And that is why, in the end, you must always lose."

Khadgar had never been more proud of anyone than he was of Auriana in that moment. Right then, she was everything he had ever loved about Azeroth and its people; everything he had spent his life trying to defend. She was brave and loyal and fierce, and she burned with tremendous strength of spirit as she faced down the mightiest lord of the Burning Legion. Unfortunately, courage and confidence alone were not enough to prevail against the demon horde, and once again Khadgar prayed that she had something up her sleeve.

"I tire of this!" Archimonde boomed. "Your army is scattered, brought low by my power! You have courage, but you cannot hope to defeat me alone."

Of all things, Auriana smiled.

"I'm not alone," she said quietly. "I've never been alone."

Silver fire raced along her arms as she raised them high into the air, and in that moment Khadgar understood what he had overlooked. Auriana was most definitely not alone, and drawing power from nearly every mage in the vicinity, whether Kirin Tor or Sunreaver, conscious or not. He reached out with his magical senses and did a quick count, soon realising that Auriana commanded a link of almost forty other mages. The amount of magic she was channelling had to have been staggering, and Khadgar had to wonder how she was still standing under the weight of so much power. He then remembered that she also carried Nithramas, and deduced that she was holding everything together with a combination of skill, fury, and sheer stubbornness.

"Reform lines!" he ordered, dragging himself back to his feet and encouraging both the Horde and the Alliance to do the same. "Stand, defenders of Azeroth! We're not out of this yet."

Keeping one eye on Auriana, and ignoring the pain of his own injuries, Khadgar moved quickly to the side and shook Yrel back into consciousness.
"This fight isn't over yet," he said kindly. "On your feet, my friend."

"What use is it?" Yrel panted, struggling to close her bruised and bloodied fingers over the haft of her hammer. "We're never going to get through his defenses!"

"Trust me," Khadgar told her confidently, hoping to break her out of her uncharacteristic bout of melancholy. "You're about to get your chance. Be ready."

He nodded to where Auriana stood before Archimonde, the sole point of light in the gloom. She was nearly invisible now, cloaked in the blinding white of her own power, and she seemed to be attempting to draw on every last bit of magic on Draenor. Khadgar quickly abandoned any attempts at understanding how Auriana was doing what she was doing, instead focusing his attention on rallying the Alliance and Horde forces. He had no idea what Auriana intended to do, but he knew she was going to do it soon, and he wagered that it was going to be spectacular.

Khadgar was proven right a second later as Auriana let out a scream unlike anything he had ever heard before. It was not a scream of pain, however, but one of pure, primal rage. It was as if she had bottled up every bit of hurt and anger that she had ever suffered, and now prepared to release it upon Archimonde in a single, devastating attack. A sphere of pure arcane energy swelled between Auriana's fingertips, unrestricted by any spell or words of power, and with a triumphant roar of fury, she finally unleashed her full potential.

A massive beam of blinding light exploded outward from Auriana's hands, taking Archimonde in the centre of his chest. The eredar lord screamed in defiance, quickly summoning a counterspell of his own, but Auriana now had the edge. She burned though his defenses like they were nothing, making her linked mages cry out as she drained them of everything they had. It was clear to Khadgar that Auriana was now entirely out of control, but he wondered it that wasn't exactly what was needed right now. Archimonde had little recourse against such raw magic, and the flesh of his chest actually began to blacken and char before Auriana finally collapsed under the strain of using so much power.

"A valiant attempt, but ultimately futile," Archimonde intoned, though his voice now sounded distinctly strained. "Foolish girl. You would have done well in the Legion."

He stepped forward over Auriana's now-still body, and once again turned his full attention to what reminded of Azeroth's fighting forces. Yet while his fel magic still burned brightly, Auriana's counterattack had torn away all his carefully prepared defenses, and Khadgar knew they would never again get a better chance.

"Attack!" he shouted. "Do not let him recover!"

Despite their weariness, the soldiers of Azeroth rallied to his cry, and once again resumed their coordinated assault. Auriana's wild attack had also done much more than weaken Archimonde; she had made him appear vulnerable, and she had given her remaining forces a fighting chance. There was not a single soldier who remained uninjured, but they had now seen that Archimonde, too, could bleed, and a surge of fresh hope spread amongst them like wildfire.

Once again, Archimonde was put under siege by sword and spell, but this time he was no longer protected by his inpenetrable magical defenses. He immediately ceased his gloating, and became increasingly furious as the tide of the battle began to turn against him. His air of arrogance diminished with every spell or strike that hit, though his anger burned unabated.

While the soldiers of the melee hacked away at Archimonde's colossal legs, Khadgar's primary focus was worsening the giant wound Auriana had opened in his chest. To that end, he aimed an
endless stream of arcane bolts at the demon, drawing on the power of the greatstaff Atiesh to enhance his spells. Not for nothing was Khadgar considered the greatest mage alive, and he was determined to do his part in bringing the eredar lord to his knees.

Unfortunately, Khadgar's considerable efforts did not go unnoticed, and Archimonde targeted him with a singularly brutal spell. Khadgar cried out in pain and fell to one knee as a fragment of his soul was unceremoniously ripped from his body. Gasping in shock, he stared up into the hollow eyes of his shadowy self, and desperately tried to break free from the soul link with an arcane explosion. The powerful blast did nothing to relieve his pain, however, and he buckled further under the weight of Archimonde's insidious spell.

Yet just as he thought he might never stand again, a bright light flared in his peripheral vision, and a commanding voice broke through his pain.

"I thought we had decided to fight on our feet?" Yrel said lightly, casting a powerful blessing in his direction.

She moved to offer him a gauntleted hard, which Khadgar accepted gratefully. Her soothing Light broke through the fog of pain in his mind, and with her help he was able to move far enough away from his soul fragment to break the spell.

"Thank you," he panted.

"You're welcome," Yrel smiled, once again moving with hope and purpose. "Though I doubt Archimonde will be as pleased with my actions."

She glanced back towards the demon, who true enough had taken advantage of Khadgar's temporary incapacitation to devastate the melee. Where Archimonde had once simply been following the orders of his dark master, he now seemed personally affronted, and had begun to channel his power into a strange ritual spell that Khadgar didn't recognise.

"I will shatter this pathetic world!" Archimonde raged, his face contorted in an expression of perfect rage. "Its broken husk will be torn apart in the Twisting Nether for all time."

"Aid me, champions!" Khadgar cried, trying his best to counter the spell before it was fully cast. "This is not our final hour. We must survive!"

Archimonde must have sensed the power of the counterspell, for he abruptly lunged in Khadgar's direction, trampling an unlucky goblin beneath his hoof as he moved.

"Oblivion draws closer, mage! Give up!" he snarled, forcing Khadgar to blink backwards as Archimonde's horse-sized fist swept past his eyes.

"Never!" Khadgar shouted defiantly. "This world will stand against the Legion and prevail!"

"Do you think you can defeat us, mortal?" Archimonde hissed. "Let me show you the truth of the Legion, so that you might witness our power and despair."

He waved a hand to complete his dark ritual, and the world suddenly twisted wildly beneath Khadgar's feet. He squeezed his eyes tightly shut, trying to fight off a wave of dizziness, only to gasp in astonishment when the world finally righted itself and he managed to open his eyes.

In an extraordinary display of power, Archimonde had dragged all his attackers into the Twisting Nether. The fight was now centred on a ruined platform floating in the void, which was likely all that remained of a world once just like Azeroth. The sky was wild with unnatural streaks of black
and purple of green, and the sheer enormity and emptiness of it all made Khadgar believe that if he stared upwards too long, he might go mad.

Khadgar had no time to focus on his cosmic insignificance, however, as Archimonde redoubled his efforts to slaughter them all. Pools of dark power gathered on the ground, damaging anyone who stood too close, while explosions of fel energy detonated at random beneath their feet. Huge, pulsing netherwalkers stalked the platform, while enormous beams of fel energy cut through anyone too slow to escape their path. Archimonde had also taken to targeting specific soldiers with his own personal burning brand, and it was only through the colossal efforts of the remaining healers that those marked for death were able to survive.

Most terrifying of all, however, were the void stars that Archimonde called to his aid. At first, the stars had seemed relatively harmless, until one abruptly detonated in a large explosion that knocked a handful of soldiers back off the platform and into the Nether. There was quite simply nothing that could be done to save them, and their screams echoed horribly through the air as they tumbled forever through the vast emptiness of space.

How can we fight a being that commands the stars themselves? Khadgar wondered, as he danced sideways out of the path of an oncoming fel beam.

Once again, Archimonde had been left to cast relatively unencumbered as the soldiers of Azeroth were forced to run constantly for their lives. The Defiler was more powerful here, amongst the chaotic energies of the Nether, and despite all their best efforts, he began to pick of soldiers one by one.

Crying out in wordless frustration, Khadgar sent a netherwalker back into the void with an arcane bomb. It exploded with unusual force, and in that moment Khadgar abruptly realised that Archimonde who not the only one who could draw on the Nether's endless power.

You're getting daft in your old age, he told himself reproachfully, as he pulled shattered strands of energy into Atiesh.

As a place outside reality, the Twisting Nether did not follow the usual rules of the arcane. The magic here was wild, untamed - and able to be freely shaped by whosoever had the will. It was a dimension of pure energy, and right now that was exactly what Khadgar needed. He might not be able to overpower Archimonde directly, but even the Defiler himself could not hope to withstand the raw, untempered power of the Nether itself.

Trusting his allies to manage the netherwalkers and protect him from the void stars, Khadgar began a ritual of his own to invert Achimonde's power and turn stolen energies back upon him. It was something he never would have considered possible, that is until Auriana had torn away every magical defense the eredar could muster. Archimonde was still capable of a terrifying offense, but his wounds, both magical and physical, had left him vulnerable to the costs of his own power - and Khadgar intended to take full advantage.

A nearby shaman quickly picked up on Khadgar's intent, grinning fiercely as she called on augmented elemental energies of her own to bolster Khadgar's spell. Soon, there were priests and druids following his lead as well, every kind of magic combining to create one of the most powerful pools of concentrated power Khadgar had ever seen. His hands shook as he fought to keep the energies in check long enough to aim at Archimonde, before the combined amount of magical energy reached critical mass and he was forced to let go.

"Yrel!" he screamed. "Now!"
As the raw power of the Nether turned itself back upon Archimonde, Yrel and her paladins made one final, desperate prayer to the Light. She leapt high into the air as Khadgar's improvised spell tore into Archimonde's vulnerable flesh, practically flying forwards to bury her blazing white hammer into the gaping hole in his chest.

Already badly wounded from Auriana's earlier onslaught, Archimonde could not have hoped to survive such a rush of energy. His eyes widened in genuine surprise, and he clutched a hand desperately to his ruined breast as the power of the Nether began to consume him. His once mighty legs quivered and collapse, and all his clever spellwork began to unravel before Khadgar's eyes.

"No!" Archimonde wailed; a surprisingly piteous sound for such a terrible creature. "This cannot be!"

He pitched forward wildly, and as his magics failed, both demon and mortals were hurled out of the Twisting Nether and back into reality. A great cry went up from the defenders of Draenor as the monstrous eredar finally fell to his knees, his breath rattling pathetically in his throat as he collapsed. The ground shook from the force of the massive impact, and Khadgar's heart thrilled in triumph as he watched the demon struggle to gasp his last.

The fel light began to fade rapidly from both Archimonde's armour and his eyes, though it appeared he was not entirely done yet. The demon lord looked upwards, to where Gul'Dan still floated above the battlefield in the safety of his sphere, and he reached out a shaking hand towards the orc lackey.

"Gul'Dan!" he rumbled, his once booming voice a pale echo of what it had once been. "You made a pact!"

The orc had no time to react, seemingly struck dumb by his master's defeat, and with a titanic effort, Archimonde used his last ounce of energy to send Gul'Dan screaming in terror towards the depths of the black gate. Khadgar lunged forwards in a futile attempt to prevent Gul'Dan's escape, but within seconds the portal to the Twisting Nether exploded and collapsed.

His power finally spent, Archimonde's hand fell limply to the ground, and an exhausted, eerie silence stretched out over the once chaotic battlefield. For the longest moment, no one moved, until Grommash Hellscream limped slowly to Archimonde's side and tentatively prodded the demon's body with his axe.

"Gul'Dan… failed…" he murmured, his gravelly voice swelling with sudden emotion. "Ha! Draenor is free!"

He turned back to those warriors still standing, and raised Gorehowl high into the air. The armies of Azeroth and Draenor erupted, roaring defiantly in answer as they lifted both their hands and their weapons in triumph. Khadgar had no desire to cheer, however, ignoring the celebrations of victory all around him as he walked slowly towards ruins of the black gate, carefully stepping around Archimonde's smoking corpse. Gul'Dan's staff had fallen to the ground, but even as Khadgar watched the gnarled stick flared with green fire and disappeared before his very eyes. Frowning, he lowered himself to one knee, and ran his fingers through the ash.

"You don't think it's over?" a soft voice said from behind him, and Khadgar turned his head to see Yrel approaching slowly from his left.

The Exarch looked decidedly worse for wear, her once magnificent plate all but ruined from felfire burns. She was limping slightly, using her mighty hammer as a crutch, but there was still a distinct air of pride and determination her step. Unlike many of the other warriors, however, she did not
cheer or gloat over Archimonde's death. Her eyes were sharp as she stared into the remains of the dark gate, clearly having reached the same conclusion as Khadgar.

"Gul'Dan, and the devils that command him, are not so easily banished," Khadgar said grimly. "I fear this is only the beginning."

"Take heart, Archmage," Yrel replied quietly, placing a soft hand on his shoulder. "If you ever need us, we will be here."

Khadgar nodded and rose with a small sigh, permitting himself a single moment to savour the death of Archimonde, but no more. Gul'Dan was now somewhere in the Twisting Nether, no doubt already planning his revenge against the peoples of Azeroth for their defiance. With a heavy sigh, Khadgar turned away from Yrel, preparing to shift into his raven form, only to clap a hand over his mouth in horror as he remembered the price of Archimonde's defeat. In the chaos and urgency of the battle, he had been forced to focus on only the most immediate threats, and had put all other thoughts aside… until now.

Auri… he thought, a great pressure suddenly building in his chest.

He whirled back to face the battlefield, desperately seeking the place where she had fallen. She was so little, and it was nearly impossible to distinguish any single body from amongst the dead. Khadgar's heart beat faster for every second that he failed to sight her, only to stop entirely as he finally saw a river of dark hair covering pale skin that could only be Auriana. She was lying half-concealed behind the smouldering corpse of a deathcaller, and even at this distance it was clear she wasn't moving.

"No, no, no, no…" he breathed, racing to her side and sliding to his knees on the hard stone.

Khadgar lifted Auriana's head carefully into his lap, and was alarmed to see the extent of the damage to her collarbone and the bruising on the side of her face. Of greater concern to the Archmage, however, was the amount of magic she had channelled in her efforts to bring Archimonde down. Between the power she had gained from the linked mages of the Horde and the Alliance, Nithramas, and her own raw fury, Auriana had drawn upon more magic than any mortal spellcaster had a right to and live. Thick trickles of drying blood ran down from both her nose and her right ear, and Khadgar was suddenly very afraid.

With a dry mouth, Khadgar touched a hand to Auriana's neck, and his heart leapt into his throat when he failed to find any sign of life. He wiped his bloody fingers on his trousers and tried again, and again, but his actions were to no avail. His chest tightened once more as he fought to ward off panic, unsure if it his inability to register her pulse was due to his horribly shaking hands, or...

"Please…" he murmured. "Come on, Auriana, please…"

He heard the clatter of boots on stone behind him, and Yrel appeared once more at his side. This time she was not alone, however, and Khadgar dimly realised that he was surrounded in a small semicircle by Zala'din, Delvar Ironfist, Durotan, a handful of Auriana's lieutenants, and even Grommash Hellscream.

Each of them looked tired and bloody and battle-worn, though it appeared Zala'din was the worst of a bad bunch. His neck and shoulders were badly burned, and the tip of his left tusk had been entirely broken off about a third of the way down. He seemed to have little concern for his own injuries, however, instead crouching down anxiously over Auriana.

"I can't see… if she be breathin'," he said worriedly, his jaw twitching in agitation. "Can ya help
"I will try," Yrel said, gently resting her hands on Auriana's chest. "Though I fear this may be beyond me…"

Her palms suddenly glowed bright with the power of the Light, and she began to mutter quietly under her breath in her own language. Khadgar, too, added his own silent prayers, wishing he had even an ounce of healing talent to add to her efforts. He was one of the most powerful mages alive, perhaps one of the most powerful mages to have ever lived, and yet right now he could not have imagined feeling more useless.

Perhaps a minute passed, though to Khadgar it felt like a thousand years, and yet Auriana still did not stir. Her chest lay utterly still, and Khadgar repeatedly failed to find any sign of a pulse in either her neck or slender wrists. One of the lieutenants from Lunarfall let out a sound that was somewhere between a gasp and a sob, and the Light in Yrel's eyes dimmed.

"She fought bravely," Grommash Hellscream rumbled, inclining his head in a genuine expression of respect. "It was a warrior's death."

"She is not dead!" Khadgar growled, surprising himself with the vehemence of his words. "I am not taking her back to Azeroth in a box!"

And I am certainly not going to be the one to tell Varian... he thought darkly.

Yrel shook her head.

"I'm sorry, Archmage," she said, sitting back slightly with a pained expression. "I do not think…"

"You will not stop," Khadgar ordered shakily. "Do you hear me? And where are the rest of our healers?"

He quickly and carefully moved to the side, making sure to keep Auriana's head positioned in such a way that her breathing would be unrestricted, and gently loosened her robes. Khadgar was far from an expert, but he did know something, and he would be damned if he were going to let Auriana go without trying everything he could. At his command, Yrel called Light to her hands once more, and she resumed her healing magics while Khadgar brought his linked fists down hard on Auriana's chest.

"Come on, Auri," he urged, brushing a loose strand of hair back from her face. "Fight for it. Where's that stubbornness?"

There was nothing magical about what he did, but he had seen soldiers revive their comrades in a similar fashion before. Khadgar was sure there was a more refined way to complete the task, too, but he was desperate, and every second she remained unconscious made it less likely that she would wake. Combined with Yrel's powers, he only hoped it would be enough.

Khadgar pounded on Auriana's chest for what seemed like an age, certain he had to have broken half her ribs in his desperation, when he thought he saw her slowly inhale. The movement was so small that Khadgar almost missed it, but half a second later it happened again; the slightest expansion of Auriana's chest. Khadgar paused, his hands still raised for another compression, closing his eyes in a gesture of silent thanks as she began to breathe regularly.

"That's my girl..." he murmured.

He fumbled for Auriana's wrist, sighing heavily with relief as he felt a weak but steady pulse
between his fingertips once more. His gaze met Yrel's, and he was surprised to see her bright eyes swimming with unshed tears. Zala'din, too, looked uncharacteristically misty, and even Grommash Hellscream looked rather relieved.

Khadgar continued to hover anxiously as Yrel continued to call on the Light, and unashamedly shed hot tears of relief when Auriana finally managed to open her eyes. She looked rather confused to see so many bloodied faces staring down at her, and she winced painfully as she struggled to focus in on Khadgar's face.

"Kh-Khadgar? Did… Archimonde… is… did we win?" she croaked, her laboured voice barely a whisper.

"Yes," Khadgar said, chuckling wearily as he sat back on his heels and brushed the tears from his eyes. "Yes, you brave, brave girl. We won."

"Oh. Th-that's… nice," she murmured vaguely, before her eyes rolled back into her head and she flopped down into unconsciousness once more.
The first thing Auriana noticed as she regained consciousness was the pain thundering through her entire body, and the sting of a bright light hitting her eyes. The second thing was the fact that she was lying in a soft bed, while the third was the sight of what seemed to be a large, grey haired figure looming menacingly over her left-hand side.

"Hey!" she squeaked, practically leaping out of her skin in fright. "What the…"

"Woah! It's me!" the dark figure said, its voice oddly soothing. "It's me, Auri, it's Khadgar. Archmage Khadgar. We fought together in Draenor."

Auriana blinked rapidly, and touched a hand to her chest in a vain effort to still her racing heart. She blinked, and as her eyes adjusted to the light she was finally able to recognise the familiar outline of the older mage. Deep down, she wished that she had awoken to see Varian at her side instead, though of course she was overjoyed to see that Khadgar had survived the battle of the black gate.

"I know who you are, Archmage," she said drily, her voice strained and raw. "I just wasn't expecting to see you in my room, much less standing over me like that."

"Well, no one ever expects to see me in their room," Khadgar said offhandedly, taking a seat near her knee.

"Er… what?" Auriana asked, certain she had misheard. "Just how many people do you watch in their sleep, Khadgar?"

"Never you mind," he said teasingly, with an enigmatic smile. "How are you feeling?"

Auriana slowly pulled herself into an upright position, but even the smallest of movements caused her great suffering. Although her left arm was immobilised in a sling, her shoulder throbbed painfully every time she breathed, and it felt as if someone had raked the back of her throat raw. Heavy bandages swathed her arms and one of her legs, and there wasn't a part of her body that didn't feel bruised. What worried Auriana more than her physical condition, however, was the state of her magic. If she were being perfectly honest, she was rather surprised that she was actually alive. The amount of power she had channelled should have burned her out, if not killed her, and yet somehow, she was still breathing.

"Well, I'm not dead," she croaked, shrugging her good shoulder slightly. "So, that's something. How long have I been out?"

"Only two days, this time. How's your head?" he asked, leaning forward and studying her critically.

"Bad," Auriana admitted. "I feel like I'm thinking through mud."

"I'm not quite sure I know what you mean," Khadgar said worriedly, briefly touching a cool hand to her forehead as if he were checking her temperature.

"My magic… I think it's there, at least," she explained. "I can feel it, but I think it will be some time before I can cast properly without passing out. Even just thinking about casting a spell is making my headache worse, and it's hard to pull my thoughts together."

"That's better than I had hoped for, considering what you did," Khadgar mused. "Especially in light..."
of the fact that you've also got a broken collarbone, numerous cuts and abrasions, several burns, and… er… three cracked ribs. Though… I should apologise… the ribs were not Archimonde's fault, but mine."

He ducked his head, looking rather embarrassed, but Auriana gathered he had damaged her ribs in an effort to save her life, and she gave him a reassuring smile.

"Um… out of interest… what exactly did I do?" she asked. "I'm assuming we won… given that we're having this conversation."

"You don't remember?"

"Not really," she confessed, touching her good hand to her temples as she tried to think. "I remember… Gul'Dan summoned Archimonde. We were losing… I… I used Nithramas. Calandra… gave me the Kirin Tor. I tapped into my rage. And then… I have no idea."

Auriana frowned, vaguely recalling a bright beam of light and the sensation of incredible power flowing through her veins, though she couldn't remember anything more specific.

"We secured… a partial victory," Khadgar explained. "You… well, to be perfectly honest, even I'm not entirely sure what you did. Suffice to say, you were able to burn through Archimonde's defenses and leave him vulnerable to our attack. We then managed to strike the death blow when he pulled us into the Twisting Nether. We won't be seeing him again."

"And Gul'Dan?" she asked quietly, hearing the unspoken fear in Khadgar's voice.

"He escaped," the Archmage said flatly. "Archimonde banished him to the Nether with his dying breath."

"What do we do?" Auriana asked, sitting forward urgently and immediately regretting the swiftness of the movement. "That… that isn't the end of him, Khadgar, he isn't going to let us get away with this…"

"I know," Khadgar said soothingly, pressing his hands carefully against her good shoulder to guide her back to the pillows. "Believe me, I know. Azeroth is undoubtedly his next target. Unfortunately, there's nothing to be done. You know as well as I do that time passes differently in the Twisting Nether. He could show up in five minutes, he could show up in five years - or fifty. The best we can do for now is to wait, and to watch… and to make sure we're ready when the Legion comes."

"That isn't very comforting," she told him, biting her lip anxiously.

"No. It isn't," Khadgar conceded.

They both fell silent, each considering the implications of Gul'Dan's escape. The Legion had always been a threat to Azeroth, but now that they had been beaten back on multiple occasions, and now on multiple worlds, Azeroth had to have become a priority once again. Auriana was too young to have fought during the last Legion invasion of her world, but she had the sinking feeling that she would be forced to fight in the next. She winced, wondering if she had survived one war just to be thrown straight into another, when another worrying thought sprung into her mind.

"Did… did I hurt anyone?" she asked, recalling all too well the last time she had really tapped into her rage.

Based on what Khadgar had said, Auriana knew her actions had been instrumental to securing
victory over Archimonde, but she wondered if they hadn't come at a terrible price. The fact that she
couldn't remember exactly what had happened was certainly concerning, and she began to feel
slightly nauseated at the thought of harming any of her brave allies.

"No, you didn't," Khadgar said kindly. "Well, Archimonde may beg to differ, but…"

He smiled, and reached out a hand to gently cup her cheek. Auriana flinched slightly in surprise,
though she soon relaxed into his comforting touch.

"I'm proud of you, you know," he said quietly. "I saw something in you when you stepped through
that portal, but you've exceeded my wildest hopes. What you did out there…"

"Oh, come off it, Khadgar, you're making me blush," she protested.

"I'm being perfectly serious," he insisted, carefully tucking a strand of hair behind her ear.

"So am I," she countered. "I didn't do anything special. I what anyone else would have done in the
same position."

"Auriana… there are very few people who could have done what you did out there," he said
seriously. "Channelling that much magic requires extraordinary strength. Perhaps you were
the only person who could have done what you did."

He pulled backwards, folding his arms across his chest and studying her with piercing blue eyes.
Auriana's blush deepened, and she suddenly found it hard to meet his gaze.

"You make it sound like destiny," she said, laughing slightly, but it was clear that Khadgar was
very serious.

"Would I be wrong?" he mused. "Think of all the little things that had to happen to get you into that
fight. The right person, in the right place, at the right time. Take Varian, for example. If you hadn't
fallen in love with him, you likely would have died in Blackrock Foundry. He came for you
because he loved you, and in doing so he inadvertently ensured that you would be alive to fight
Archimonde at a later time."

"I don't think that's how it works," Auriana said skeptically, though she had to concede it was a fair
example.

"I choose to believe that's exactly how it works," Khadgar said firmly. "Somewhere in the universe,
the forces of fate are conspiring to assure our victory."

"I suppose that's better than believing that the whole universe is against us," she conceded.

"Indeed," he smiled.

Auriana rested her head back on her pillow with a sigh, and she and Khadgar lapsed into a
comfortable silence. There was no denying how much pain she was in, and yet Khadgar's mere
presence helped ease her suffering. She closed her eyes, trying to relax and breathe through the
waves of pain, when yet another thing she had forgotten came floating back into her mind.

"Oh! Khadgar… um..." she stammered, her eyes flying open. "About what I said to you in the
Citadel…"

"Think nothing of it," he said quickly, instantly picking up on her train of thought.
"But I do," Auriana insisted. "I don't have so many friends that I can afford to speak to them I way I spoke to you. I hope you know that's not actually what I think of you… when I'm in a fury, apparently I'm also an arrogant b-"

Auriana trailed off as Khadgar suddenly raised a hand, and offered her a calm, gentle smile.

"Enough with the self-recrimination," he said firmly. "If I am willing to forgive you, you should be willing to forgive yourself. Actually… I must confess I found it a little amusing. You sound a lot like him when you're angry."

"Who?" Auriana wondered.

"Varian," Khadgar said, smirking.

"Oh, don't you start…" she warned him, trying not to roll her eyes.

"Alright, alright. That said… it is an interesting question," Khadgar continued, rubbing his stubbled chin thoughtfully. "Who do you think would win in a fight? You or I?"

"I hope I never have to have that question answered," Auriana said sincerely. "I don't want to fight you. I want to serve beside you, and I want to be your friend."

Khadgar nodded, looking rather touched, and Auriana couldn't help but to smile.

"Besides…" she added slyly. "Is it really that much of a question? I'd kick your ass, old man."

Khadgar barked out a laugh.

"Auri, my dear, right now I don't think you could take on a pigeon, much less me," he said. "In any case, you need to focus on getting back on your feet, and back home to Stormwind."

"Why? You'd think after defeating Archimonde I'd be allowed a couple of day's rest," Auriana snorted.

"There's to be a parade, you see, by order of the High King himself," Khadgar explained, pointing to a pile of sealed papers stacked neatly on Auriana's dresser. "You're apparently quite the hero."

"I'm not a hero. I told you," she insisted. "I did what I had to do. I did what anyone would have done to protect their people."

"Well, Varian seems to feel differently… along with quite a few others, I might add," Khadgar informed her. "Including me."

Auriana sighed.

"A parade, you say," she repeated. "On Varian's orders…"

In truth, she was somewhat surprised that Varian hadn't been waiting by her bedside, though she supposed the end of the war demanded much of his attention as king. A small part of her, however, was glad that he had remained distant, as the end of the war on Draenor would certainly mean that their quiet, secret affair was over. Auriana knew full well that she had often used the war as an excuse, but now that she would be returning to Azeroth, she was forced to confront the possibility of a future with the man she loved. Her heart beat faster at the thought, though strangely she found the prospect of publicly revealing her relationship with Varian more terrifying than having to fight the Burning Legion.
"I suppose I can't very well deny my King," she conceded slowly. "I'll head back to Stormwind as soon as I'm able."

"Good," Khadgar said, nodding. "Oh - though before you do, the Council has requested your presence in Dalaran at your earliest convenience."

"The Council of Six?" Auriana exclaimed, wondering why the ruling Council of Dalaran had suddenly taken an interest.

"Of course," Khadgar replied. "How many other mage councils do you know?"

"I see fighting Archimonde hasn't dulled your sass," Auriana observed drily. "Why does the council want to see me? I haven't really been a member of the Kirin Tor for years."

"Because believe it or not, Auriana, we do like to keep track of mages with enough power to level a city," Khadgar said, rolling his eyes.

"I can't level a city…"

"Are you quite sure about that?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Well… maybe a small city…" Auriana conceded, trying not to grin.

"That's my girl," he said, smirking as he rose smoothly to his feet. "Go on. Get some more rest… and don't you ever scare me like that again, you hear?"

"Now who sounds like Varian..." she muttered, but she gave Khadgar a weary smile to let him know she wasn't genuinely annoyed. "I'll do my best."

Much to Auriana's surprise, Khadgar leaned forward and pressed a fatherly kiss to her forehead, before turning and making his way from the room. Auriana felt her cheeks burn, though she was secretly rather pleased by the gesture. She had few close friends, and she took great comfort in the fact that her harsh words in the Citadel had not dulled Khadgar's affection. If anything, she now felt as if they were closer for having shared the ordeal, and she silently thanked the Light that he had survived.

Auriana briefly considered falling back asleep, but she was not an idle person by nature, and eventually she made a slow, awkward attempt to crawl out of bed. Her tortured muscles protested angrily at every small movement, but Auriana knew she would grow impossibly stiff if she stayed in bed overlong. Gritting her teeth, she pulled her blankets off her legs, and with a supreme effort, she slid gracelessly off the bed and took several slow, shaky steps towards her dresser.

As Khadgar had indicated, someone had collated a number of letters and reports into a neat pile for her perusal, and Auriana began to rifle through them one by one. The first was a casualty report from the Citadel, and Auriana had to fight back tears as she read through the long list of names. She had known it would be bad, but in the final tally less than a third of the soldiers she had taken into the Citadel had made it back out alive. A hot wave of grief welled up in her throat, and she immediately resolved to make sure that their brave sacrifice was never forgotten.

Fortunately, most of the other papers covered more mundane topics; describing and summarising the garrison's recent activity and current strength. Best of all, as far as Auriana was concerned, there were two letters from Varian; one personal, and one written in his capacity as King. She opened the formal missive first, which contained orders to return to Stormwind in time for the parade later that week, as well as instructions for the withdrawal of Alliance troops from Draenor and the establishment of a permanent outpost at Lunarfall. The personal letter, in contrast, was far
shorter, and managed to perfectly capture Varian's unique brand of gruff concern.

_Are you trying to give me a heart attack?_

- V

_P.S. Come to me. Soon. I need you._

Auriana was almost able to hear the heat in Varian's voice as she read the words, and a slight shiver passed up her spine. At the same time, however, her earlier trepidation returned, and her stomach leapt nervously at the thought of seeing him once more. Sighing, she placed the letter back upon her dresser, and slipped her silk robe from her shoulders until she was standing half naked in front of her mirror. Khadgar had provided a concise summary of her injuries, but it was quite another thing to inspect the damage up close. Her left shoulder and clavicle were practically black with bruising, and indeed most of her upper body looked like as if she'd been badly pummelled. She was pale, too, even more so than usual, her skin practically translucent, and dark circles gathered under her eyes. She was also surprised to see that a few white hairs had sprung up around her temples, most likely as a result of the immense amount of magic that she had channelled.

_You're alive_, she reminded herself, her eyes flicking briefly to the casualty list. _That's more than a lot of people can say._

She turned her head wistfully towards the window, where the last rays of afternoon sunlight were filtering through the glass. It would be dark, soon, though for the moment the entire world glowed warm gold. For the first time in a good long while, Auriana was reminded that Draenor was actually a beautiful place, and she leant back against the dresser for balance as she stared into the oncoming twilight.

Auriana lost track of time as she disappeared into her thoughts, and only made to move when the room around her at last grew dark. Without thinking, she reached out with her good arm to ignite one of the wall sconces with her magic, only to fall to her knees a moment later as white hot pain lanced through her temples. It was such a simple spell, and one that normally came to easily, that she hadn't even considered that she was not yet ready to begin using magic again. The pain was enough that she nearly blacked out, and she didn't even realise that she had screamed until she heard a frantic banging at the door.

"Commander?" an urgent voice cried. "Commander!"

Auriana heard the door open, and she looked up to see Lieutenant Thorn burst into the room with wild eyes. The worgen made her way across the room immediately, her muzzle drawn into a tight line of disapproval as she crouched down at Auriana's side.

"What are you doing out of bed, Commander?" Thorn fussed, lifting Auriana as easily as if she had been a rag doll.

"I was…"

"Being foolish?" Thorn supplied sternly. "Did Khadgar put you up to this, Commander? You shouldn't be out of bed for another day or two, yet."

"I forgot," Auriana explained lamely. "I was reading my reports, and it didn't even occur to me that I shouldn't use magic…"

Thorn lowered Auriana back onto her bed, before carefully pulling the blankets back up over her
trembling legs. She was surprisingly gentle for an enormous humanoid wolf, and her soft growls of disapproval sounded decidedly maternal.

"Promise me you won't do that again, Commander," she said firmly, moving off to kindle the torch that Auriana had so spectacularly failed to light.

"Believe me, I have no intention of trying that again," Auriana assured her, breathing slowly to counter the pain.

"Good," Thorn said, looking slightly mollified. "Seeing as how you're awake, I'll have some food and water brought up. In the meantime, is there anything else I can get for you, Commander?"

"No, thank you. Though… if I could borrow a moment more of your time?" Auriana said.

"Of course," Thorn said, her expression softening ever so slightly. "How may I be of service?"

Auriana gestured to her dresser, where Varian's formal missive lay open atop the pile of papers Thorn's presence had reminded Auriana of one of the most important orders Varian had given in his letter, and despite her pain, she was determined to speak to her Lieutenant on the matter.

"We need to begin returning our troops to Azeroth as soon as possible. That said, the High King has ordered that a permanent company remain behind on Draenor," she explained. "Lunarfall has been charged with monitoring the remnants of the Iron Horde and continuing to develop relations with the draenei, while also providing resources for the kingdoms of the Alliance."

Thorn nodded seriously, folding her hands behind her back.

"I thought as much," she said. "Though I confess I had thought you would return to Stormwind."

"You're quite correct. I'm not staying," Auriana said firmly. "I've seen enough of this place to last me a lifetime and… well, I'm needed elsewhere. I will cede command of the garrison to another."

Lunarfall had been Auriana's home for over a year, and while she would always have great affection for the garrison, she knew when it was time to move on. She may not have been sure where exactly moving on might take her, but Lunarfall held more painful memories than happy ones, and she was looking forwards to returning to her true home on Azeroth.

"I can have a candidate list prepared for you by tomorrow," Thorn said smartly.

"The High King has given me the choice of allocating command," Auriana said, smiling slightly. "And quite frankly, there's really only one person who I would trust with Lunarfall … Commander."

Thorn blinked slowly, and Auriana could see that it was taking her some time to process the information. All of her earlier assurance had seemingly vanished, and she looked for all the world like a wide-eyed pup.

"Me?" the worgen stammered. "But I… I'm just a lieutenant."

"Not any more. You have served me faithfully and well, even if you didn't always agree with my decisions," Auriana said. "We both know I've no head for the day to day minutiae of garrison operations, and I firmly believe that Lunarfall would have fallen apart long ago, if not for you."

"But you're a better warrior and strategist than I'll ever be," Thorn protested. "People would follow you into hell. They will die for you."
"You'll learn," Auriana said encouragingly. "And besides… if we're lucky, the peace between the orcs and the draenei will hold, and you won't ever be forced to go to war."

Thorn nodded slowly, though her head was tilted in such a way that she still seemed disbelieving.

"I will remain for a day or so to oversee the withdrawal of our forces, but after that… she's all yours," Auriana continued. "After you've attended the victory parade in Stormwind, of course."

"It's more than I deserve," Thorn said quietly.

"It's exactly what you deserve," Auriana countered. "Of course, you're free to refuse. If there's another posting you'd prefer, just say the word and I'll alert Alliance High Command."

"No!" Thorn snarled, her dark ears pricking urgently. "That is… I would be honoured to take over command of Lunarfall, Commander."

"I'm glad to hear it," Auriana said sincerely, trying to hide her smile. "The High King has allocated you a permanent force of two hundred men. You'll need a couple of good lieutenants, too, so you might want to think on that."

"I will," Thorn said eagerly, her wide mouth splitting in a rarely seen smile. "I can have a list to you later tonight, if you'd like?"

"Tomorrow will be fine," Auriana said reassuringly, immensely pleased that her garrison would be going to someone who cared so much. "I think I've exhausted my ability to think for the evening. You can certainly bring me that dinner though – I'm starving."

After spending two days overseeing the evacuation of her troops and handing control of Lunarfall over to the now-Commander Thorn, Auriana left Lunarfall for Dalaran late one sunny afternoon. Much to her frustration, she was as yet unable to open the portal herself, and had been forced to ask one of the garrison mages to complete the task in her stead. The mage had made no comment, of course, but Auriana rankled at her inability to cast even the simplest spells. She wasn't used to feeling useless, and reminding herself that she had survived a great physical ordeal only a few days prior made little difference.

Jaina Proudmoore had been awaiting Auriana upon her arrival in Dalaran, and had immediately and comprehensively interrogated her about the siege of Hellfire Citadel. Auriana supposed that Jaina's interest was only natural, given that they had previously worked together to tame her rage, but she felt distinctly unnerved by the intensity of the blonde mage's questions. She had not formally been a member of the Kirin Tor for some time, but she had once called Dalaran home, and she considered the mages of the Kirin Tor her allies, if not her friends.

As luck would have it, Auriana's meeting with the Council was delayed by a couple of days due to the unexpected but necessary absence of two of the Six. Jaina had been kind enough to allow grant Auriana a room of her own while she waited, and in truth Auriana had been glad for the extra rest. She had considered returning to Stormwind when it became apparent that she would not see the Council for a few days, only to feel a strange pit of nervousness bubbling in her stomach every time she made to open a portal. She desperately wanted to see Varian, to feel the warmth of his touch and the sweetness of his kiss, but she had realised that she had absolutely no idea what she wanted to say to him about their future together. Auriana had clung to the secrecy of their relationship for a long time, and despite what she had promised Varian previously, she still wasn't sure whether she was ready to publicly expose their romance to the gossips of Stormwind. Moreover, formally courting a king would mean being forced to reclaim her title, and after everything her mother had
done to distance herself from the harsh strictures of nobility, Auriana still felt as if it were something of a betrayal. She had sent Varian a short letter, of course, not wanting him to fret over her whereabouts, but there was no escaping both the fact that she was hiding, and that she could not stay in Dalaran forever.

On the afternoon of her second full day in the great flying city, Auriana was finally summoned before the Council of Six. Despite her nervousness about the meeting, the summons provided a welcome break from brooding on her own cowardice, and she had made her way to the Chamber of Air with all haste. Located in its own floating tower at the very top of the Violet Citadel, the chamber was one of the most beautiful rooms in Dalaran, which was really saying something. With its lack of visible walls and elegant architecture, standing in the Chamber gave the true impression that one was floating through the sky on a cloud.

As Auriana arrived, the Six Archmagi that made up the Council were already waiting, standing aloft on the great ringed platform at the top of the chamber. Traditionally, the identities of Council members had been secret, and they commonly altered their genders and physical appearances when meeting with lesser mages. The Council seemed to have dispensed with the practice for this particular meeting, however, though Auriana wasn't sure if it was because of her, or whether they had simply decided to give up on the idea in general. Despite historically operating in secrecy, it wasn't exactly hard to determine who the six most powerful mages in Dalaran were, and Auriana had always found their attempts at preserving anonymity rather baffling.

Certainly, she could easily recognise the six mages standing before her; if not by appearance, then certainly by power. Jaina stood at the centre of the group, of course, as was her right as Archmage of the Kirin Tor. Khadgar stood to her left, smiling down at Auriana with his normal air of mild amusement. On Jaina's right side were the Archmagi Modera and Karlain, who both watched Auriana with thoughtful expressions. On Khadgar's other side were the final two members of the Six, Ansirem and Vargoth, who exchanged a few quiet words as Auriana ascended the stairs and took her place on the great seal at the very centre of the room.

Auriana bowed awkwardly before the six archmages, trying to remember the lessons in decorum she had taken as an apprentice mage. She had not appeared in the chamber for many years, not since she had first passed her trials of mastery, and yet the moment she had stepped into the room, she felt like a clueless initiate all over again.

"There's no need to bow, Auriana," Jaina said kindly. "We know that you're injured, and have no wish to add to your discomfort. Can we get you a chair?"

"No, thank you," Auriana replied formally. "With my ribs the way they are, it's actually easier to stand than to sit."

"Very well," Jaina said. "In that case… I take it you know why we have summoned you here?"

Auriana exchanged a quick look with Khadgar, though he gave her nothing but an infuriatingly enigmatic smile.

"Ah... no, actually, I have no idea," she answered truthfully. "I'm assuming it has something to do with my recent actions in Draenor, though I would hope the Council could appreciate what I had to do to assure our victory. If... if that's what this is about."

She swallowed nervously, wondering if she was being called into account for using the Kirin Tor's mages the way she had. Calandra had offered, of course, in the heat of battle, but taking control of a link such a manner was almost unheard of, and for good reason. It was dangerous, often painful, and a violation of the autonomy of other mages. Auriana hated herself for it, especially now that
she'd done it twice, though she hoped the Council could understand that she'd had no other choice.  

"Your actions in Draenor have been well noted," Karlain said seriously, and Auriana found it very hard not to squirm under the sudden intensity of his gaze.  

He glanced sideways at Modera, the eldest of the Council, who nodded her agreement. Each member of the Council looked as if they were carved from stone, and at that moment Auriana couldn't have said whether they wanted to kill her, reward her, or lock her up for the rest of time.  

"It is very unusual to achieve the rank of Archmage by acclamation, though from what Khadgar tells us you are a very unusual young woman," Modera said kindly.  

Auriana blinked, certain she had misheard, and she shook her head slightly to clear her thoughts.  

"Archmage? Archmage? What are you talking about?" she asked, instinctively glancing towards Khadgar.  

"The Council have voted, and we have unanimously decided to promote you to the rank of Archmage," Ansirem explained. "We have never doubted your skill, but it was not until now that we were satisfied that you could demonstrate the necessary control and wisdom required of an Archmage of the Kirin Tor."  

"I… what?" Auriana said dumbly.  

"Jaina… I thought you said she was intelligent," Vargoth remarked, though his tone was teasing.  

"She is, don't you worry," Jaina said. "Put simply – the Kirin Tor have let you run wild for far too long, Auriana. It's time you were brought back in the fold, and given responsibilities commensurate with your skills."

A slight smirk pulled at the corner of Jaina's mouth as she spoke, though it was clear from her tone and stern posture that she was completely serious.  

"Jaina… with respect… I took my leave from the Kirin Tor for a reason," Auriana stammered, still not quite sure what she was hearing. "I wanted - I want - to fight for the Alliance. And as you and Khadgar know… I have… er… close ties to Stormwind. I'm not a neutral party."

"The Kirin Tor has not been neutral since the Horde violated my city for their own ends," Jaina snapped, her crystal eyes flashing with sudden. "We are well aware of your status within the Alliance. I assure you it is of no concern."

A strange feeling of discomfort rippled around the room, and Auriana realised that the issue of the Kirin Tor's neutrality was perhaps not as settled as Jaina would have her believe. Khadgar, in particular, seemed to have other ideas, but he held his tongue with nothing more than a brief glance at Modera. It did not appear that anyone else was willing to confront Jaina over the matter either, and the brief moment of tension was soon forgotten.  

"But even then… I… you know what I am," Auriana protested. "My rage… I…"

"We know exactly what you are," Ansirem said seriously, his dark eyes narrowing. "You have been watched more closely than you know. However, it is our belief that you can control your rage to a sufficient degree. It is not, perhaps, ideal, but both Jaina and the Aspect Kalecgos have assured us that you are capable. We also have first-hand reports from the battle in Hellfire Citadel that support your claim."
Ansirem shifted his gaze to a point behind Auriana's left shoulder, and she turned to see Calandra standing quietly at the bottom of the stairs leading up to the Chamber of Air. The auburn-haired warmage nodded respectfully in Auriana's direction, and with a surge of gratitude, she realised that Calandra must have vouched for her with the Council. Auriana hadn't even realised that the other mage was still alive, and after Auriana's abuse of their magical link, she had never imagined that Calandra would be willing to speak to her again, let alone testify on her behalf.

"I… I don't know what to say," Auriana said finally. "I hadn't ever considered taking such a position, even when I was still a member of the Kirin Tor."

"I assure you, Auriana, being an Archmage is not all stuffy book learning and standing around in councils," Khadgar said quietly.

Auriana blushed and ducked her head, embarrassed that Khadgar had been able to see through her concerns so easily. The fact was, Auriana liked fighting, and she certainly wasn't willing to give up her warrior's life for an existence of quiet contemplation and esoterica.

"Do you honestly believe I intend to waste your talents for combat?" Jaina added, shaking her head slightly. "The Kirin Tor needs scholars, yes, but also enforcers. It is our duty to safeguard the use of magic and to protect this world from magical threats, and I can't think of a better mage for the task."

Auriana nodded, trying to ignore the pounding behind her eyes as she thought through the consequences of acceptance in her mind. The Council's offer was entirely unexpected, and while she still wasn't entirely sure that the whole meeting wasn't a strange fever dream, she had to admit it would be a nice change of pace not to be in mortal peril all the time.

"Would I still be able to fight for the Alliance, if necessary?" Auriana asked worriedly. "For Stormwind? They're my people, I can't just turn my back on them if they were in need."

"Yes, provided such action does not interfere with the best interests of the Kirin Tor," Jaina said. "As you know, we fought alongside Alliance men in Draenor, and I fully intend to continue our strong relationship with Stormwind."

"May I have some time to think about it?" Auriana asked carefully, not wishing to cause any offense. "It's a very generous offer, but… as I said, I had never in a million years considered that I would be asked to be an Archmage."

"Of course, but do not muse overlong," Jaina said seriously. "We don't offer the rank of Archmage to just anyone, you know."

"I understand," Auriana said, offering the Council another awkward half-bow. "It's a great honour to have even been considered. I'll let you know my decision as soon as possible."

Her answer seemed to be enough to satisfy the Six, and one by one the archmagi began to take their leave of the Chamber of Air. Auriana stood respectfully silent as they departed, tentatively returning any encouraging smiles that came her way. Khadgar was the second last to leave, giving Auriana's good shoulder a gentle squeeze as he passed, until only Auriana and Jaina remained.

"I do apologise for springing this on you," Jaina said, her tone losing some of its earlier formality. "I know it's unexpected."

"You can say that again," Auriana murmured, staring down at her hands. "Though… I am grateful for your faith in me."
"You've earned it. I confess, I didn't believe you'd ever come this far… but I'm glad that you proved me wrong," Jaina said quietly, gracefully alighting from the upper platform and moving down to the centre of the floor.

She flashed Auriana a bright, genuine smile, before gently placing a hand on the small of her back and guiding her towards the stairs.

"Let me help you back to your rooms," she said kindly. "You look exhausted."

"Being out of bed for any length of time is still an effort," Auriana admitted, secretly glad that she could lean on Jaina for support as she made her way slowly down the stairs.

"Understandable. Khadgar said you took quite the beating," Jaina said lightly. "You need to rest. And – oh! I had forgotten. A package arrived for you just before the Council met. I had it taken to your rooms."

"A package?" Auriana repeated, nonplussed. "I wasn't expecting a package. Hardly anyone knows I'm here."

"Well, whatever it is, it appears to have come from Stormwind. It's big, too," Jaina explained. She was smiling strangely, as if she knew something more than she was letting on, but she declined to offer anything further as she gently guided Auriana back to her quarters. Even more curiously, she lingered in the doorway as Auriana made her way over to the large, plain box now resting upon her bed.

It was somewhat difficult to open the package with only one hand, but after some awkward jiggling, Auriana pulled apart the box to reveal one of the most beautiful sets of armour she had ever seen. The battle robes were wrought in fine black and blue and silver, and Auriana could tell just from looking that they had been cut perfectly to her size. Scenes of the hunt and wild things were embroidered across the fabric, and she could feel latent spells of protection and power lingering within every thread. In addition, the armour came with a matching set of underclothes and gauntlets, a well-oiled pair of tall boots, and a wide, heavy belt.

Most magnificent of all, however, were the pauldrons; carved meticulously in the shape of two savage, snarling wolves. Although the carving alone would have been impressive enough, the wolf heads had also been enchanted so that soft clouds of frost occasionally puffed from their snarling jaws. Put together, the entire set was a work of art, and Auriana knew there was only one person in the world who would have had such particular armour made. Varian was, quite literally, marking his territory, and Auriana felt a lump form in her throat as she stared down at the tangible evidence of his love.

"I'm assuming you did the enchantments," she said drily, turning back to face Jaina

"Well, it certainly wasn't Varian," Jaina replied, folding her arms across her chest with a teasing grin.

Auriana chuckled, running her fingers happily across the soft fabric.

"It really is beautiful," she remarked. "And I can feel how much work you must have put into it. These enchantments are incredibly complex."

"It took some time, but Varian insisted that you have the best. He wanted to give it to you before
Hellfire Citadel, actually, but it wasn't complete," Jaina explained. "In a way, I'm sort of glad you didn't have it, I gather it most likely would have been ruined."

Auriana nodded, unbelievably touched by Varian's gesture, and at the same time feeling more wretched than ever about the fact that she was hiding away from him in Dalaran.

"Jaina… can… can I ask you something personal?" she said tentatively, wondering if she were about to overstep her bounds.

She and Jaina got on well enough, but they weren't exactly friends. Certainly, Auriana was not as close to Jaina as she was to Khadgar, and while they had worked together extensively over the past year, Auriana would have considered them friendly colleagues at best.

"Of course," Jaina said smoothly.

"Varian. Why did you never…" Auriana asked, making a series of vaguely explicit hand gestures. "I mean, you two have been friends for a long time. It must have at least crossed your mind…"

"It did," Jaina admitted, looking down at the floor as she considered the question seriously. "He's certainly handsome, and more than that, he's a good man. But... he and I are very different people. We'd clash too much. Besides, after what happened to Tiffin… I think he forgot how to even look at a woman. Even if I'd wanted to… I doubt I would have gotten very far. He's a very lonely man."

She glanced up at Auriana as she finished speaking, and her eyes widened as she caught her inadvertent faux pas.

"Or was, I should say," she added hurriedly. "I was skeptical first, but… I've seen the way he looks at you. He loves you, and I only hope you realise just how much."

Auriana blushed and ducked her head, trying to hide how awkward she felt. She wasn't used to discussing her relationship with Varian with anyone, and it was strange to hear Jaina acknowledge their love out loud.

"Did you ever… think about what being with him would mean?" she asked. "Did you ever want to be Queen of Stormwind?"

"There was a time in my life…" Jaina started slowly, suddenly looking very sad, "When I thought I might have been the Queen of Lordaeron. I was born to it, was raised for it my entire life, but even then, I found the idea of ruling a kingdom… daunting. I feel differently, now, of course, having ruled Dalaran for so long, but as a young woman it was an incredibly intimidating prospect. And yet… if it had meant a life with Arthas? I would have done whatever it took to be by his side."

Auriana had never before heard Jaina speak of her ill-fated romance with Arthas Menethil, and she remained silent as the Archmage was briefly lost in her memories. Eventually, however, Jaina visibly shook herself, and she regained her normal air of cool confidence once more.

"Auriana… Auria… I understand that you must be at a bit of a crossroads in your life right now, but whatever you do, I would ask only this…” Jaina added, her eyes impossibly bright. "Please don't break his heart."

Somehow, Jaina had correctly read the cause of Auriana's concern, and while she offered no judgement, it was abundantly clear that she agreed with Varian's opinion on the matter. She was also very right in saying that Auriana was at a crossroads – what with having to choose between a life of nobility with Varian and a life of quiet anonymity; as well as having to choose between
remaining a frontline commander or returning to the Kirin Tor as an Archmage.

Auriana bit her lip uncertainly as a heavy silence settled over the room, when she abruptly realised something about the Council's offer that she had failed to see earlier. Continuing with her military career would most likely mean being sent to Kalimdor, or even an outpost in Northrend or Pandaria. Archmages, however, were largely autonomous - at least, if Khadgar were any example – and while all mages maintained close ties to Dalaran, if she were to be an Archmage she would have the freedom to spend most of her time in Stormwind…

With Varian, her inner voice whispered encouragingly. *For once in your life, Auri, stop running and stop fighting and do what makes you happy.*

"I'll do it," she said quickly, before her doubts got the better of her.

She was surprised at the vehemence of her own declaration, though in reality it had been more for herself than for Jaina.

"Pardon me?" Jaina asked, arching a delicate eyebrow in surprise. "You'll do what?"

"I... I accept the Council's offer," Auriana elaborated, trying not to let her voice tremble. "I will serve as an Archmage of the Kirin Tor. Provided I can obtain permission from Alliance High Command."

Jaina considered Auriana critically for a moment, her head tilted ever so slightly to one side. For the second time that day, Auriana felt as if her entire self were being laid bare, though Jaina's expression gave none of her own thoughts away. They stared at one another for what seemed like an eternity to Auriana, before Jaina's posture abruptly relaxed and she looked away.

"Good," she said finally, giving Auriana a small and enigmatic smile as she stepped back outside, and gently closed the door behind her.
Auriana stared at her new armour for a long time after Jaina left. Despite agreeing to take on the role of Archmage within the Kirin Tor, she still found herself conflicted over her future, and where it might be leading. She had never sought power or notoriety, and yet somehow, she had reached a point in her life where she had the option to choose both. There was no denying that her life would change dramatically should she choose to publicise her relationship with Varian, and certainly no denying that she was rapidly running out of time to make her decision, one way or another.

Staring at the armour did little to settle her troubled thoughts, when it suddenly occurred to Auriana that there was perhaps one place in the world where she might find the answers she sought - and far more besides. It was almost midnight in Dalaran, but Auriana found herself suddenly suffused with restless energy as she rose to her feet and began to poke around her chambers. She moved slowly, encumbered as she was by her injuries, but within minutes she had retrieved chalk, wax and a marked runestone from the bookshelf at the back of her the room. Jaina was apparently a generous host, and saw to it that her magical guests had access to the basic catalysts necessary for spellcasting.

Normally, Auriana would never have relied on reagents to open a portal, but she was both magically exhausted and casting a spell to a new location. It helped that she was at least somewhat familiar with her destination, but for once she decided that it was best to err on the side of caution, instead of relying on her brute magical strength. Auriana quickly moved the small circular rug at the centre of the room to the side to reveal the wooden floor beneath, before using the chalk to sketch out the necessary runes for a portal to the Eastern Kingdoms. She made a few small, atypical adjustments to offset her weakened physical state, before finally sending a burst of power through the runestone as she cast the spell.

Auriana regretted her decision to open a portal almost immediately, as the world around her twisted violently and she was rudely yanked though the aether. She fell to her knees the moment she rematerialised, emptying the entire contents of her stomach on the ground. Her head pounded painfully, and she had to struggle mightily to maintain consciousness.

Eventually, however, the throbbing behind her temples subsided, and she was finally able to stand. She gave herself a quick once over, pleased that she had at least arrived with all her limbs still attached, before she turned to take stock of her surroundings. As planned, she was standing near a small copse of trees in southern Tirisfal Glades, about a mile north of her family's ancestral home of Redwood Manor. Far to the north-east, she could faintly make out the dim lights of a Forsaken town, most likely Brill. Fortunately, the estate was located far away from any major settlements, and she hoped that she would be able to avoid any entanglements with Forsaken patrols. Somehow, Auriana didn't think the Banshee Queen would be overly sympathetic to her sudden need to explore her family history, and she certainly had no desire to accidentally start a war.

Varian would certainly have something to say if you got yourself captured by Sylvanas, she thought drily, as she slowly began to make her way south.

The area she traversed was now known as the Redwood, though once it had been known as the Bloodwood. Legend held that it had once been the site of a great battle between Auriana's early ancestors and some great, unknown foe. Of course, given her grandfather's tendency to exaggerate family history out of pride, she had typically taken the story with a grain of salt. That said, there was something about the ancient trees that Auriana had always found unsettling, and the sickly blight that now hung in the air did little to change her impression. Gooseflesh erupted on her arms...
as she walked further into the woods, and she couldn't quite shake the feeling that she was being watched.

Thankfully, after about half an hour of walking, the woods opened to reveal what remained of the path leading to the manor proper. Given the rift between her mother and her grandfather, Auriana had only visited the estate a handful of times as a young girl, before she moved to Theramore, but it was a hard place to forget. Even though it had fallen into disrepair in the long years since Lordaeron's fall, there was still grandeur in the towering wrought iron fence and the sweeping gothic architecture of the main house.

Auriana made her way slowly up the path towards the manor, pushing the main gate open just enough so that she could slip inside. The metal was so rusted that the gate was almost impossible to move, but it finally gave way with an eerie wail that sent a nearby group of bats scrambling into the sky. Auriana jumped at the sudden flurry of wings, cursing her own edginess, and made her way for the manor's heavy wooden doors as fast as she was able.

While the moon outside had been adequate to light her path through the woods, inside it was pitch black. She called a small witch light to her hand, ignoring the sudden flash of pain behind her eyes as she looked curiously around the manor house's interior. As she had expected, the place had long ago been ransacked everything of value taken. The Redwood was too far out of the way to be of much strategic use to Sylvanas and her limited population of Forsaken, and so it seemed the once proud estate had simply been stripped and forgotten.

Auriana had not come here to rue her family's poor fortune, however, but rather to delve deeper into her noble heritage, and the life she might have had. As she moved off through the manor, memories of her childhood flashed before her eyes, and she instinctively made her way to a room on the top floor of the manor's west wing. She had only been in her grandfather's study a handful of times, but she distinctly remembered that there were two very important things that were hidden in the Duke of Redwood's private sanctum.

The first was an enormous oil painting that hung over the fireplace at the back of the study, depicting all of Auriana's immediate family. Much to her surprise, it had not been looted or destroyed, only withered from so many years of inattention. It seemed that someone had tried to break the frame, expecting to find something more expensive than simple polished wood, but had given up upon realising that the frame itself held little real value.

Auriana, of course, was not interested in the frame, however, but rather what the painting depicted. It was a stately family portrait, with her black haired and moustachioed grandfather taking pride of place in the centre of the image. On his left stood his faithful wife, Auriana's grandmother, with her gorgeous mane of red-blonde hair, while his three daughters posed delicately on the floor about them. Auriana's aunts were both pretty girls, with shining dark hair and enviable cheekbones, though they had nothing on Auriana's mother. The artist had done a wonderful job of capturing the life in her bright blue eyes, and for a second Auriana forgot she was looking at a painting.

"I don't know what I'm doing," she said quietly, speaking to the portrait as if it were her actual mother, instead of a lifeless swirl of paint. "I'm in love… in a way that I never thought I would be, but… it's complicated. He's a king, and I'm… me. You ran away from this life, and now I'm walking straight into it, and I'm not..."

Auriana sighed heavily.

"Well, that's it, isn't it? I'm just... not," she mumbled. "I'm not a great beauty, I'm not influential, I'm not politically minded, I'm not... anything, really. But... he loves me. He loves me... and..."
She walked forwards, and touched the painted cheek of her mother with a gentle hand.

"It feels like I'm betraying you, you know," she whispered, as something deep within her finally clicked into place. "But… I love him, and… I'd do anything to be with him."

Auriana ran her fingers along the left side of the frame, mimicking a movement she had once seen her grandfather make, and the right side of the painting suddenly swung out from the wall as she slipped the hidden catch. Her grandfather had been very angry when she had caught him opening the safe hidden behind the family portrait, and even as a child she had understood that it contained important things. Luckily, the safe appeared to have remained undiscovered during the sack of the manor, and Auriana quickly set herself to the task of getting it open.

She had never been told the combination, of course, but she knew her grandfather well enough to know that there would be only one number he would use – her grandmother's birthday. It turned out she was quite correct, and after a few twists of the dial, the safe sprung open to reveal not gold and jewels, but rather dozens of weathered scrolls. Auriana set her witch light floating above her head, and hurriedly rifled through the assorted parchments until she found what she had come for: a full history of her maternal line, and the deed to the Redwood estate. Auriana was rather surprised to see her own name hastily written at the bottom of the family tree, though her mother's name had been scratched out, and her father's name was missing entirely. Still, in combination with the copy of her birth certificate she had stowed safely in her apartment in Stormwind, she now had more than enough evidence to prove that she was the sole heir of Andros Saevian, and a rightful claimant to his title.

Auriana tucked the two precious scrolls into her cloak, determined to return to Dalaran before she got cold feet and changed her mind about claiming her title, when she heard a soft rasping noise emanate from one of the dark corners of the room. Startled, she whirled to face the sound, her body suddenly pumping with adrenaline, and her jaw dropped as her witch light revealed a badly decayed Forsaken resting supine in what remained of a once plush velvet reclining chair. His jaw was grotesquely lopsided, and on closer inspection, Auriana realised that he was entirely missing his left arm. He still had a shock of dark hair on top of his head, however, as well as what remained of his upper lip, and despite the decay in his appearance, Auriana would have recognised the man anywhere.

"Grandfather?" she whispered.

Of course, it made a twisted kind of sense that he would be here, of all places. Andros Saevian had been a proud, stubborn man, and it would have taken more power than existed on Azeroth to make him surrender his home. Evidently, the Scourge themselves had had little success, with the Duke of the Redwood guarding his manor even beyond death. Auriana's heart leapt into her throat, and she wondered if all the members of her family who had stayed in Lordaeron had become Forsaken. The thought that she might have met or slain them during a battle with the Horde was thoroughly disconcerting, and she could only hope that they had been granted the swift mercy of a real death.

She took a careful step closer to the remains of her once-proud grandfather, only to practically jump out of her skin in fright as he reached a shaky, skeletal hand in her direction.

"Alliana…" he rasped. "Alliana? Is that you?"

Auriana started at the sound of her mother's name, and realised that he had somehow confused her for his favourite daughter. She had heard rumours that there were Forsaken who, through either age or long suffering, would slowly begin to lose consciousness and devolve back into a state of mindless zombiism. It seemed her grandfather was sentient enough to speak, but was rapidly fading
into a state of complete dementia.

"Ah… no…" she said tentatively. "I'm not…"

"Alliana," the wretch repeated, his trembling voice strengthening. "It is you. I'd know those eyes anywhere… my little Allie, come home at last…"

Auriana knew she looked nothing like her mother, favouring her grandfather's looks far more, but it seemed that her eyes alone were so reminiscent of Alliana's as to have been convincing.

"I… I'm sorry…" he murmured.

"It's… it's alright," Auriana said soothingly, realising that there was little point in trying to convince the addled Forsaken that she was, in fact, his granddaughter. "I…um… I'm here…"

"I never should have turned you away... losing you is my greatest regret," he rambled, his inhuman voice sending shivers down Auriana's spine. "What does it matter, in the end? I'm going to die alone, and it's nothing less than I deserve. We're all dust in the end, just dust and memories and broken things…"

He abruptly lunged forward, and closed his bony fingers around Auriana's wrist with surprising strength.

"I hope he loved you," he whispered. "Don't die like me, Allie. Don't die alone."

"I… I won't," Auriana promised, gently extricating herself from his terrible grip. "I swear to you, I won't."

The answer seemed to satisfy whatever remained of her grandfather, and he lay backwards with a rattling sigh.

"I'm cold, Allie," he wheezed. "So cold…"

"I know," Auriana murmured, swallowing down her instinctive revulsion as she reached out a hand to touch his chest. "Sleep now."

She sent a soft pulse of frost magic into her hand, gently freezing the undead ichor that pulsed through her grandfather's decaying body and kept him animated. The spell was simple, but even then, it sent spots dancing across Auriana's vision, and it took a great deal of her concentration to maintain the magic as she slowly sent her grandfather into the silent embrace of true death. Tears tracked silently down her cheeks as she watched him slip away, no matter how much she tried to convince herself that she was doing him a kindness. Despite his broken history with her mother, he was still the last remaining member of her family, and as the unnatural light of undeath finally faded from his eyes, Auriana realised that she had once again been left all alone in the world.

Auriana sat a silent, lonely vigil by her grandfather's bones until dawning, when she finally teleported herself back to Dalaran. She had fallen asleep almost instantly upon arrival, exhausted both by her use of magic and the emotional toll of having put the last of her family to rest, and she did not wake again until well after midday. It was understandable, considering her late-night adventures in Tirisfal and the fact that she was still recovering from the battle in Hellfire Citadel, but Auriana couldn't help feeling mildly annoyed at herself when she eventually awoke. It was the day before the victory parade in Stormwind, and she had fully intended to return home sometime in the morning. Instead, it was now late afternoon, and it was with great irritation that she hastily threw on a set of robes and teleported herself back to the Alliance capital.
Fortunately, walking through Stormwind was almost always a sure-fire way to improve her mood. The city was particularly beautiful at this time of year, and she couldn't help but to smile as she walked the familiar cobbled streets. The late afternoon sunlight shone off the white stone buildings, giving the entire city a soft golden glow, and the canals sparkled like diamonds. In the Keep, she knew, Varian would be sitting on his throne, or perhaps working in his study, and while she was not quite yet ready to see him, the thought that they were once again in the same city gave her a surprising sense of comfort.

Auriana’s first destination was not the Keep, however, but rather her small apartment in the Mage Quarter. She had not returned there in some time, and somewhat sheepishly realised that the apartment looked as if no one actually lived there. Certainly, it was sparsely furnished enough, and in her absence a light coating of dust had settled on every exposed surface. Swearing slightly, she promised herself that she would make it look a bit more habitable later that night, but right now she was only here to retrieve her birth records.

She had wisely carried a notarised copy with her every time she had moved to a new city, and along with the documents she had retrieved from the Redwood the night before, she now had ample evidence to support her claim to a noble title. Her request to recover a writ of nobility was not an uncommon one, of course, given the number of people who had been displaced by the First and Second Wars and the fall of Lordaeron, but having all her documents in order would certainly help to expedite the process.

Her submission would need to be made to Stormwind’s official record keepers, who took up office in the back of the Royal Library. Instead of the most direct route, however, Auriana chose to slip in one of the back entrances, carefully avoiding the throne room and the war room, or any other place that she might not accidentally run into Varian. She could not have precisely said why, but it was important that she did this on her own, and she was determined to submit her application on her own terms, before she was reunited with her king.

Half expecting to run into him every time she rounded a corner, Auriana had just managed to sneak into the inner gardens of the Keep, and was making her way across to the Library, only to have her heart all but leap out of her chest as she heard someone call her name.

"Auri! Hey!"

"Anduin!" she exclaimed, turning around as she recognised his distinctive voice. "You scared me."

The Prince of Stormwind looked as bright and youthful as ever, though it seemed to Auriana as if he’d grown another inch in the time since they had last spoken. It appeared that late adolescence was hitting him hard, and she vaguely wondered if he might be at last taking on the more rugged, masculine look of his father. The look he gave her, however, was distinctly Anduin, and she could see his healer’s mind carefully assessing her every visible injury.

"Why? Because you're hiding from Father and you thought I was him?" he retorted smartly, folding his arms across his chest and giving her a cheeky smile.

"I'm doing no such th..." she started, only to fall silent at the incredibly skeptical look on the prince’s face.

She sighed.

"Alright, yes, that's exactly what I'm doing," she admitted sheepishly.

"Why?" he repeated. "You know he's going crazy without you... and I admit, I thought you might
"You're not wrong," she said quietly. "But I... I've had a lot of thinking to do."

"Thinking? About what?" he pressed. "I heard Aunt Jaina made you an Archmage."

"Angling for a job with SI:7 are we?" Auriana remarked, surprised that word of her promotion had already reached Stormwind. "You're remarkably well informed."

"She was here this morning. Father more or less... interrogated her," Anduin said, shrugging. "Does this mean you're going to live in Dalaran now?"

"Ah... no. I'll have to travel there occasionally, of course, but I... I was actually planning on spending most of my time in Stormwind," she said tentatively, ducking her head in sudden shyness.

Anduin was no fool, and he understood the deeper meaning behind her words. Somewhat to Auriana's surprise, however, his face lit up at the news, and he gave her a dazzling smile.

"That's wonderful," he enthused. "I'll go find Father and tell him that you're here, he's been dying to see you ever since we heard what happened with Archimonde, I..."

He turned to head back into the main part of the Keep, but Auriana stopped him with a gentle hand on the shoulder.

"Anduin, wait a second," she said. "Please."

Anduin stopped as asked, but the smile quickly faded from his face.

"You don't want to see him," he said, looking thoroughly confused. "U don't understand..."

"I do. Believe me, I do," Auriana said quickly. "I just... there are a few things I need to get in order first."

"Like what?" Anduin demanded, with such vehemence that Auriana took an inadvertent step backwards.

"I'm sorry. I'm not trying to be nosy," he said quietly. "But he's my father."

"It's fine, Anduin," Auriana assured him, finding his concern for Varian very touching.

She took a seat on one of the long stone benches that lined the gardens, and gestured for Anduin to do the same. He followed her curiously, and as he took a seat by her side, she reached into the pocket of her cloak and pulled out the thick scroll of parchments that she intended to present to the office of records. While the prince didn't know the full extent of her history, he was vaguely aware of her noble heritage, and his mouth fell open in suprrise as he skimmed over the papers.

"This is... but that means..." he mumbled, staring up at her with wide eyes. "You're going to submit this to the hall of records?"

Auriana nodded.

"He doesn't know?" Anduin asked, carefully returning the documents.

"No. He has no idea, and... I don't know, I guess I wanted to surprise him," Auriana confessed. "I
also needed to be sure, before I told him. I think it would be worse, to take it back, than to have
never told him at all."

Anduin gave her a shrewd, calculating look, and not for the first time, Auriana wondered if he
could read her mind.

"You're not sure?" he asked. "As I understand it… you love him… and I know he loves you… is it
really more complicated than that?"

"It is when he's the High King," Auriana said ruefully. "But… I'm sure now. Or… mostly. I…
actually, one of the things I was worried about was… you."

"Me?" Anduin said, lifting a golden eyebrow in genuine surprise. "What did I do?"

"You didn't do anything," Auriana said hurriedly. "But… you're his son. His grown son. And I'm
his… well, you have to admit that there's an element of… weirdness about the whole thing."

"'An element of weirdness'?" he said teasingly.

"You know what I mean," she said, rolling her eyes slightly. "If I allow your father to court me
openly… you might not…"

She trailed off as Anduin suddenly leaned forward, and gripped her firmly by the elbow of her
good arm.

"There are very few things that make my father happy in this world, Auri," he said seriously. "A
good fight, a good steak, and you."

"I think the list is a fair bit longer than that," Auriana laughed.

"Oh, yes," Anduin retorted drily, gently releasing her arm. "I forgot. Fresh pressed cider."

He fell silent with a sarcastic shake of his head, and a somewhat awkward moment of silence
passed between them.

"Anduin…" Auriana said softly, finally giving voice to something that had been bothering her for
some time, "I'm not your mother."

"No. You aren't," he said warily. "Do you… do you want to be?"

Auriana cocked her head to the side, considering the question seriously.

"Not really. I mean, don't get me wrong, you're… a wonderful young man, but… I'd rather be your
friend," she said carefully. "You had a mother, a wonderful mother, and I would never want you to
think that I was trying to replace her. I told you once that I would walk away from Varian if you
asked, and… I stand by that."

"Auri… I have never seen my father as happy as he is when he's with you," Anduin said firmly. "I
could never deny him that. He has lost too many things in this life for me to want to take
something else away from him, no matter how I felt. Fortunately for all of us… I happen to like
you. A lot."

"You do?" she exclaimed, both surprised and touched.

"You didn't know?"
"Well… to be honest, Anduin, you like everyone," she said, shrugging. "I've never been entirely sure if you liked me, specifically, or if you were just being polite."

"I suppose that's fair," Anduin conceded, giving her another one of his impish grins. "Rest assured, however, that I do like you. Though… perhaps we could get to know each other a bit better, you and me. Now that you're back living in Stormwind."

"I'd like that," Auriana said honestly, giving him a bright, relieved smile. "Though for now, I best head for the Library. I want to get this done before the clerks finish up for the day."

"Understandable," Anduin agreed, rising smoothly to his feet and offering Auriana his arm.

She accepted the chivalrous gesture gratefully, leaning into him ever so slightly as she gathered her feet.

"Um… Anduin?" she started. "I…"

"Your secret is safe with me," the prince assured her, grinning broadly. "Although… do put Father out of his misery soon, would you? He's a terror."
The day of the Draenor victory parade dawned bright and clear, and Varian was awoken early in the morning by his servants so that they might prepare him for the festivities ahead. As the king, he would be required to lead the parade formalities, and he would need to look the part. As far as his chamber staff were concerned, however, this was a task far easier said than done. Formal events normally required formal clothing, but Varian was far more comfortable in his armour. He was also reticent to appear in some flouncy tunic at a military event, and after a short but intense argument with his grandiloquent chamberlain, Falster, he was finally able to don his beloved heavy plate.

Nevertheless, while Varian eventually triumphed in the armour debate, he was not able to prevent Falster from insisting on several other efforts to make Varian look appropriately royal. The chamberlain was obsessed with order and decorum, and he was not afraid to make his expectations clear – especially when it came to Varian's frequent failures in propriety. He had eventually compromised on the armour, for example, but only on the condition that it was polished so bright that Varian could practically use his gauntlets as a mirror. His hair had also been washed and brushed to within an inch of its life, and he had spent nearly half an hour scrubbing his nails and shaving his dark stubble before Falster was finally satisfied.

About half an hour before the parade was due to start, Falster and the rest of his servants mercifully departed, and Varian was finally left alone. Admittedly, they had done an excellent job of making him look kingly, and as he eyed himself critically in the mirror, he wondered if he might even look handsome.

Not that you have anyone to look handsome for, he thought bitterly.

Although the siege of Hellfire Citadel had ended over a week ago, Auriana had not yet paid him a visit, and Varian was at his wits end. As the commander of Lunarfall, she was expected to attend the parade, but Varian had begun to wonder if she wouldn't simply disappear after the formalities were over. It was hard not to believe that she was deliberately avoiding him, though he couldn't for the life of him figure out why.

Frowning, he continued to brood over Auriana's absence as he stared at his reflection in the mirror, when there came a sudden loud knock at his door.

"Falster, I swear to the Light…" he growled under his breath, wondering if the determined chamberlain had returned to make another attempt at convincing him to wear an embroidered pair of hose.

Trying and mostly failing to contain his annoyance, Varian threw his door open so hard that he nearly tore it off his hinges - and stopped. Standing on the threshold was not his grey-haired chamberlain, but rather Auriana, decked out in the armour that Varian had sent to her in Dalaran. She wasn't usually one to take pains with her appearance, but for today she had clearly gone to great effort. Her dark hair was bound in a series of gleaming, elaborate knots, and a fetching blush rose in her cheeks. Her gifted armour gleamed, even in the dim light of Varian's study, and she was so stunningly beautiful that it took Varian some time to realise that her left arm was still in a sling.

"I… hello," he said quietly, his voice barely more than a husky whisper.

"Hello, Varian," she replied, her lips quirking upwards in a tentative smile. "Can I come in? You're sort of blocking the door."
"Oh! Of course," Varian said quickly, flushing awkwardly as he stepped back to allow her into his study.

She swept past him, still graceful despite her injuries, and moved to lean up against his heavy wooden desk. For a long moment, Varian simply stared, utterly overwhelmed to finally have her standing right in front of him. His gaze swept over her critically from head to toe, mentally cataloguing each of her visible wounds, but finding that they did nothing to diminish her radiance.

"Auriana..." he murmured. "You... you look... beautiful."

"I look like I've been run through a meat tenderiser," she countered drily, touching a hand to one of the bruises on her cheek, "But... thank you."

Varian frowned. He had received a full report on the battle for Hellfire Citadel from Khadgar, and he was unhappily aware of how close Auriana had come to death. Images of her demise had plagued his nightmares for weeks, even before she had lead the invasion of Hellfire Citadel, and Khadgar's assurances had done little to convince him that she was really safe. It didn't help that Auriana herself had remained distant, aside from a few short and not entirely reassuring letters.

"That was a joke, Varian, you can smile," she prompted gently.

"Forgive me, but I don't find the topic of your pain funny," he growled.

An awkward silence fell over the room, and Auriana looked suddenly shy. Her brilliant blue eyes were downcast, and Varian instantly wished that he'd said almost anything else. He had wanted to see her for so long, but now that she was actually standing in front of him, he found that he had no idea what to say.

"I heard you were made an Archmage," he said stiffly. "Congratulations."

"I... thank you," she said, blushing slightly.

"I take it this means you'll be moving to Dalaran," he muttered, unable to keep the disappointment from his voice.

"Actually... no," she said quietly. "I thought... I thought I might stay here. In Stormwind."

She bit her lip nervously, giving him a hopeful, wide eyed look. Varian's heart skipped a beat at the unspoken implication of her words, and he wondered why on earth she was still standing so far away. Forgetting all his fear and frustration, he swept across the room and pulled Auriana into his embrace, being very careful to watch her injured shoulder.

"I thought... I thought I'd never see you again," he murmured, burying his face desperately into her hair. "Light, Auri..."

"I know," she whispered, clinging fiercely to his chest. "Varian, Varian, I've missed you so much..."

Any awkwardness between them faded the second Varian took Auriana into the shelter of his arms, and in a single moment it was as if she had never been gone. Every curve of her body was exactly as perfect as he remembered, and the sweet, familiar scent of her skin made him feel almost giddy. Of course, between his heavy armour and hers, it was rather difficult to hold her properly, but Varian was more than happy to take as much of her as he could get. Seasons could have passed outside and he wouldn't have noticed, so all-consuming was his desire to hold Auriana close.
Eventually, however, he pulled back, though he kept both hands resting possessively on her slender waist.

"You've been avoiding me," he said softly.

It wasn't an accusation, but Varian couldn't deny that he had been hurt by her reticence to return to Stormwind. He had imagined all sorts of wild scenarios to explain her absence; everything from Khadgar lying about her death, to Auriana deciding that she never wanted to speak to him again.

"I'm sorry," she said, frowning slightly as she stared up at him. "I… I needed time to think."

"You couldn't do that here?" he demanded, a good deal more forcefully than he had perhaps intended.

"It's hard to explain, but… no," Auriana confessed. "I needed space. I needed to be in my own head for a while."

She looked away anxiously, and Varian's heart unexpectedly plummeted. Auriana was a difficult person to read, and oddly enough, Varian had always found himself to be the more declarative partner in their relationship. He had always been the first one to make a move, the first to push for something more, and in his darker moments, he often worried if Auriana loved him quite as much as he loved her.

"Has something changed?" he asked quietly. "For you, I mean? Do you no longer want…?"

"Something's changed," she said quickly. "But not in the way you think."

"Auri, you're shaking," he said worriedly, unconsciously tightening his grip on her waist. "What's wrong?"

Wordlessly, Auriana freed herself from his grasp, and reached into the pocket of her robes to withdraw a single scroll of parchment. She handed it over with trembling hands, and Varian distinctly heard her breath quicken in anticipation. He frowned curiously, but she simply shook her head and gestured for him to read.

Varian read over the document as quickly as was humanly possible, and his heart began to beat faster as he recognised the official seal of Stormwind marking an application for a writ of nobility. Shocked, he read the parchment another three times over before he finally came to believe it was real, and that he wasn't the victim of some elaborate trick.

"You… you decided to claim your title," he murmured, looking down at Auriana in amazement.

"I did," she said. "The clerk said it will take a week or so to complete the necessary checks and finalise the writ, but…"

"You're a duchess," Varian said stupidly.

"Yes," she said patiently. "Though if people start calling me 'my lady', there's going to be trouble."

"Ah… actually, a duchess is formally addressed as 'Your Grace'," he informed her absentmindedly, still unable to believe that she had willingly embraced her noble heritage.

Auriana raised an eyebrow.

"Er… but that's… really not important right now," he added quickly. "Did… why didn't you tell
me? This… this changes everything, Auriana."

"I know," she said, with the kind of soft smile that made Varian's heart leap into his throat. "I think that's why I didn't tell you. I had to make sure this was my decision, and mine alone."

Varian nodded slowly, trying to wrap his mind around Auriana's startling revelation. She had fought him on this issue for so long, and yet now he was on the brink of getting everything he had ever wanted. A real relationship, with her standing proudly at his side, and not just a few stolen moments whenever she had the chance to get away.

"I… why?" he wondered. "Why now?"

She considered the question seriously, her beautiful blue eyes intense.

"You told me once that I'd have to stop running someday… and you were right," she said slowly. "My past is important… but I can't keep living there. I've been looking back for far too long… and I… well, I figured that today, of all days, was as good a day as any to start looking towards my future. Towards… towards you."

"Does that mean…?" Varian started, only to be cut off by the sharp, clear sound of the Cathedral bell from outside.

Auriana looked shyly towards the door.

"I…. we need to take our positions," she said, though there was a distinct note of reluctance in her voice. "The parade is starting soon."

"I don't care about the damn parade," Varian growled, pulling her roughly against him. "I need you to tell me what this means. For you."

Auriana opened her mouth to reply, when the door to Varian's study abruptly burst open and Falster bustled inside.

"Your Majesty, you're wanted at the… oh…" the chamberlain trailed off, obviously aware that he had interrupted something important.

Auriana blushed furiously and took three quick steps backwards, pointedly not meeting Falster's eyes. Varian's hands balled into fists, and his jaw clenched tightly as he bit back a surge of irritation. Of course, it wasn't really Falster's fault that he had the worst timing imaginable, but Varian had never wanted to shove someone headfirst through a doorway more.

"I'll be there momentarily," he said flatly.

"Yes, sire," Falster agreed, twitching nervously. "Only punctuality is very much expected of…"

"I'm the king," Varian snapped, whirling furiously on his hapless manservant, "They can wait for me."

"Yes, only…" Falster tried, only to be cut off as Varian took an angry step forward.

"I just need a minute!" he roared. "Why is that so difficult to understand?"

"It isn't, but… um… she's gone," Falster stammered, pointing.

"What?"
Varian turned back around to where Auriana had been standing, and was annoyed to see that Falster was, in fact, correct. In the time Varian had been distracted by the chamberlain's entrance, Auriana had used her powers to vanish, presumably to take her place in the parade. She was habitually punctual, though Varian suspected she had left out of embarrassment more than anything else.

He swore.

"I am sorry, sire," Falster said sheepishly. "I was not aware that you had company."

"It's fine," Varian said wearily, though his tone clearly indicated that it very much wasn't. "Come on. Let's get this parade over with, shall we?"

Under the watchful eyes of Falster and a company of his elite guard, Varian made his way downstairs and outside to the sweeping staircase at the entrance of the Keep. As he expected, it was a calm and sunny day, and he could scarcely remember a time when he had seen Stormwind look quite so grand. A great cheer went up from the assembled crowd as he stepped out into the light, and Varian waved warmly in acknowledgement as he went to stand beside the other waiting dignitaries.

From what he could see, almost the entire population of the city had turned out to welcome the heroes of Draenor home. There were people packed into every corner of the great plaza, and the crowds stretched back as far as the eye could see. Even then, Varian knew that there would be thousands more people along the parade route, which began outside the main gates of the city. The soldiers of the Alliance would march through the Trade District and Old Town, before presenting themselves to Varian at the foot of the Keep.

As was only proper, Anduin stood to Varian's left, looking every inch the crown prince of Stormwind as he watched out over the enthusiastic crowd. On his right, Genn Greymane looked resplendent in a coat of red and charcoal, while Grand Marshal Tremblade, Grand Admiral Jestereth, and Sky Admiral Rogers stood to proud attention in their own well-polished armour. Behind the line of royalty and officers sat representatives of both the church and the House of Nobles, each wearing their elaborate best and smiling politely at the crowd as they waited for the parade to arrive.

In the distance, Varian could hear the bright clarion call of war horns as the parade began to make its way through the city, though he knew it would be some time before they arrived at the Keep. He gave Anduin a quick nod as he folded his arms behind his back and adopted a comfortable, wide-legged stance. The gentle sun beat down pleasantly on his face, and Varian had to admit there were worse places he could stand in wait. While he may not have been the kind of charismatic and urbane king that Falster clearly desired, he was a king who loved his people, and there were few things that made him happier than to see his people looking so happy and safe.

Varian gradually lost track of time as he stared out over the city, only to be brought back to reality as the war horns sounded nearby, and the parade finally turned into the grand concourse that lead up to Stormwind Keep. He found himself leaning forward in anticipation, seeking Auriana amongst the crowd, though he knew spotting any individual person would be nearly impossible, let alone a person as small as she.

Despite his best efforts, however, she remained hidden as the parade reached its final destination, and the soldiers formed up in a series of neat lines. They saluted Varian in perfect unison, and he returned the sign of respect with a grateful nod. He stepped forwards, lifting a hand for silence, and as the assembled citizens of Stormwind fell quiet, he began to speak.
"People of Stormwind, and of the Alliance!" he cried, his voice magically amplified so that it might be heard across the city. "It is my honour to serve as your king, and a greater honour still to welcome home the soldiers who fought for us in the Draenor campaign. I was only a child when the Dark Portal was first opened, and the red tide of the Horde swept across these lands, but I remember all too well the fear and destruction that followed. When my father passed, I swore that my people would never again know the horror of such an invasion, and it is thanks to you, brave soldiers, that I am able to keep that promise. It is because of your courage, commitment and sacrifice that this city, and indeed this world, is kept safe. Words alone are not enough to convey my gratitude for your service, but I want you to know – you are all heroes of the Alliance, and your victory in Draenor will never be forgotten."

The crowd erupted in wild cheers as Varian finished speaking, and they soon took up an Alliance war chant. The returning soldiers eagerly joined in, raising their triumphant fists towards the sky, and Varian's heart thrilled with fervent pride as he watched them shout and celebrate.

Varian permitted the crowd to carry on for quite some time, not wishing to put a damper on their joy. Eventually, however, he raised a hand for the second time, and after a few minutes, the excitable crowd finally fell silent once more. As if on cue, Grand Marshal Tremblade stepped up to his side, and she presented him with a list of names. All the soldiers would receive campaign medals, of course, but there were also awards for a select few who had gone above and beyond the call of duty. A young worgen druid, for example, who had been personally responsible for saving the lives of dozens of soldiers during the siege of Blackrock Foundry; or the veteran paladin who had singlehandedly held a supply camp against an entire company of Warsong orcs.

The awarded soldiers came before him one by one to receive their commendations as their names were read, until there was only one name left on the list. Auriana was not a conventional commander by any means, but her bravery and personal involvement in the Draenor campaign were beyond question. As such, Grand Marshal Tremblade had nominated her for the Legion of Valour, the highest medal awarded by the Alliance military. Varian had been quick to agree to the commendation, and it was now his honour to recognise her as one of our greatest heroes.

Unable to stop himself from smiling proudly, Varian pinned the medal to her chest, and despite the presence of the crowd all around them, his hand lingered against her overlong.
utter shock, however, far from pushing him away, Auriana instead reached up to close her fingers around his, and hold his hand firmly against her chest. Her pulse raced beneath his fingertips, as if her heart were just about ready to jump out of her chest, though she had all but stopped breathing.

Slowly, her eyes never leaving his, she gave an almost imperceptible nod, and Varian abruptly realised that at long last she was giving him permission. The rest of the world slowly faded away as Varian forgot she was a Commander, forgot that he was a King, and he simply stared down at the woman he loved. Her eyes were impossibly bright, and despite the nervous hitch in her breath, her steady gaze never faltered.

"Varian…" she whispered softly, so that only he could hear, and in that second, he knew precisely what he needed to do.

More sure of it than almost anything else in his life, he stepped forwards and pulled Auriana close, crashing his lips to hers with heady abandon. The crowd erupted, but Varian had more important things to worry about than their reaction. All that mattered was the fiercely beautiful woman in his arms; the warm press of her body and the intoxicating sweetness of her kiss. Surprisingly, Auriana responded without any hesitation, wrapping her good arm around his neck and even allowing him to lift her off the ground so that he might kiss her better.

Varian couldn't have said how long they stood there, locked in a passionate embrace for the whole world to see. Dimly, he began to realise that the crowd were no longer shouting in shock, but rather approval, calling their King's name over and over as their furor reached fever pitch. Someone – he thought it might have been Greymane – let out a great laugh of approval, and he thought he heard someone else shouting that they'd known all along. It was all to be expected, of course - there would be plenty of gossip and rumours and all sorts of excitement to come - but in that single, perfect moment, Varian didn't care. For him, the entire world was and and always would be Auriana, her lips on his and her soft hands in his hair, and the sound of the roaring, triumphant crowd echoing in his ears.

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