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In the name of the ancestors . . . what would they do now?

WORLD
OF
WARCRAFT[®]

BEYOND THE DARK
PORTAL

AARON ROSENBERG
&
CHRISTIE GOLDEN



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*To my family and friends and especially my lovely wife,
who help me hold back the tide.*

*For David Honigsberg (1958–2007)
Musician, writer, gamer, rabbi, and friend extraordinaire.
Teach Heaven to rock, amigo.*

PROLOGUE

“**T**hrow down!”

“Shut up!”

“Throw *down*, damn you!”

“Fine!” Gratar growled, half-rising, his powerful shoulder muscles bunching. One arm whipped forward and down, fist descending in a blur—and his fingers opened, the small bone cubes spilling from them to clatter upon the ground.

“Hah!” Brodog laughed, tusks jutting up as his lips pulled back in a grin. “Only one!”

“Damn!” Gratar sank back down onto his stone, sulking as he watched Brodog again gather the cubes and shake them vigorously. He didn’t know why he kept throwing against Brodog—the other orc practically always won. It was almost unnatural.

Unnatural. A word that had nearly stopped having any meaning for Gratar. He glanced up at the stark red sky

that filled the horizon, the sun a burning globe of the same shade. The world had not always been thus. Gratar was old enough to remember blue skies, a warm yellow sun, and thick green fields and valleys. He'd swum in deep, cool lakes and rivers, blissfully ignorant of how precious a thing water would one day become. One of the most basic needs of life, uncontaminated water was now brought in in casks and stingily parceled out.

Rising, Gratar kicked idly at the ground before him, watching the red dust puff upward, parching his mouth, and he reached for the waterskin and drank sparingly. The dust covered his skin, dulling the green hue, lightening his black hair. Red everywhere, as if the world had been drenched in blood.

Unnatural.

But the most unnatural thing of all was the reason he and Brodog were stationed here, whiling away the dusk-clogged day with idle games of chance. Gratar looked past Brodog at the towering archway just beyond them and the shimmering curtain of energy that filled it. The Dark Portal. Gratar knew that the strange mystic doorway led to another world, though he had not passed through it himself—none of his clan had. But he had watched as proud Horde warriors had entered the portal to win glory over the humans and their allies. Since then, a few orcs had returned to report the Horde's progress. But lately there had been nothing. No word, no scouts; nothing.

Gratar frowned, ignoring the clattering sound of

Brodog's tossing of the bones. Something about the portal seemed . . . different. Gratar stepped closer to the towering gateway, the hairs along his arms and chest tingling as he approached.

"Gratar? It's your turn. What are you doing?"

Gratar ignored Brodog. Squinting, he stared at the rippling veil of energy. What was going on beyond it, on that strange other world?

As he watched the curtain's undulating shimmer grew and became more translucent, allowing Gratar to see through it as if through murky water. He squinted his eyes, peered intently—and gasped, staggering back.

Playing out before his eyes, as if he were watching a ritual enactment, was a fierce and violent battle.

"What?" Brodog was beside him in an instant, the game forgotten, and then he was gaping as well. They both stared for a second before Gratar regained his wits.

"Go!" he shouted at Brodog. "Tell them what's happening!"

"Right—the commander." Brodog's eyes were still glued to the scene before them.

"No," Gratar replied sharply. He had a gut feeling that what was about to happen would be more than his commander was prepared to handle. But one orc he knew might be. "Ner'zhul. Get Ner'zhul—he'll know what to do!"

Brodog nodded and took off at a run, though not without glancing back a few times. Gratar heard him

leave, but still his gaze was riveted to the battle that was so violent but so oddly veiled. He could see orcs, some of whom he thought he recognized, but they were fighting strange figures, shorter and more narrowly built but more heavily armored. The strangers—they were called “humans,” Gratar remembered—were quick and as numerous as gnats, swarming over the beleaguered orcs and overpowering them one by one. How could his people be suffering such a defeat? Where was Doomhammer? Gratar saw no sign of the massive, powerful warchief. What had happened on that other world?

He was still watching, sickly enraptured, when he heard the sound of approaching feet. He tore his gaze away to see that Brodog had returned with two others. One was a massive figure, larger by far than any orc and much stronger, with pale milky skin and heavy features. An ogre, and a mage, by the cunning Gratar saw glinting in his small, piggy eyes. More important than this towering figure was the orc who accompanied him, pushing his way forward right up to the portal itself.

Though his hair was gray and his face heavily lined, Ner’zhul, chieftain of the Shadowmoon clan and once the most skilled shaman the orcs had ever known, was still powerfully built and his brown eyes were as sharp as ever. He stared at the portal and the vaguely glimpsed disaster unfolding behind its shimmer.

“A battle, then,” Ner’zhul said as if to himself.

And one the Horde is losing, Gratar thought.

“How long has—” Ner’zhul began. Suddenly the space framed by the Dark Portal shifted, its energies swirling violently. A hand thrust from the curtain as if it were rising from water, gleams of light and shadow clinging to green skin as it breached the barrier. A head followed, then the torso, and then the orc was through. His war axe was still in his hand but his eyes were wild as he stumbled, then caught himself, racing past Ner’zhul and the others without even looking.

Behind him came another orc, then another and another and another, until there was a flood of them, all racing to pass through the portal as fast as their feet would carry them. And not just orcs—Gratar saw several ogres emerge, and a group of smaller, slighter figures with heavy hooded cloaks bridged the gap as well. One warrior caught Gratar’s attention. Too tall and bulky to be a full orc, his features brutish enough to have some ogre blood in him, this one did not run with the air of panic the others did, but with purpose, as if he was running to something rather than from it. At his heels loped a massive jet-black wolf.

An orc shoved past this warrior as they stepped from the portal, snarling at the obstruction. “Out of the way, half-breed!” the orc snapped, but the warrior merely shook his head, refusing to be baited at such a time. The wolf, however, snarled at the orc before the war-

rior silenced it with a sharp hand gesture. The wolf fell silent, utterly obedient, and the warrior dropped a huge hand on the black head with affection.

“What has happened here?” Ner’zhul demanded loudly. “You!” The shaman pointed toward one of the unfamiliar creatures. “What manner of orc are you? Why cover your face so? Come here!”

The figure paused, then suddenly shrugged and stepped closer to Ner’zhul. “As you wish,” he said in a cold voice that had a slightly mocking tone to it. Despite the heat of the land’s baked, lifeless soil, Gratar shivered.

A mailed hand slid the hood back, and Gratar could not help crying out in horror. Perhaps the being’s features had once been fine and regular, but no longer. The skin was a pale grayish green, and had burst open at the juncture where ear met jaw. A thin trickle of ooze glistened. Swollen, cracked, purple lips drew back in a smile as the eyes glowed with malevolent humor and a fierce intelligence.

The thing was obviously dead.

Even Ner’zhul shrank back, though he rallied quickly. “Who—what are you?” Ner’zhul demanded in a voice that shook only a little. “And what do you want here?”

“Don’t you recognize me? I am Teron Gorefiend,” the figure replied, chuckling at the shaman’s obvious discomfiture.

“Impossible! He is dead and gone, slaughtered by

Doomhammer along with the rest of the Shadow Council!”

“Dead I am indeed,” the creature agreed, “but not gone. Your old apprentice Gul’dan found a way to bring us back, and into these rotting carcasses.” He shrugged, and Gratar could hear the lifeless flesh creak in slight protest. “It suffices.”

“Gul’dan?” The old shaman seemed more shocked by that revelation than by the sight of the walking corpse in front of him. “Your master still lives? Then you should return to him. You forsook me and the shaman tradition to follow his lead and become a warlock when you lived, abomination. Serve him now that you are dead.”

But Gorefiend was shaking his head. “Gul’dan is dead. And good riddance. He betrayed us, halving the Horde at a crucial moment and forcing Doomhammer to pursue him instead of conquering a human city. That treachery cost us the war.”

“We . . . have *lost*?” Ner’zhul stammered. “But . . . how is that possible? The Horde covered the very plains, and Doomhammer would not go down without a fight!”

“Oh, he fought,” Gorefiend agreed. “Yet all his might was not enough. He killed the humans’ leader but was overpowered in turn.”

Ner’zhul seemed stunned, turning to look at the panting, bloodied orcs and ogres who had rushed through the gates moments earlier. He took a deep

breath and straightened, turning to the ogre who had accompanied him. “Dentarg—summon the other chieftains. Tell them to gather here at once, bringing only weapons and armor. We—”

The wave washed out of the portal with no warning, a massive energy burst that slammed all of them to the ground. Gratar gasped for breath, the wind knocked out of him. He stumbled to his feet, only to be greeted by a second explosion, more violent than the first. This time hunks of stone had been snatched up by the energy that powered the portal and came flying past them, chips and slabs and slivers and sheets. The curtain wavered, becoming opaque.

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Horde warriors who had escaped back through it one last time. Then he glanced over at Dentarg, and the elderly shaman cradled in the ogre's surprisingly gentle grasp.

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CHAPTER ONE

“Ner’zhul!”

N Gorefiend and Gaz Soulripper strode into the village as if they owned it, booted feet moving swiftly over hard-packed dirt. Curious villagers poked their heads out of the doors and windows of their simple huts, only to shrink back inside as the interlopers fixed them with a baleful stare from unnaturally glowing eyes.

“Ner’zhul!” Gorefiend called again in a voice that was both cold and commanding. “I would speak with you!”

“Don’t know who you are,” a voice growled behind him, “and don’t much care. You’re trespassing on Shadowmoon territory. Leave or die.”

“I need to speak with Ner’zhul,” the death knight replied, turning to face the powerful orc warrior who had stepped threateningly behind him. “Tell him Teron Gorefiend is here.”

The orc looked unsettled at the name. “Gorefiend?”

You are the death knight?” He grimaced, showing his tusks, glancing at Gorefiend and his companion, then obviously mustering his courage. “You don’t look so dangerous.”

“Dangerous enough,” replied Soulripper. He turned and nodded at something the orc could not see. Several more beings, their faces hooded but their glowing eyes visible, emerged from the very shadows of the village’s huts and stepped up beside their two fellow death knights. Gorefiend chuckled, and the orc swallowed. “Now fetch your master, lest your arrogance bring you swift death instead.”

“Ner’zhul sees no one,” the orc stated. He was beginning to sweat, but he obviously had his orders.

Gorefiend sighed, a strange whistling sound as air was taken into and then expelled from dead lungs.

“Swift death then,” he said. Before the orc could even form a reply, Gorefiend extended a mailed hand and murmured something. The warrior gasped, doubling over and then dropping to his knees. Gorefiend tightened his fist and blood suddenly burst from the hapless orc’s nose, eyes, and mouth. Gorefiend had already turned away by this point, having lost interest in tormenting the annoyance.

“Dark magic!” one of the Shadowmoon warriors shouted, grabbing up the axe beside him. “Kill the warlocks before they can afflict any more of us!” he bellowed, and his fellows responded by readying themselves as well.

Gorefiend whirled, glowing eyes narrowing. “If you all die so be it; I will speak with Ner’zhul!” This time he extended both hands, and darkness formed at his fingertips. It exploded like a glowing black flame, knocking back the orc who had hurled the axe as well as his fellows. They lay where the blast had blown them, screaming in agony.

“*Stop!* There has been enough killing already!” The old orc’s voice rang with authority. Gorefiend lowered his arms and his companions fell back, watching their leader.

“There you are, Ner’zhul,” Gorefiend drawled. “I thought that might get your attention.” He turned to regard Ner’zhul, mildly surprised to notice that the old orc’s face had been painted white—almost like a skull, Gorefiend mused. As their eyes met, Ner’zhul’s widened.

“I . . . have dreamed of you,” he murmured. “I have had visions of death, and now here you are.” Long green fingers reached to touch the skull painted on his face. Small bits of white flaked off at the gesture. “Two years have I been dreaming of this. You have come for me, then. For us all. You have come to take my soul!”

“Not at all. I’ve come to save it. But—you are partially right: I have come for you, but not the way you think. I wish to see you lead.”

Ner’zhul looked confused. “Lead? Why? So that I can destroy more of the Horde? Haven’t I done enough?” The old shaman’s eyes were haunted. “Nay, I

am done with such things. I led our people once—straight into Gul’dan’s plots, straight into schemes that have doomed this world and a battle that nearly destroyed us. Seek a leader elsewhere.”

Gorefiend frowned. This was not going as expected, and he couldn’t simply slay Ner’zhul as he had the shaman’s clansmen. He tried again. “The Horde needs you.”

“The Horde is dead!” Ner’zhul snapped. “Half our people are gone, trapped on that horrible world, and lost to us forever! You want me to lead that?”

“They are not lost forever,” Gorefiend replied, and the calm certainty in his tone brought Ner’zhul up short. “The portal was destroyed, but may yet be restored.”

That got Ner’zhul’s attention. “What? How?”

“A small rift remains on Azeroth,” Gorefiend explained, “and this side is intact. I helped create the Dark Portal, and I can still sense it. I can help you widen the rift until the Horde can pass through it.”

The shaman seemed to consider this for an instant, then shook his head, folding in on himself almost visibly. “What good would that do us? The Alliance is too great a foe. The Horde will never win. Our people are as good as dead already. All we have left now is the manner of that death.” Again his fingers touched the painted image on his face, almost of their own volition. His weakness disgusted Gorefiend. It was hard to believe that this wreck, obsessed with death,

his own and that of others, had once been so revered. And unfortunately still so necessary.

“Death is not the only option, not if we rebuild and use the portal,” Gorefiend countered, forcing patience. “We don’t have to win—we don’t even need to battle the Alliance again. I have quite another plan for the Horde. If I can get ahold of certain artifacts—there are things I learned about from Gul’dan that—”

“Gul’dan and his twisted schemes—they reach out and destroy lives even from beyond the grave!” He scowled at Gorefiend. “You and your plans! And how much power would you gain from success? Power is all you Shadow Council bastards care about!”

Gorefiend’s patience, never great, had evaporated. He seized the old shaman’s arms and shook him angrily. “Two years since the portal collapsed, and you have been hiding in your village while the clans slaughter each other. All they need is guidance and then they will be powerful again! Between your supporters and my death knights, we can force the clans to obey you. With Doomhammer dead or imprisoned on Azeroth, you are the only one left who can lead them. I have been examining the portal, assessing the damage, and I told you I have a solution. I’ve assigned several death knights to the site already. Even as I speak to you, they are working spells, preparing it for its reopening. I am sure it can succeed.”

“And what is this solution?” Ner’zhul spat bitterly. “Did you discover a way for us to return to Azeroth

and win the war we lost two years ago? I think not. We are doomed. We will never win." He turned away, and took a step back toward his hut.

"Never mind the war! Listen to me, old man!" the death knight shouted after him. "We do not need to defeat the Alliance *because we do not need to conquer Azeroth!*"

Ner'zhul paused and glanced back. "But you said you could reopen the portal. Why do that if not to return there?"

"Return, yes, but not for battle." Gorefiend closed the gap between them again. "We need only to find and claim certain magical artifacts. Once we have those, we can leave Azeroth and never return."

"And stay here?" Ner'zhul waved a hand, the gesture encompassing much of the stricken landscape around them. "You know as well as I that Draenor is dying. Soon it will not be able to sustain even those of us left."

He had not remembered the shaman as being so slow-witted. "It will not have to," Gorefiend assured him, speaking slowly as if to a child. "With these artifacts in hand, we can leave both Azeroth and Draenor behind and go someplace else. Some place better."

Now he had Ner'zhul's full attention. Something like hope flickered across the white-painted face. For a long moment, Ner'zhul stood poised either to reenter his hut and resume his self-pitying seclusion, or to embrace this new possibility.

“You have a plan for this?” the old shaman asked finally.

“I do.”

Another long pause. Gorefiend waited.

“. . . I will listen.” Ner’zhul turned and stepped back into his hut.

But this time Teron Gorefiend—warlock and death knight—came with him.

CHAPTER TWO

“Look at this place!”

L Genn Greymane, king of Gilneas, gestured at the citadel towering over them, the same massive structure whose front gates they were striding through as he spoke. Though a large, burly man, Greymane was dwarfed by the edifice they were entering, the arch of its front gate more than twice his height. The other kings nodded as they too passed through, admiring the thick outer walls with their heavy block construction, but Greymane snorted, and his frown showed he did not echo their approval.

“A wall, a tower, and a single keep,” he rumbled loudly, glaring at the half-completed buildings beyond. “This is where our money’s gone to?”

“It’s big,” Thoras Trollbane pointed out, the terse Stromgarde ruler as usual wasting as few words as possible. “Big is expensive.”

The other kings grumbled somewhat as well. They

all grieved at the costs involved. Especially since they, the Alliance leaders, were sharing the expenses equally.

“How great a price do you put on safety?” commented the tall, slim young man near the front of the group. “Nothing worth having comes cheaply.” Several of the others ceased their grumbling at the subtle admonition. Varian, the recently crowned young king of Stormwind, had known safety, and been robbed of it. His realm had suffered greatly at the hands of the orcs during the First War. Much of the capital city in particular had been reduced to mere rubble.

“Indeed—how does the rebuilding go, Your Majesty?” a whip-thin man in green naval garb asked politely.

“Very well, thank you, Admiral,” Varian replied—though Daelin Proudmoore was ruler of Kul Tiras, he preferred to use his naval title. “The Stonemasons’ Guild is doing an excellent job, and I and my people owe them our gratitude. They’re fine craftsmen, with skills to rival those of the dwarves themselves, and the city is rising higher and higher every day.” He grinned at Greymane. “Worth every copper, I’d say.”

The other kings chuckled, and one of them, tall and broad with graying blond hair and blue-green eyes, caught Trollbane’s gaze and nodded approvingly. Tereanas, ruler of Lordaeron, had sponsored young Varian when the prince and his people had sought refuge from the Horde, and had taken the youth into his own home until such time as Varian could be restored to his fa-

ther's throne. Now that time had come, and Terenas and his old friend Trollbane were well pleased with the results. Varian was a clever, charming, noble young man, a natural leader and a gifted diplomat for one so young. Terenas had grown to think of him almost as a son, and he now took nearly a father's pride in admiration of the way the youth had controlled the conversation and distracted the other rulers from their previous complaints.

"In fact," Varian continued, pitching his voice slightly louder, "there's the miracle worker himself." The king indicated a tall and powerfully built man speaking animatedly with some dusty-looking workmen. The man in question had black hair and dark green eyes that sparkled as his head turned toward them, having clearly overheard the words. Terenas recognized Edwin VanCleaf, the head of the Stonemasons' Guild and the man in charge of both Stormwind's restoration and the construction here at Nethergarde Keep.

Varian smiled and beckoned him over. "Master VanCleaf, I trust the work continues apace?"

"It does, Your Majesty, thank you," VanCleaf replied confidently. He banged a heavy fist against the thick outer wall and nodded proudly. "It'll hold against all comers, sire, I promise you that."

"I know it will, Master VanCleaf," Stormwind's king agreed. "You've outdone yourself here, and that takes some doing."

VanCleaf nodded his thanks, then turned as another

man somewhere by one of the unfinished buildings called for him. "I'd best be back to work. Your Majesties." He bowed to the assembled rulers, then turned and hurried off toward the shouts.

"Nicely handled," Terenas said softly to Varian as they fell into pace together. "Defusing Greymane and flattering VanCleaf at the same time."

The younger king grinned. "It's an honest compliment, and he'll work all the harder because of it," he pointed out just as quietly, "and Greymane only complains to hear the sound of his own voice."

"You've grown very wise for your age," Terenas said, laughing. "Or perhaps just wise in general."

Of course, Varian's hidden reprimand could not shut Greymane up for long. As they crossed the wide courtyard Gilneas's king began grumbling again, and soon those rumblings in his thick black beard formed words once more. "I know they are working hard," he admitted grudgingly, glaring at Varian, who grinned in reply, "but why all these buildings?" He waved a large hand at the single completed keep they were entering as they passed beneath the portcullis and up the stairs. "Why go to so much trouble—and cost—to create such a vast citadel? It is only here to maintain watch over the valley where the portal once stood, is it not? Why would a simple keep not have sufficed?"

Khadgar, archmage of Dalaran, exchanged tired but still slightly amused glances with his fellow wizards as Grey-

mane's strong voice carried to them even before they entered the large meeting room.

"It is good to hear Greymane is his old self," Antonidas, leader of the Kirin Tor, commented dryly.

"Yes, some things never change," Khadgar replied, stroking his full white beard. He turned, his youthful quickness giving a seeming lie to his lined visage, to face the kings. "You want to know what your money has bought you, then?" he said to the newcomers, nodding a brief greeting to them but otherwise treating them as equals—for such they were, as Khadgar, a member of the Kirin Tor, was a ruler in his own right.

"Well, I'll tell you, and you can thank me. Nethergarde Keep is large, yes. It has to be. Quite a few people will be living here—the magi we brought here from Dalaran, as well as the soldiers who watch for more mundane threats. The valley below us was once the site of the Dark Portal, the Horde's entrance into our world. If they ever return, we'll be ready."

"That explains the warriors," Proudmoore agreed, "but why these magi you spoke of? Surely a single mage would be enough to monitor the situation and alert you of any danger?"

"If that were all that was required, yes," Khadgar agreed, pacing the room. His strides were that of the young man he truly was. Khadgar was only a handful of years older than Varian, but he had been aged prematurely by the magic of Medivh just before the Magus's death. "But Nethergarde is quickly becoming

more than just a watch post. You can't possibly have missed the reason for our concern as you rode up. Something drained the life from Draenor, from the very land itself. When the Dark Portal was opened that lifelessness touched our world as well, killing the land around it and spreading outward. When we destroyed the portal, we thought the land would heal itself. It did not. In fact, the taint continued to spread."

The kings frowned and looked at one another. This was news to them all.

"We began to study the situation, and discovered that, even with the portal gone, a small dimensional rift remained." That brought gasps from the assembled rulers.

"Did you find a way to stop the taint from spreading?" Proudmoore asked.

"We did, though it took several of us working together to do so." A frown crossed his lined face. "Unfortunately, we were unable to restore the land that had been damaged. This area was once the Black Morass, and we managed to protect the northern half and keep it in its former state. There are rumors that some orcs are still hiding out there, but we've not seen anything concrete. But the southern half—for whatever reason, we could not breathe life back into it." He shook his head. "Someone took to calling it the Blasted Lands, and now the name has stuck. I doubt this land will ever be able to support life again."

"Still, you stopped the taint and saved the rest of the

world's soil," Varian pointed out. "That is incredible enough, given how rapidly the effect spread."

Khadgar inclined his head, acknowledging the praise. "We have done more than I had dared hope," he admitted, "though less than I might have liked. But a full contingent of magi must remain here at all times, to watch the area and make sure we lose no more of Azeroth to this strange taint. The magi also monitor the rift itself at the same time. And *that*, good majesties, is why Nethergarde had to be so large, and is costing so much."

"Is there really any risk that the rift might reopen?" Trollbane asked, and the others turned back to Khadgar, clearly awaiting his answer but worried about what it might be. He could read their thoughts on their faces; the idea of reliving what had happened eight years before, when the portal had opened and the orcs had come pouring through, unnerved them all.

Khadgar began to answer, but was interrupted by a shrill caw from just outside the meeting hall. "I think the final member has just arrived by gryphon and landed on the wall walk," he said. The woman who entered the meeting room a few moments later was tall and almost unspeakably lovely. Worn-looking green and brown leather clung to her slim form as she strode toward them. Her golden hair was tousled and she brushed it absently back from long, pointed ears. Exquisite and delicate she might seem, but everyone present knew well that Alleria Windrunner was a

formidable ranger, scout and fighter and wilderness expert. Many of those present had fought in battle alongside her—and owed their lives to her sharp eyes, quick reactions, and strong nerves.

“Khadgar,” she said bluntly as she stepped up beside him, tall enough to almost look him eye to eye.

“Alleria,” he replied. Affectionate nostalgia made the single word warm. They had been comrades in arms not so long ago, good friends fighting a good fight. But there was no warmth in her green-eyed gaze, nor on a face that, while beautiful, might have been carved from stone for all the animation it displayed. Alleria was courteous, but that was all. Inwardly, Khadgar sighed, stepping back through the door and gesturing for her to follow.

“This had better be good,” she said as she entered the room proper and nodded briefly to the various kings. Despite her willowy build and youthful golden looks, Alleria was easily older than any of the human rulers, which made her immune to—and often mocking of—their majesty. “I was hunting orcs.”

“You are always hunting orcs,” Khadgar countered, more sharply than he intended. “But that is part of why I wanted you here for this.”

He waited until he had her full attention and that of the various kings. “I was just explaining that we’ve noticed a dimensional rift in the area where the Dark Portal once stood, Alleria. And recently the energies emanating from it have increased dramatically.”

“What does that mean?” Greymane demanded. “Are you trying to tell us it’s getting stronger?”

The young-old archmage nodded. “Yes. We think the rift is about to expand.”

“Has the Horde found some way to restore the portal?” Terenas asked, just as shocked as the rest.

“Perhaps, perhaps not,” Khadgar answered. “But even if they cannot create a stable portal again, once the rift alone is large enough, the orcs will once more have access to our world.”

“I knew this would happen!” Greymane all but shouted. “I knew we hadn’t seen the last of those green-skinned monsters!”

Beside him Alleria’s lips curved, her eyes growing bright in—was that anticipation?

“How soon?” Trollbane asked. “And how many?”

“How many, we cannot say,” Khadgar replied, shaking his head. “How soon? Very. As little as a few days, perhaps.”

“What do you need?” Terenas asked softly.

“I need the Alliance army,” Khadgar answered bluntly. “I need the entire army here in case the rift does begin widening. It’s quite possible we could have a second Horde pouring out into that valley.” He smiled suddenly. “The Sons of Lothar must step forward once again.”

The Sons of Lothar. That’s what they had taken to calling themselves, the veterans of the Second War. Victory had been bought, but at a dear cost—the death

of the Lion of Azeroth, Anduin Lothar, who had been the man all were willing to follow. Khadgar had been there when he fell, slain by the orc chieftain Orgrim Doomhammer. And he'd been there when his friend Turalyon, now the general of the Alliance forces, had avenged Lothar by capturing Doomhammer. Lothar's protégé, coming into his own, carrying on a heroic legacy; and thus in blood had been born the Sons of Lothar.

"You're sure about this rift?" Terenas asked carefully, clearly reluctant to offend a wizard. Which, Khadgar mused, was hardly ever a good idea. But in this case, he wasn't offended at all.

"I wish I weren't. The energy level is most definitely rising. Soon that energy will be enough to widen the rift, allowing the orcs to pour forth from Draenor onto our world." He felt suddenly tired, as if sharing the bad news had emptied him somehow. He glanced again at Alleria, who noticed the gaze and lifted an eyebrow, but said nothing.

"We cannot afford to take chances," Varian pointed out. "I say we rally the Alliance army and make ready for war, just in case."

"Agreed," Terenas said, and the others nodded their approval.

"We'll need to contact General Turalyon," Varian continued. Alleria stiffened slightly, a flicker of unreadable emotion crossing her face, and Khadgar's eyes narrowed. Once, the elven ranger and the human paladin

had been more than comrades in arms. They'd been good for each other, Khadgar had always thought. Alleria's age and wisdom strengthened Turalyon's spirit, and his youth and innocence softened the somewhat jaded elf. But something had happened. Khadgar had never known what, and was discreet enough not to ask. An alarmingly cold distance had sprung up between Turalyon and Alleria. Khadgar had felt sorry for them at the time; now, he wondered if this distance would cause problems.

Varian appeared not to have noticed the subtle change in Alleria and continued, "As commander of the Alliance army, it's his job to gather our soldiers and prepare them for what lies ahead. He's in Stormwind now, helping us rebuild our defenses and train our men."

An idea occurred to Khadgar, one that might solve two problems at once. "Alleria, you could reach Turalyon more quickly than anyone else. Take the gryphon and head to Stormwind. Tell him what's happened, and that we'll need to reassemble the Alliance army immediately."

The elven ranger glared at Khadgar, her green eyes flashing fire. "Surely another could accomplish the trek as easily," she stated, her tone sharp.

But Khadgar shook his head. "The Wildhammers know and trust you," he answered. "And these fellows have their own arrangements to make." He sighed. "Please, Alleria. For all our sakes. Find him, tell him, and bring him here." *And maybe you two can settle your*

differences . . . or at least decide to work together, he thought.

Alleria's glare hardened into that implacable, expressionless mask. "I will do as you have requested," she said almost formally. Without another word she turned and stalked back across the hall and out the front doors.

"Khadgar's right," Terenas said as they watched her walk away. "We'll each need to rally our troops and gather supplies, and right away." The other kings nodded. Even Greymane was quietly compliant—the thought of the Horde returning had shocked any gripping clean out of him. Together they moved toward the doors, heading back into the courtyard and from there toward the massive front archway they had first passed under not an hour before.

"Aye, go," Khadgar whispered as he watched the kings depart. "Go, and rouse the Sons of Lothar. I just pray it is not too late."

CHAPTER THREE

The axe shrieked as it arced downward, catching the light and glinting brightly, thirsting for blood. Its wielder laughed in a manic harmony, opening his black-tattooed jaw almost impossibly wide in the scream that had given him his name. Long black hair whipped behind him as he moved, red eyes glowing, slashing at the imaginary foe again and again, honing his moves so that in a real battle, his enemy would be so much raw meat. Grom Hellscream grunted and whirled and turned, sheer power tempered by skill, until the sound of his name being called pulled him from the red haze that descended at such times, even in a mere exercise such as this.

“Grom!”

Grom Hellscream lowered Gorehowl, panting only slightly from the vigorous exertion, and glanced up to see an older but imposing figure stomping toward him.

“Kargath,” he replied, waiting until the Shattered

Hand chieftain had reached him. They clasped hands—right hands; Kargath’s left hand had been severed long ago and replaced with a wicked-looking scythe’s blade.

“Well met.”

“Well met to many, it seems,” the older chieftain said, nodding to where more orcs were gathering. “Ner’zhul sent emissaries to every clan, or so I was told.” Grom nodded, his black-tattooed jaw setting into a grim line. Some of those emissaries had been his, sent at the old shaman’s request.

“He is planning something.” Grom shouldered the massive axe and together the two leaders turned and walked across the valley, toward the ruins of the Dark Portal, passing warriors from both clans. Glares and sharp words were flying here and there, but at least no one was fighting. Yet. “But what?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Kargath replied. “Anything is better than this!” He ran his fingers absently along his scythe’s edge. “These past two years we’ve sat and done nothing. Nothing! And why? Because the Alliance defeated us? So what? Because the portal was destroyed? Surely they can craft another! There has to be someone we can fight, else we’ll sit and molder like so much rotten meat!”

Grom nodded. Kargath was a creature of combat, pure and simple—he lived to fight and to kill. Grom could appreciate that, and what Kargath said had merit. They were a combative race, the orcs, and constant struggle honed their wits and strengthened their limbs.

Without that they grew soft. He had kept his own people sharp by warring against the other clans, and he suspected Kargath had done the same, though their two clans had not skirmished. Still, one could attack patrols and scouting parties only so often before it led to true war, and warring against his own kind did not interest him. When Ner'zhul had formed the Horde, he had united the clans into a single massive unit. And even after all this time Grom still thought of them that way. When his Warsong warriors fought the Thunderlords or the Redwalkers or the Bladewinds, they were battling their fellow warriors, orcs they should have been fighting alongside instead of against. During combat he still felt the same bloodlust, the same savage joy as Gorehowl tore a shrieking path through his foes, but afterward he felt empty, hollow, and slightly unclean.

What had happened? he wondered as they approached the ruins and the figure standing before them. Where had the Horde gone wrong? They had outnumbered the blades of grass that had once covered the plains and the drops of water comprising the ocean! When they marched, the thunder of their footsteps shattered mountains! How could such an army fail?

It was Gul'dan's fault. Grom was sure of it. The lifeless plains that had once been covered in grain and grass, the trees that had withered and blackened, the skies that had grown dark and red as blood—all that had been caused by the warlocks and their quest for powers never meant for orcish hands. But it was more

than that. They had doomed Draenor, all of them, but Gul'dan had been behind the warlocks' every move. And it was his fault that the Horde had failed to conquer that other world and claim it as their own. After all, the wily warlock had convinced Grom to stay behind on Draenor during the first battle, instead of taking his rightful place at the vanguard.

"We need you here," Gul'dan had claimed. "You and your Warsong clan are some of our finest, and we need to hold you in reserve, just in case. We also need someone to stay here on Draenor and protect our interests, someone powerful, someone we can trust. Someone like you." Grom had been a fool, letting the warlock's flattery lure him from his path. He had watched as Blackhand and Orgrim Doomhammer led the Horde through the portal into that strange place called Azeroth. And he had watched as reports came back, reports of their initial successes and then of their ultimate failures.

Grom growled softly beneath his breath. If only he had been there! He could have turned that final battle around, he was sure of it—with his help Doomhammer could have conquered that human city by the lake and still sent forces to crush the traitorous Gul'dan and his cohorts. Then they could have claimed Lordaeron and spread out from there, sweeping across the land until no one was left to stand against them.

Grom shook his head. The past was past. Blackhand was dead, his old friend Durotan was dead, Doomhammer was captured, the Dark Portal was destroyed,

Gul'dan was gone, and the Horde was a shadow of its former glory.

But perhaps some of that was about to change.

He and Kargath had reached the portal now, and he could see the waiting figure clearly. Ner'zhul's hair was completely gray now, but otherwise the Shadowmoon chieftain and former Horde leader looked as powerful as ever. Then he turned in Grom's direction.

The Warsong clan leader growled and jerked in surprise as he got his first good look at the shaman's face. White paint adorned Ner'zhul's cheeks, upper lip, nose, brow, and forehead, turning them white as bone. And that was clearly the intent, Grom realized. The old shaman had masked his face to resemble a skull.

"Grom Hellscream and Kargath Bladefist!" Ner'zhul called out, his voice still strong and clear. "Welcome!"

"Why have you summoned us?" Kargath said bluntly, wasting no words.

"I have news," the shaman answered. "News, and a plan."

Grom snorted. "For two long years you have hidden away from us. How can you have news?" he said, anger and doubt in his voice. He gestured at Ner'zhul's painted face. "You let Gul'dan supplant you, you refused to drink from the chalice, and you sulk like a marmot in its burrow. Now you announce you have a plan, and emerge from your seclusion wearing the face of the dead—I do not think I want to hear what sort of plan that involves."

He could hear the pain in his own voice. Despite all that had happened with Gul'dan, despite his distrust of advisers and shaman and warlocks alike these past few years, he wanted Ner'zhul to still be the shaman Grom remembered from his youth, the strong, stern, wise orc who had forged the fractious clans into a single fighting unit. Despite his scathing words, Grom wanted to be proven wrong.

Ner'zhul touched the white skull on his face and sighed deeply. "Long have I dreamed of death. I have seen him, spoken with him. I have seen the death of my people, the death of all I have loved. And this—this image I wear to honor that. I did not wish to come forth, but I now believe that I owe it to my people to lead them once more."

"Lead as you did before?" Kargath cried. "Lead us to betrayal? To defeat? I will send you to that death which you are so enamored of with this very hand if you attempt to so lead us, Ner'zhul!" He brandished his scythe-hand at the shaman.

Ner'zhul began to reply but stopped as he spotted something behind them. Turning, Grom saw a hulking figure approaching, an ogre judging by the way it towered over the orcs it passed.

"What news, Dentarg?" Ner'zhul called out as his assistant crossed the clearing that separated the portal ruins from the orcs milling about. "I sent you to locate the other clans and summon them here—as I told you two to do as well," he reminded Grom and Kargath.

“Yet I see only Shadowmoon, Warsong, and Shattered Hand in this valley. Where are the rest?”

“Lightning’s Blade said they would attend,” Grom assured him. “They have a long way to travel, so it may take them another day or two.” He shook his head. “Neither Thunderlord nor Laughing Skull listened, however.” He growled. “They were too busy slaughtering each other.”

“This is precisely why we need to act!” Ner’zhul cried. “We are killing ourselves and each other if we sit and do nothing!” He bared his teeth in a grimace. “All the work we did—all that I did—to forge the Horde is crumbling away, the clans splintering off and fighting with one another. If we do not act soon we will be reduced to the old ways once more, with the clans meeting only in battle save the yearly gatherings—if that!”

“What did you expect to happen while you hid away for two years?” Grom snapped. “We understand that you were wounded by the explosion. But then, even after your wounds had healed, you never came out. Long we waited for your counsel, but it never came. Of course we went our own ways! Of course we began fighting with one another. You abandoned us so you could dream your dreams of death, Ner’zhul. And this is the result.”

“I know,” Ner’zhul said softly, in pain. Grom’s further angry words died on his lips in the face of that grief and shame.

“The Bladewind clan will join us,” Kargath