



WORLD
WARCRAFT
WARLORDS of DRAENOR

BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT

Hellscream

by Robert Brooks

Part One

Garrosh surveyed the Nagrand landscape carefully. No Warsong scouts had come into sight for days. Why would they? This hilltop was on the edge of the clan's territory, and in peacetime, there was little reason to patrol here. Raiding ogres would come from the west. Other orc clans would approach from the east. Even the hunting here was poor during this season, Garrosh remembered.

He had been very young the last time he had sat on this hilltop, and—

No. Garrosh had never sat on *this* hilltop or climbed *these* trees or run his fingers through *these* patches of grass as a child. This was a different world.

Kairozdormu had advised him to expect a few strange discoveries. *I've spent my life studying the timeways. If you try to count and compare blades of grass, you'll drive yourself mad*, he had said. *My plans require a few... favorable conditions, and we'll find them here. This is the perfect timeway for us. Not a perfect mirror image, but perfect nonetheless.*

That remained to be seen. Garrosh shaded his eyes and stared at the land just below the setting sun. At least he knew this hilltop was a safe place to rest. The open meadows, lush and green, would reveal any interlopers long before Garrosh would be spotted.

Behind him, Kairoz was at his ease, lying on his back near the smoldering campfire, holding a large, jagged shard of curved glass above his eyes. The fire's light and the setting sun played bronze shimmers across its surface. "Have you thought about what we discussed, Hellscream? You've already wasted enough time—"

Garrosh spun around, fixing him with a glare. "Do not call me that name again. Not here. Not ever."

Kairoz sat up clumsily. The bronze dragon could not yet move with grace in his new orc form. "No? Your family name would certainly grab the Warsongs' attention. Move things along."

"It might move Gorehowl through my neck. And yours," Garrosh said.

Kairoz smirked. The shape of his expression was distinctly quel'dorei, out of place on an orc face. "Your father and his weapon cannot touch me. Not unless he can fly."

Garrosh didn't respond. *I hope you reveal your dragon form in front of Grommash Hellscream. I truly do.*

Kairoz set the glass shard down in his lap. Even that simple movement looked wrong. "So. Have you made a decision?"

"I have."

"And?"

Garrosh kept his voice even. "It is time for us to part ways," he said.

"Is it?" Kairoz chuckled. "I don't remember offering that choice."

"You may look like an orc, but you don't act like one. They'll smell you out. I need to approach them alone," Garrosh said.

"I see. And how long until I can join you?" Kairoz's smirk deepened.

"Who can say? When the time is right—"

"Never, you mean." Kairoz shook his head. "Oh, Garrosh, Garrosh, Garrosh. Subtlety is not a strength of yours. Don't embarrass yourself."

Garrosh bit back a harsh reply. "Fine." His voice was controlled. "I'll be clear: my Horde does not need a dragon's aid."

"Mmm. Your Horde?" Kairoz stood up slowly, carefully balancing the glass shard in one hand. "*Your* Horde deposed you. Without me, you would still be rotting in a prison cell. You do not have the privilege of telling me to leave." The impostor orc tilted his head. "And if you refuse to behave, I can make you wish you were still awaiting the mercy of an executioner's axe."

Kairoz's other hand rested inside his sash, the only piece of clothing he had kept from his high elf garb. Garrosh heard rattling metal inside. A hidden weapon, perhaps?

An anticipation of violence fell upon Garrosh's mind. The world became clearer, sharper. He allowed no outward sign. "My people deserved better than what fate gave them. I will fix that. Without you," Garrosh said.

"You do not give me orders," Kairoz said. "I—"

Enough. Garrosh leapt forward without warning, his wordless battle cry filling the air. Three strides and he had vaulted the campfire and seized Kairoz around the throat, squeezing and lifting.

There was a flash of bronze light. The glass shard in Kairoz's hand shimmered.

Garrosh blinked. His hand squeezed nothing but air. The campfire was in front of him again, three strides away, as though he had never moved. Kairoz was gone. A moment of confusion passed, and then an arm snaked around Garrosh's throat and pulled him off his feet.

The world turned upside down. Cold metal—familiar metal—clicked shut around both of his wrists.

He struck the dirt hard, Kairoz's knee pinning him against the ground, his forearm firmly placed against Garrosh's neck.

"You think because I'm now mortal, I'm weak?" Kairoz hissed. "You are warchief no longer, *Hellscream*. You are free because I will it. You live because I will it. You will join your father and rally the old orc clans because I will it." Kairoz's disguise vanished from the neck up, his orc head suddenly shifting into something much larger and reptilian. The massive eyes of the bronze dragon lowered to mere inches from Garrosh's face. "You are a pawn. Nothing more. Remain useful, or you will be discarded."

Garrosh bared his teeth. His wrists had been chained together with the same restraints he had been wearing when he escaped from that absurd show of a trial. Now he understood why Kairoz had so carefully removed them instead of just breaking them.

Kairoz had wanted them hidden and ready. He had anticipated a confrontation. No, he had *provoked* a confrontation.

Slowly, bit by bit, Garrosh reined in his fury. He controlled his breathing. Steady breaths. *Fool. He baited you. Do not make that mistake again.* The red tinge faded from his vision. His voice was strained but composed when he finally spoke.

"And if you didn't need me, dragon, you would have left me in Pandaria," the orc said. "So don't bother with threats."

Kairoz's reptilian mouth twisted into a smile. "Just so long as we understand each other." He shifted back wholly into his orc form and stood up, stepping back from Garrosh.

"Oh, I do." Garrosh rolled over and used his bound hands to push himself to his feet. "Believe that."

A glimmer of light caught his eye as he rose. Nearby lay the glass shard, dropped into the dirt during the struggle. Kairoz pointed to it. "Pick it up."

Garrosh glanced at it. "Pick up your own toys."

"It's yours now." Kairoz spoke as though addressing an unruly child. "You will have need of it."

Garrosh eyed the shard but didn't move. The curved glass was pulsing, shimmering with a faint bronze light, the same light he had seen when the dragon had escaped his grip. The edges looked sharp. With restrained hands, it would be a trick to hold it without slicing up his palms. "I thought you said it had no more power."

"I said it did not have the power it once did. That does not mean it has *no* power, as you just witnessed," Kairoz said. His smirk was back.

Garrosh lifted his manacled wrists. "And these?"

"Those still seem to have plenty of power, yes? They will stay on until you convince me you understand your place." Kairoz returned to the campfire and began nudging dirt over the smoldering wood with his feet. "Pick. It. Up."

Steady breaths. *Do not let him bait you again.* Garrosh picked up the shard with care, balancing it on the palms of his hands. When it had been whole during Garrosh's trial, the Vision of Time had two sculptures of bronze dragons twined around the glass. This shard still had the head and neck of one of those figures melded with it. It was a convenient grip.

"I assume this holds no power for me," Garrosh said, his voice tight. *Or you wouldn't have let me touch it.* The thought made Garrosh's hidden anger burn white hot.

"Clearly. But do not lose it. That would make me upset," Kairoz said. He wandered away from the campfire, idly plucking a leaf off a low-hanging branch and crushing it between his fingers until it was green pulp. "You made a good point, Garrosh. You. Me. We're two strangers here. It might be best for us to approach the Warsongs separately. Months apart, even. It will lessen the chances of your people assuming you and I are... colluding." He dropped the crushed leaf to the ground and wiped his hand off on his thigh. A light green stain remained on his palm. "Show them the glass. Primitive as your kind was on this world, you had some awareness of the supernatural, yes? Your shaman will suffice. Any fool with a little talent can tap into what you're holding. It will be enough to catch a glimpse of our Azeroth and the spoils of other worlds. Once you have convinced them to join your ideal Horde and conquer all that they see, I will arrive. Just another orc following the new direction of his people." Kairoz spread his arms wide.

"I will discover *miraculous* new uses for the shard. We will use it to travel to any world we please."

"I'm only interested in one," Garrosh said.

"Because you never see the big picture. You want *one* Horde, free of demonic taint. I want more. We can cultivate an infinite number of Hordes—"

Garrosh laughed.

Kairoz lowered his arms. His expression turned dangerous. "You doubt me?"

Garrosh met his gaze openly. "The hourglass was destroyed getting us here. I saw it broken on the floor of that pandaren temple." He raised the shard. "You might be able to perform a few tricks with this, but don't pretend this is still the Vision of Time."

"Think it through, Hellscream." Kairoz's voice was light. "Because most of the hourglass is still in our Azeroth, this piece resonates with our timeway. Call it a glimpse... a *glint* of time. With a little work on my part—"

"We can go back." Garrosh felt his heart race and his skin tingle. Plans began to unfold within his mind. "Not just back to our Azeroth. It could take us back to *our time*."

"And that is just the beginning," Kairoz said. He turned around, gesturing toward the sun dipping low on the Nagrand horizon. "First Azeroth. Then other worlds. All of them. As many as we need." The bronze dragon began to laugh. "We will be limited by nothing. Not even time. The possibilities are infinite. *I will become infinite—*"

Three strides and Garrosh slammed the shard into Kairoz's back.

Laughter turned to shrieks. The jagged glass tore through flesh easily, not breaking even as it sliced through muscle and glanced off bone. Garrosh kept a firm grip on the shard's bronze sculpture with his manacled hands.

Power surged into the glass. Bronze scales appeared and disappeared on Kairoz's skin. He was trying to use the shard, trying to shift back into his dragon form. It wasn't working.

Garrosh shoved him over and followed him to the ground, dragging the sharp edge around Kairoz's shoulder until it met the collarbone and had to be pulled free. The shrieks grew louder. Weak orcish hands struck out, trying to push Garrosh away. He lowered his face to mere inches from the bronze dragon's eyes and buried the shard in his throat. Shrieks turned into gurgling.

Garrosh held the shard firm, ignoring the torrents of energy racing in and out of the glass, focusing instead on the total surprise in Kairoz's eyes.

"No more," Garrosh said. "No more puppeteers hiding in the shadows. No more slavers offering corrupted power. *No more of the likes of you.* The orcs will be free of *all* masters."

Garrosh twisted the shard and dragged it down into Kairoz's chest, stabbing again and again. Blood spilled onto the hilltop. Not orcish blood, not the blood of any creature that had ever walked on this world, but the land would drink it all the same.

Finally, he pulled the shard free and stood.

Kairoz convulsed on the ground. Garrosh watched, curious. He had never killed a bronze dragon before. The shard trembled in his grip, beating in time with the dragon's final heartbeats. Bronze mist, each mote thick as a grain of sand, wafted away from Kairoz. It was not dispersing like smoke but rather pulling together into a thin, rope-like vortex, twisting away into nothing, as though being drawn away from this world.

When the bronze mist was gone, the shard was quiet. Kairoz's eyes were wide open, and he breathed no more. Garrosh waited. He wanted to be sure. Minutes passed before he grunted and nodded.

"An easier end than you deserved."

He left the body where it lay. Any who happened upon it would simply see an orc who had angered someone he shouldn't have.

And wasn't that close to the truth? Garrosh smiled.

He found a small creek nearby and washed the blood off of himself and the shard. His wrists were still manacled and had been rubbed raw. There was nothing to be done about it now. The key was worlds away.

How to proceed? Elaborate ideas rose and fell quickly. Kairoz had been right: subtlety was not Garrosh's strength. Approach too slyly, show too much manipulation, and his father would cut his head off. Grommash Hellscream was not a fool.

Was he?

Fear trickled into Garrosh's belly. He had been so young. He barely remembered his father. *What if he's not the orc I expect?* Grommash Hellscream had been deceived, tricked into becoming a slave to demons. He had redeemed himself at the end, proving his strong heart, but he had not been infallible.

Garrosh had been chewing over the problem for days and still didn't know the answer. *How do you convince one of the strongest orcs in existence that he is weak?*

The last rays of sunlight disappeared. Garrosh sat quietly by the creek. Perhaps he should wait. It would take hours to reach the Warsong encampment on foot, and the manacles and the shard would mark him as someone who did not belong. Tomorrow, or the day after tomorrow, might prove safer than arriving in the middle of the night.

No, he decided. No more waiting. He wrapped the shard in Kairoz's sash and tucked it in his waistband. Grommash would recognize the strength in Garrosh's heart... or he would not.

Garrosh began walking. By sunrise he would learn whether he would live at his father's side or die at his hand.

"Lok-tar ogar," he whispered.

Part Two

"Hellscream."

... I am done...

"Chief Hellscream?"

... end it...

Grommash Hellscream opened his eyes. His tent was empty, as it always was, yet his arm was outstretched across his animal-skin bedding, trying to embrace someone who would never lie there again. As it always was.

From outside his tent, once more, "Chief Hellscream?"

He grunted and relaxed. That voice had spoken outside of his dreams after all. "Enter," he said.

A Warsong armorer stepped inside. "Chieftain, the raider Riglo has insulted me. We wish to prove ourselves in mak'rogahn."

Grommash blinked the sleep out of his eyes. "You both fought last night," he said.

"Against others. But he has questioned my honor, and I will prove him wrong. No longer shall he speak of..."

On and on. Minutes passed.

Grommash rubbed his forehead and finally interrupted. "Fine. You may fight. When the sun sets—" He looked through the parted tent flaps. Night had already fallen. He had slept through the day. "No, prepare yourselves now. Wait until I arrive to begin."

"Yes, Chief Hellscream." The armorer left.

This is the problem with peace, Grommash mused. Plenty of his Warsong had not been born into the clan. They had flocked to Hellscream's banner in search of war and

glory, and for a time, they found both. Now their enemies were defeated. Even rival orc clans were slow to make war upon one another, thanks to Gul'dan and his warnings of an external threat. Until the clans decided how to combat that threat, there was nothing to fight. Some found it difficult to fill the time.

Mak'Rogahn. It was never meant to settle petty insults. Grommash let out a long breath and rose, buckling on his gauntlets.

"Fools," he whispered, and immediately regretted it. They were not fools. No more than he. He understood the quiet chaos of peace, the way the past could press down on an idle mind. Regrets could sicken a warrior's will, if left to fester too long. *Regrets are a weakness*, Grommash reminded himself. There was no room in the Warsong for weakness, not even in its clan chieftain. The pleasures of even a meaningless fight would clear his head.

... give me the warrior's death I deserve...

Gorehowl, the axe of the Hellscream lineage, lay next to his bedding. It had not drunk anyone's blood in far too long, and it was unlikely to do so tonight. Hellscream snatched it up anyway and stalked through the camp to the fight pit. A crowd had already gathered—not the entirety of the clan, of course. Only a tenth of a tenth of their number had yet returned from the season's hunting, and only some would care for what happened in the pit. Still, there were enough to surround the ledge and block his view until he reached the chieftain's seat. The armorer and the wolf master were down on the pit floor, ready to fight. They saluted him.

The crowd fell silent. "Normally there are words to say, but you've heard them all before," Hellscream said, allowing a bit of an edge to creep into his voice. "Only those with a true will of iron may call themselves Warsong—"

... don't you see it's too late?...

Hellscream's voice shifted into a growl. "But you've proven your worth before. Prove it again. Begin!"

The two orcs leapt at each other, striking and grabbing and twisting and tearing.

The crowd roared and clattered their weapons together, loud enough to drown out that other voice, the one heard only by the chieftain, crying out from his memories.

Grommash sat and folded his arms, setting his axe across his lap. A few minutes later, the wolf master put his fist onto the armorer's temple, hard, and the fight was over. The victor strutted around the pit, basking in his clan's adulation. The other lay unconscious.

All in all, quite ordinary. But they had lived up to the Warsong standard. "A good fight. No surrender. Honor to the wolf master for victory, and honor to the armorer for the will to fight to the end," Grommash said. "Drink your fill tonight. You both have proven you have a Warsong's heart." *For the eighth time in two weeks, I suspect.*

Two orcs lifted the armorer free of the pit and lightly slapped his face until he woke up, groggy but in good humor. No broken limbs to mend, not this time.

The crowd milled about, eager for another bout. Grommash agreed. One fight was never enough to quiet the past.

Grommash raised a fist, and the crowd turned to face him. "Who else?" he asked. "Who else will show me a Warsong's heart tonight?"

Several in the crowd raised both fists, bellowing for Grommash's attention. One orc shouldered his way through the crowd and jumped down into the pit. "I will!" he shouted.

Grommash smiled. *The others ask. He acts.* The chieftain couldn't immediately recall the orc's name, and the few torches around the fight pit didn't illuminate him properly. Grommash squinted, searching his face. Strange. There was a familiar shape to him, but the name simply wouldn't come.

Uneasy whispers rippled through the crowd.

"Who is he?"

Nobody knew. The murmurs spread.

Something was wrong. Grommash leaned forward and stared. *Many* things were wrong. Manacles linked the strange orc's wrists together. His garments were nothing like what Grommash had ever seen, not in cloth or in cut. The dark shadow covering his jaw wasn't a short-shorn beard but a tattoo, a *chieftain's* tattoo, elaborate beyond belief.

The crowd shifted uneasily. Soon silence fell over the Warsong, and those with weapons at hand grasped them firmly. The orc stood tall and proud in the pit, a slight smile on his face, enjoying their confusion.

Grommash lowered his hand to Gorehowl's shaft. He had learned to trust his inner voice, and right now it was shouting that this orc was dangerous, an outsider, one who did not belong here. An assassin? If so, he was a bold one, or a stupid one, to step into a pit surrounded by armed Warsong with his hands chained together.

An anticipation of violence fell over Grommash's mind. It had been too long since his axe had a drink.

Yet that same inner voice... it piqued his curiosity. *Why does he look so familiar?* "You claim to possess a Warsong's heart?" Grommash asked.

"I do," the orc said in a strong voice, speaking to the crowd as much as to Grommash.

"Tell us your name."

The orc lifted his chin. "I come to you as a stranger and nothing more."

Grommash studied him quietly for a moment. "You have no clan, stranger? No heritage? No name taken from tales of your astonishing battlefield victories?" He let a little contempt show, and tense laughter floated about the crowd.

"Tales are words, and words are wind," the stranger said. "Only deeds prove what's in the heart."

"But even a short tale or two can answer certain questions." Grommash gestured toward the stranger's manacles. "Which clan did you anger to earn those? And when did you escape? Is there an army of pursuers at your back, stranger, preparing to fall upon my camp?" He turned his gaze toward the crowd and made no attempt to hide his anger. "And how did he get into my camp in the first place? *Who among you was responsible for watching the night but instead chose to watch the pits? Show yourself!*" His full-throated roar echoed across the rows of Warsong tents. The crowd's laughter vanished.

Four orcs shuffled slowly to the edge of the pit, the soft sounds of their movement deafening in the silence. Their faces were pinched with worry, but they held their heads high and identified themselves by name. Grommash let them stand there, waiting, until beads of sweat formed on their brows.

"The heart of a Warsong means nothing if you have the brains of an ogre," he said in a soft voice. "You allowed this one to enter our midst. It is only fair that you share this stranger's fate, whatever it may be. Do you agree?"

They murmured, "Yes, Chief Hellscream."

Grommash kept his voice low. "Then join him." They hesitated but jumped down into the pit without protest. The stranger stepped back, giving them room. They shot hateful glances at him. He returned the looks without blinking.

"Stranger. You claim no clan?" Grommash asked.

"As I said, my heart is Warsong. But I have no clan," he said.

Grommash rubbed his chin. "Does that explain the markings? You have no clan; therefore, you are your own chieftain?"

Laughter traveled through the crowd again. The stranger didn't smile. "It is a mark from a different time. A scar. Nothing more."

"My Warsong do not answer my questions with riddles and evasion, stranger, and you are not skilled enough at either to impress me," Grommash snapped. "Answer me plain. Why are you here?"

The stranger smiled. "You are the second person to tell me that today." He lowered his head for a moment and gathered his thoughts. When he raised his eyes, the smile was gone. In its place was absolute conviction. "Grommash Hellscream, I have traveled far and sacrificed much to stand in front of you. I am here to defy what fate has dictated for you and all orcs."

"Which is?"

"Slavery. The loss of our souls and everything that makes us great," the stranger said with finality.

The crowd of Warsong looked at Grommash, seeking his reaction. He didn't make them wait long.

He laughed. Loudly. Explosively. The tension broke, and all the Warsong roared with him. Even the orcs in the pit joined in. Only the stranger remained impassive. *I actually believed him dangerous*, Grommash thought ruefully. When the wave of amusement passed, Grommash stood up, Gorehowl held loosely in his grasp.

"Some might want you dead for those words, stranger. Myself, I find no honor in killing lunatics," Grommash said. To the chastened orcs in the pit, he said, "Take him to the blacksmith's tent. Get his chains off, give him a meal and a skin of water, and escort him away. You won't be punished further." The four orcs relaxed. "Perhaps you are not fully to blame. If you had seen him, you might have killed him, and the spirits protect fools. Send him off and take the lesson to heart. No more lapses."

The four orcs in the pit closed in on the stranger. "You think I'm lying?" he said, stepping back.

"No," Grommash said gently, "I think your mind has been harmed. The Warsong do not surrender. For us, slavery is the *one* fate we know we will never face. Even in defeat, even when captured, we resist until we die."

One of the guards in the pit grabbed the stranger's arm. The manacled orc set his feet, clasped both hands together, and swung. His fists met the guard's jaw, throwing him back. The others moved in hard.

"*Stop!*" Grommash bellowed. They halted. "Stranger, you test my patience. Warsong mercy does not extend far, even for fools."

The stranger refused to back down. "The path to the Warsongs' slavery will not come from war or defeat. Your fate will be accepted freely and gladly," he said, raising his voice, "and it will be *you*, Grommash Hellscream, who will insist on being first to tie yourself to the orcs' new masters. The rest will follow. We will never recover."

Dead silence greeted his words. Only the slight rustling of the breeze on the Warsong's tents and the crackling of the lit torches around the pit offered any sound at all.

Grommash's last traces of pity were long gone. "Your prophecies are absurd. And now you have insulted my honor." His eyes hardened. "But as you said, words are wind. Only deeds matter. Have you heard of mak'rogahn, stranger?"

The manacled orc tilted his head and moved his mouth, sounding out the words. *Duel of will*. "I know of mak'gora. I know it very well. Is this much different?" he said.

"Mak'Gora is a fight to the death," Grommash said. "Mak'Rogahn is how the Warsong prove their worth. They enter the pit and fight, only stopping when their bodies fail. There is no surrender. No mercy. Only a pure display of the will to survive any hardship and endure all pain. Those who give up are exiled. *That* is how you can prove you have a Warsong's heart. Our clan will never tolerate weakness again."

"Again?" the stranger asked.

... give me the warrior's death I deserve...

Grommash ruthlessly squashed the memory. "If your words are true, fight. Show us your honor."

The stranger considered his restrained hands for a moment. "I accept."

"Excellent. Mak'Rogahn is not meant to be a fight to the death, but accidents happen," Grommash said. "You have insulted not only me but all Warsong. Perhaps you four in the pit would like the chance to defend our honor."

"*We accept!*" they roared back without hesitation. The stranger's eyes widened slightly.

"Begin," Grommash said mildly, sitting back in his seat.

They did.

Part Three

The four Warsong orcs hurled themselves at Garrosh, tackling him. He landed hard on his back, snarling and covering his face with his chained hands. Fists and feet rained down on him. The crowd bellowed approval.

Accidents happen, his father had said. Clearly an accident was meant to happen now. The glass shard was tucked into the rear of Garrosh's waistband, wrapped in cloth yet digging painfully into his skin. It was tempting to bring it out... no. *No*. That would gain him nothing. Revealing a hidden weapon was dishonorable and would only guarantee his death.

That old, familiar bloodlust sank into his mind, but he resisted the urge to go berserk. Four against one—this was not a matter of raw strength. He rocked from side to side, trying to take each blow on muscle instead of bone. It worked, but even so, pain soon radiated across his body.

Still, no ribs had cracked yet. No blows had landed hard on his jaw or temple.

His attackers had given themselves over to fury. Each punch and kick was delivered like a killing blow. They were wasting strength.

Garrosh kept moving, kept kicking out, kept fighting, kept avoiding the hits that would leave him injured and helpless.

He had come too far to die now.

One of the Warsongs was targeting his head with kicks, settling into a rhythm. *Bam. Bam. Bam.* Predictable. Garrosh reached out. The chain between his wrists wrapped around the orc's ankle.

Garrosh smiled.

* * *

Grommash shook his head and turned to one of the Warsong warriors standing to his left. "When this is done, dispose of him quickly. He may be insane, but perhaps he was important to someone. Let's avoid a blood feud over this fool, if we can," Grommash said.

The warrior laughed. "At least this one knows how to die," he observed.

"Yes, he does." Grommash couldn't see beyond the blur of attacks raining down in the pit, but he caught glimpses of the stranger, still moving and fighting from flat on his back, refusing to give up. "He took my instructions to heart." *Too bad.*

One of the four Warsong in the pit suddenly jumped back, roaring with pain. His left foot was dangling at an unnatural angle. Grommash and others laughed. *Kicked so hard he hurt himself.* The injured orc gnashed his teeth and dove back in, snarling, dropping fists onto the stranger's head. A moment later, there was another shout of pain, and the same orc scrambled backward, left wrist crushed and broken.

Some of the crowd went silent. So did Grommash. He had seen what they had seen: the stranger had used his chain as a weapon.

And that was only the beginning. A kick connected with another Warsong orc's knee, shattering it. Another kick caught a third orc between the legs, dropping him to the ground. In moments, the stranger had crippled or stunned three opponents.

The cheering around the pit died quickly.

The final Warsong orc growled and stepped back, out of kicking range, allowing the stranger to scramble to his feet, breathing deeply but steadily. He beckoned his last Warsong opponent. They charged each other.

Grommash didn't blink. What he was seeing, he couldn't believe. No fear. No hesitation. Violence incarnate. Bloodlust channeled into pure power. A mind solely devoted to victory, letting nothing distract him.

That is how I fight, Hellscream thought.

The Warsong orc struck the stranger in the stomach once, twice, three times, then seized him around the throat. The stranger clasped both hands together and raised them like a hammer, catching him under the chin. The last orc's jaw snapped shut with a sickening crunch. Two teeth flew free. He fell over, eyes rolling into the back of his head.

It was done.

The three injured Warsong were starting to rise, crawling toward the stranger, refusing to give up, though they were obviously beaten. Mak'Rogahn demanded it. As long as they could fight, they must fight.

The stranger stepped back from their reach. "Have I proven my Warsong heart, Hellscream? Have they?" he asked. "Or do I need to kill them?"

Grommash didn't answer. He was watching. Listening. The bystanders were muttering, "He fights... he fights like Hellscream..."

The orc with the shattered knee forced himself to his hands and knees and shuffled toward the stranger, each motion bringing a gasp of pain. The stranger stepped back again, to the edge of the pit. "Chief Hellscream, I did not come to kill your Warsongs. I came to save them," he said.

"Enough," Grommash said. "The fight is over." The injured Warsong collapsed.

Hellscream stepped down into the pit, Gorehowl in his grasp. The stranger stood motionless. The clan held its breath.

Grommash stepped to within a single pace of the stranger and studied him closely. The face tattoo, the scars, the fierce eyes, the oddly familiar features. The fighting style. The manacles, emblazoned with an insignia of an animal Grommash had never seen. "What is this?" he asked quietly.

"It is Xuen, the White Tiger, the sigil of the Shado-pan," the stranger answered.

"Who?"

"I have come a long way, Hellscream." The stranger spoke softly. There was desperation in his eyes but no madness. "My path is now unimportant. Yours is all that matters, and that is why I am here."

The whispers from the crowd still drifted into the pit. "He fights like Hellscream."

Grommash raised Gorehowl above his head and brought it down. It shrieked through the air.

Clang.

The stranger's hands dropped to his sides, the chain between his manacles broken.

"I don't believe I've ever met an orc like you," Grommash said. "Come. We will talk. But know this," he added, laying the edge of Gorehowl against the stranger's neck. "If you waste my time, if you intend to harm my clan, I will take your head."

The stranger didn't flinch, didn't blink. "If my words waste your time, I won't object. If I fail here, my life means nothing."

"Very well." Grommash stepped out of the pit and walked back to his tent. The stranger followed.

Part Four

Grommash lit a small torch inside his tent and sat on the ground, gesturing for Garrosh to do the same. The dim, flickering light played over the thick animal-skin walls rippling in the night's breeze, a chill swirling through the tent.

Garrosh lowered himself to the ground slowly. The pain from the fight would likely last for days, but he felt no sign of serious injury. "I had an advantage in the pit," he said. His voice was calm, betraying nothing.

"Tell me," Grommash said.

"Surprise." Garrosh rested his hands on his knees. "They thought I was finished the moment I fell over."

The clan chief grunted. "You taught them something they already should have learned: your enemy is not dead until he is dead."

"A lesson you've shared with your foes, I understand," Garrosh said. *Grommash Hellscream... the orc with the will of iron... my father.* It was an effort to keep from smiling. "I am curious. Mak'Rogahn. I am not aware of any other clan that practices that."

"How much do you know about me, stranger?"

"Some," was Garrosh's cautious reply.

To Grommash's left lay a wineskin. He offered it to Garrosh, who refused. The chieftain took a long pull before speaking. "The Warsong once suffered through hard times. An ogre raid nearly wiped us out."

Garrosh knew this story. The death of his mother, the rebirth of the Warsong clan, the beginning of Hellscream's legend. "That's when you lost your mate, yes? A hard thing, to see family die in battle."

"We will not speak of her." Grommash's voice was iron.

His anger was startling. Garrosh hesitated. "I had heard Golka died fighting, taking down several ogres personally before she fell," he said.

"My clan showed weakness that day. They stayed behind," Grommash growled. "I had to show the Warsong how to face death. With blood on your hands and your enemy's throat between your teeth!" He hurled the empty skin across the tent. "Mak'Rogahn culls the shame of that day from my clan. Any who wish to call themselves Warsong must pass through that trial."

Garrosh didn't know what to say. There was clearly more to this story than he had heard as a child. "But your mate, she—"

"I said we will not speak of her."

What am I missing? thought Garrosh. An honorable death should be celebrated, even if the warrior had fallen in a lost battle. *Unless...*

Memories of Garrosh's youth rushed back to him. Day after day, filled with guilt and shame, bearing a name he had thought cursed. *We are not so different. Not so different at all.*

"I understand how you feel." Garrosh chose his words carefully. "My father died with his axe buried in his enemy's chest. A good death. But the path that led him there was paved with dishonor and was born from a single wrong decision. For too long I lived with rage toward him. It was wasted anger. Your mate's death and your clan's moment of weakness may still cause you pain, but the son she gave you—"

"My son? She never gave me a son."

Grommash was staring into Garrosh's eyes, weighing him, judging him. Garrosh did not even allow himself to blink. "I did not know that," was all he said.

Kairoz. Garrosh felt a cheek muscle jump. *Counting blades of grass.* He took a moment to relish the memory of carving out the dragon's middle, feeling Kairoz's hot blood flow over his hands. It calmed him. Deep breaths. *I was never born on this world.*

Grommash was never a father. Is this what the bronze dragon meant by "the perfect timeway"?

Garrosh readied his wits. *It is time to tell him why I'm here.* "But I will ask you, Chief Hellscream..."

* * *

"... if you could go back and save her, wouldn't you?" the stranger asked. "I would. My father had an honorable heart. He was misled. He deserved a better legacy. Perhaps Golka deserves one too."

... don't you see it's too late? End it!

Legacy. Grommash's scowl deepened. "Words are wind. Unless you *can* take me back, I am through speaking of her," he said. *Golka*. He hadn't allowed himself to speak her name for a long time. How had the stranger known it?

The other orc reached behind his back. "I cannot help you go back, but I can help you look forward." He withdrew a cloth bundle, unwrapping it. A glass shard with jagged edges lay within. He set it down between them. "This is how you will avoid making your own unforgiveable mistake."

Grommash didn't touch it. "You were carrying this the entire time?"

"Yes, Chief Hellscream."

It had an edge that could kill, if wielded by a motivated orc. *And you didn't use it even when four orcs were trying to kick the life out of you?* Few would have had such restraint. "What is it?"

The stranger smiled. "A friend called it a... glint of time. He thought its edges were too sharp, so now I have it." He rapped a knuckle on the shard. The sound was almost musical. "This will prove my words."

"Then speak."

"Let me describe something. Weapons." The stranger's eyes gleamed.

Grommash listened. The stranger spoke of magical energy concentrated into an explosive moment, a "mana bomb." Skilled creatures of power called "sorcerers" could hone and refine it until it had the potential to wipe out an entire clan in an instant.

"Such a weapon exists," the stranger said.

He continued, describing armaments beyond belief. Devices of metal and fire that could blast apart solid rock, spinning blades large enough to shred enemies with the slightest touch, siege weapons that could be used by land or by sea. "Such weapons exist."

"I've never seen them," Grommash said.

"Not yet," the stranger said, "but I can teach you how to build them, how to use them, how enemies might counter them. But the Warsongs cannot build them alone. You will need other clans, their resources and skills."

Grommash's eyes narrowed. "Then I'd rather not have them. Why would I ever want to give the other clans the means to wipe out my people in a single, treacherous attack?" *Joining Warsong to other clans can only end badly for us all.* He gestured beyond the tent walls. "We have the most fertile parts of Nagrand, and with them, enough food, shelter, and hunting to last for years. No clan has the spine to challenge us. They know they would pay dearly."

"So that is how the Warsongs live now? Complacent and satisfied with what they have? Wanting nothing more?" The stranger's mouth twitched into a shadow of a smile.

The words bit deep, yet Grommash felt no anger. The glut of mak'rogahn matches proved that his people were anything but satisfied. Odd that the stranger had such insight. "*Wanting more* is a long, long road from needing your impossible weapons."

... give me the warrior's death I deserve...

Grommash ruthlessly shoved her voice away. Why did the stranger keep bringing her to mind? Her memory only reminded him of his clan's shame, yet it wouldn't stay buried.

"True. But you needn't fear the other clans. They won't turn against you, Hellscream." The torch's light shimmered in the stranger's eyes. "You would use these weapons against a common foe."

"Who?" The answer was immediately obvious, and he laughed. "*The draenei*? Are you one of Gul'dan's disciples? He speaks of such things." Gul'dan had made quiet inquiries to Hellscream, and almost certainly to the other clan chieftains, suggesting he had found a new source of power that eclipsed the shamanic arts. This power, Gul'dan claimed, might prove critical in defeating the draenei. Grommash wasn't yet convinced those blue-skinned creatures were dangerous, but Gul'dan's visions were certainly unsettling. "Is that his secret power, stranger? Are you building these weapons on his behalf?"

"No, Chief Hellscream. I have never met Gul'dan..."

* * *

"... but my weapons will stop him," Garrosh said harshly.

The flames on the torch popped and crackled. No other sound rang through the tent save the soft rustle of the walls in the breeze. Garrosh could see suspicion in his father's gaze. Not suspicion of Gul'dan. Of Garrosh.

"Stop Gul'dan. From what?"

"Convincing you and every other orc to become slaves," Garrosh said. "Gul'dan will start a war the orcs cannot win alone. He will bring the clans together and offer them a gift, one that would guarantee victory. On that day—"

Grommash interrupted. "What gift?"

It was dangerous to speak over any clan chief, but Garrosh pressed on. His anger at Gul'dan spilled into his words. "*On that day*, Chief Hellscream, you will be the first to accept this gift, not because you are weak but because you would not let any other orc take such a risk first." Garrosh's eyes twitched, and his voice barely rose above a whisper. "This gift will cost you everything. Your thoughts, your mind, your will... all playthings of your new, unseen masters. My father was deceived in such a way. I am here to make sure you are not."

One of his father's brows rose. "If what you say is true," he said, though it was clear Grommash didn't believe it yet, "then there is no need for your new weapons. The old ones are capable of carving out Gul'dan's heart. An easy end."

Easier than the traitor deserves. "Gul'dan is a puppet. Kill him, and his masters will find another vassal, perhaps generations from now, when I and you and all others who remember him are gone," Garrosh said. "They have long memories, and they are patient when they need to be. No. We will not give them the chance to regroup. We will bait them, expose them, and crush them."

Grommash let out a long breath. "You speak of impossible dangers, stranger. I'm destined to be tricked by an enemy I've never known, who offers me a power I cannot imagine, and the way to avoid this fate is to use weapons I've never seen?" He shook his head. "Words are wind. How do you plan to prove this to me? The shard?" He nodded down at the odd, curved piece of glass resting between them.

Garrosh nodded. "Yes, Chief Hellscream."

"How?"

Garrosh had wondered that himself. In truth, all he had was a guess. But it was a good guess. Growing up in the ruined, shattered Draenor, he had visited a sacred place often, begging the spirits for answers and guidance. They had not answered him for years.

Then Thrall had arrived, and the spirits had shown Garrosh how his father had redeemed himself. That moment had set him on a new path.

"I would like to take the shard to the Stones of Prophecy," Garrosh said. "My own fate was changed by the spirits of Nagrand. I believe yours will be, too."

* * *

Grommash scratched his chin. The Stones of Prophecy.

Many shaman from different clans had made pilgrimages to those standing stones, yet few received answers from the spirits who dwelled there. *Only those with thunder in their hearts receive guidance through the storms of fate*, went the old saying. Grommash had met the wise elder shaman who watched over the site, but he had never bothered to visit the place himself. He was no Bleeding Hollow chieftain who needed to mutilate himself to catch a glimpse of his destiny. He preferred to believe his fate was in his own hands.

Yet this stranger claimed the spirits had guided him. *Interesting*. "You are a shaman?" Grommash asked.

"No."

"You can commune with the elements?" he pressed.

"No, Chief Hellscream, but I believe they will aid you," the stranger said.

"Why?"

"The destiny of all who live on this world rests on your shoulders. Not just the orcs'. The elements will respond to our need."

"And if they don't?" Grommash asked.

The stranger didn't hesitate. "Take my head. I will have no further need of it."

Grommash slowly lifted Gorehowl and placed its edge on the stranger's neck again. The other orc's eyes met his, unblinking. "That is a very dangerous price to offer, stranger," Grommash said.

"*Lok-tar ogar*. If there is no convincing you, I have failed."

Grommash lowered his axe and slipped deep into thought. The stranger was a walking mystery. A whirlwind of questions spun through Grommash's mind, yet he voiced none of them. Questions could come later.

What was truly important?

Destiny? Slavery? Honor? Will?

Weakness.

... don't you see it's too late? End it!

Grommash closed his eyes. Weakness. That was the key. This stranger, the one strong enough to overcome four Warsong warriors while bound, the one who fought as though he had a Hellscream's heart, was warning Grommash about *weakness*, and he claimed he could prove it. He was wagering his life on it.

He could tolerate this stranger a little while longer to know the truth. The Warsong must never be weak again.

The heart of a Warsong means nothing if you have the brains of an ogre, Grommash had said earlier. Grommash had learned that lesson the hard way. He had been so bent on proving his will that he had run blindly into a fight he could not win. An unseen enemy had been waiting for—no, had been *counting* on—his recklessness.

... I am done...

Grommash opened his eyes and smiled. "We will walk together to the Stones of Prophecy, stranger, and I will hold you to your promise," he said.

The other orc looked gratified. "I'm glad."

The clan chief eyed the stranger's bumps and bruises. "Do you have the strength to keep up?"

"Yes."

Grommash rose to his feet. He glanced out of the tent flaps and saw the first light of dawn creeping above the horizon. "The stones are not terribly far away, and we have much to talk about. If this danger is real, how could I possibly convince the other clans? I am not beloved by many outside the Warsong, stranger."

The other orc stood as well. "But you command their respect, and you will have things to offer them. Spoils of war beyond imagining..."

They stepped together into the shifting hues of the morning's light, a smile tugging the corners of the stranger's lips.

Part Five

The spirits at the Stones of Prophecy had been unsettled for days.

For an evening and a morning, they had panicked. *Fate is twisted. Someone has come. Events are already changing.* The chatter had since dwindled to confused, scattered murmurs.

Elder Zhanak had seen worse. In his decades of watching over the stones, he had grown to understand that the elements were not peaceful but energetic, not passive but adaptive. Sometimes they grew angry. Sometimes they grew fearful. Sometimes they wanted to talk. Not today. Not to Zhanak, certainly not to any pilgrims. He accepted it—what else could he do?—and sat in the shade, meditating, glimpsing an occasional fragment of the elements' unease.

Twisted and turned. Does not belong here. Who is he? Who is he?

Such talk did not frighten him. Fate was a delicate thing. Sometimes the spirits would deign to provide a glimpse of what might be—*might* be—or what had come before, but they could not plot out the footsteps of any orc, even if they wanted to. The elements could only speak of what they knew, and they did not know everything.

A whisper guided him back to the world. "Elder Zhanak." It was one of the shaman apprentices. "Pilgrims are arriving."

Zhanak didn't bother opening his eyes. His sight had been declining for three decades, and anything farther than two arms' length was a mere smudge of light and shadow. But when the elements were your ally, waning senses were not so crippling. "Three of them, yes?"

"Four."

Zhanak frowned. The spirits were aware of only *three* orcs approaching. "You're certain?"

"One is Chief Grommash Hellscream. He has two Warsong guards. I do not recognize the fourth," the apprentice said.

"I see." Zhanak raised a gnarled hand. "Please, help me up." The apprentice carefully pulled him to his feet. Weak knees trembled for a moment but held. The shaman nodded, satisfied. His walking stick would keep him upright for long enough. "You should step away, young one."

"No."

"I am not asking," Zhanak said gently. "Hellscream and I understand each other, but today will be a little different, I think. He may not be pleased when I tell him to leave. I have nothing to fear from him. He could take my head, but what would he truly steal but the little time I have left? He would take much more from you. Go." The apprentice hesitated but finally stepped away.

Zhanak stood alone and waited for the Warsongs—and their strange guest—to arrive. He began to listen closely, very closely indeed, as the spirits' murmurs grew louder and louder.

It is he. He is here. He is here. HE IS HERE.

The spirits were panicking again. Zhanak's hands tightened on his walking stick. *Fate is a delicate thing*, he thought grimly. *Let's see if we can protect it today.*

* * *

"The Blackrock clan is not so welcoming, stranger," said Grommash Hellscream. He stepped around a small rock in the middle of the path. Two Warsong guards trailed behind him by a few respectful paces. "Neither is the Shattered Hand clan. They will want more than trinkets and promises."

"Once they are convinced that another world is for the taking, they will only want a greater share of the spoils. You won't have to give up Nagrand," Garrosh said. "There is a place called Ironforge—the Blackrocks will sacrifice much to claim it. The Shattered

Hand? Give them the land near a place called Sen'jin Village. I will even help them take it." *And I will enjoy it.*

Garrosh kept his glee hidden. His father was seriously considering his words. Already Grommash was contemplating ways to shepherd a united orc people, a Horde. *I suppose I should thank you, Kairoz,* Garrosh thought. "And if that is not enough for the moment," he added, "tell them about the marvels we'll plunder from the draenei."

"You said they were not the threat Gul'dan claims," Grommash said.

"They aren't, but they will stand in the way eventually. Better to deal with them sooner than later. You will see," Garrosh said.

Grommash didn't look convinced. "Perhaps." He fell silent as they finally topped the last rise. The Stones of Prophecy were only a short distance away.

An orc was waiting for them, standing next to a nearby tree. "Elder Zhanak," the clan chief called, "it is good to see you again."

The old orc, his hands twisted and gnarled with age, leaned heavily on a stick. "It has been too many seasons since I've seen you last, Chief Hellscream, but words of your conquests have reached my ears. You've brought much honor to the Warsongs," he said with warmth and respect.

Garrosh stepped forward. *If my father is friends with him, I should be, too.* "Greetings, elder. I have journeyed a long way and—"

The elder cut him off. "I know." The warmth was gone. "What is your name?"

"I come as a stranger and nothing more."

"*What is your name, outsider?*" The venom in Zhanak's voice left Garrosh speechless. The elder raised a crooked finger and said, "You do not belong here. The spirits *loathe* your presence. You bring chaos to this world merely by existing."

Garrosh glanced at his father and saw a veil of doubt drop over his eyes. *This old shaman could ruin everything.* "I am indeed from a land far away, but—"

"I can smell your lies before you speak, outsider." The shaman was actually hissing with fury. He took slow, deliberate steps forward, staring directly into Garrosh's face, veins standing out against his wrinkled skin. "Fate itself *retches*. You intend to topple everything about this world."

An oppressive presence seemed to weigh down on Garrosh's mind. The spirits really *did* loathe him. *If you knew what I gladly did to your brethren in Durotar, you would strike me down on the spot.* He reached behind his back for the shard, quickly unwrapping it. "This will prove—"

The shaman slapped it out of Garrosh's grip. "I do not care for your vile tricks," Zhanak said, voice rising. He had cut his hand badly on the shard's jagged edges but did not seem to notice his blood dripping to the ground. "Chief Hellscream, it will save you untold pain and heartache to kill this obscenity without delay. His every step will lead to the deaths of countless innocents. Watch. He will deny it."

"I deny nothing," Garrosh snarled. He pointed toward the shard, lying in the grass. "I *will* topple everything. I must. That will show you why."

"From his own mouth, he condemns himself," Zhanak said softly. "Kill him. Kill him now."

"Do you believe there could be a fate worse than death, elder?" Garrosh struggled to keep a respectful tone. The slightest sign of contempt might turn his father against him. "I do not bring peace. I bring war. Chaos. Death. Each of us could die in agony a thousand times over, and it would be a fair price to avoid what fate has decreed for all orcs."

"Elder Zhanak," Grommash said, "this stranger claims that all orcs will soon fall into enslavement."

"What must be, must be," Zhanak said.

With that one statement, Garrosh knew he had an opening. "No. I will not sit idle and wait for oblivion." Garrosh turned to Grommash, imploring. "Neither will you. I know it."

"Zhanak," Grommash said, "I must see for myself. If he has found... weakness... within our people, it must be corrected."

Zhanak shook his head. "The spirits will not speak with you today."

"I have the right to ask."

"But he doesn't," Zhanak pointed at Garrosh again. "Insist on bringing him with you, and I will stand in your way. You will have to kill me."

Garrosh resisted the urge to break the elder's finger off. *I will enjoy your death, you senile halfwit*, he thought. "I will stay here with the elder, Chief Hellscream. Take the shard. Speak with the spirits. This is too important to delay."

Grommash stood silent for a long moment, weighing Garrosh with his gaze. "Elder Zhanak, I must do this. I must know for certain."

Zhanak's expression screwed up into a grimace, as though he tasted something foul. "Very well. Get it over with."

Grommash carefully picked up the glass shard. "You, stay here," he said to the male Warsong guard. To the female, he said, "Accompany me." They walked down the path toward the standing stones.

Garrosh said not a word. He kept his eyes on his father, ignoring the poisonous glare from the elder. The remaining Warsong guard was watching Garrosh closely.

"Should it go badly for you," the guard said, "don't run. It will be much, much easier for you if you accept your fate."

"It may go badly for me, but if I can't change his fate, it will go worse for you," Garrosh said, "and I have no intention of seeing it happen."

The guard grunted. Garrosh stared at the stones. A dead weight settled in his stomach.

It's out of my hands now.

* * *

Grommash stepped into the center of the stone ring after handing Gorehowl to his guard. "Do not disturb me, and do not lose that," he told her.

"Yes, Chief Hellscream."

The air was alive with power. Each of Grommash's movements seemed to disturb the spirits. Zhanak had not been lying—they *hated* the stranger. Perhaps that meant there was no hope at all to get any answers. *But the stranger will pay the price for that, not I*, Grommash thought grimly. It would be a shame to remove such a remarkable orc's head, but a promise was a promise.

Grommash held the glass shard flat in both palms and inspected it closely. There were tiny pinpricks of bronze light shimmering throughout the glass, like small grains of sand trapped within its mass. *A fascinating object.*

Perhaps there was some traditional way to greet the spirits. If so, Grommash didn't know it. He would be direct. If they didn't respond, so be it. "The stranger believes the fate of this world rests upon my choices," Grommash said, lifting the glass. "He also claims the proof lies within this. Prove him wrong and he will die here. Show me the truth, one way or the other."

The air swirled. Small motes of fire, droplets of water, and specks of rock were caught in a vortex of rushing wind bearing down on the shard.

Grommash didn't flinch as power filled the shard, even as a sharp light stung his eyes and a mist rose among the Stones of Prophecy, and suddenly Grommash was carried away—

* * *

In a blink of an eye, Grommash vanished. A solid wall of mist, like no fog Garrosh had ever seen—certainly not when Thrall had shown him a vision—filled the circle of standing stones. The guard at the edge of the stones leaned left and right, trying to spot the clan chief through the haze.

The guard near Garrosh tensed up. "If you've killed our chieftain, stranger, you will die next," he snapped.

Garrosh shook his head. "He's fine." His words belied the sudden fear that seized his heart. How would the spirits react upon glimpsing another world, another time? Would they panic? *Might* they kill Grommash? "This is all as I expected." *This has to work.* Confidence. He needed to show confidence.

Light suddenly shone within the mist.

Elder Zhanak cried out, "No!"

The other two orcs turned. The shaman had collapsed to the ground. "No!" he screamed again. "This must not be!" The guard knelt next to him, holding him by the shoulders as the old orc quivered and convulsed.

He's seeing what my father is seeing. That oppressive feeling of disgust and hatred lifted away. *So are the spirits.* And they were as horrified as elder Zhanak.

Garrosh turned back toward the Stones of Prophecy, and waited.

* * *

—days and weeks and months rushed past with each blink. Grommash stared in awe.

It was all true. Everything the stranger said was true.

A war the orcs could not win. The blue blood of the draenei and the dark crimson blood of orcs mingling together on the battlefield. The terrifying numbers of a united orc people, far beyond anything the Warsong could ever have mustered alone. *This is the*

Horde. Grommash could scarcely conceive of its power. The stranger had not even come close to describing its potential.

Time continued to whirl past. He saw the slow decay of the land as a new power—warlocks—was embraced. He saw orcish skin changing color, patches of green appearing even on those who never touched the corrupted energy.

He saw Gul'dan's "miracle," a gift of untold might from an unseen benefactor. And, yes... Grommash was the one who strode forward and drank the gift first.

But the stranger had been wrong. Grommash cared little for the danger to other orcs. He would be first because he would not ignore a single thought: *None will be stronger than I. Not for a moment. I will never be weak.*

Hellscream stared into the mist of prophecy and watched himself drink the glowing liquid and felt its effects as keenly as if he were there. He felt his body transform. He felt the tingling fury as his skin turned entirely green. He felt the power encompass all that he was.

"I feel... magnificent!" he shouted in the vision. *"Give me draenei flesh to tear and rip! Draenei blood on my face... I will drink it down until I can hold no more! Give me their blood!"*

It was magnificent.

And it was wrong. His thoughts were no longer his own. He could feel that, too.

The mist carried him forward.

* * *

The elder shaman cried out again. *"Must not be!"* He was quaking, flailing, his eyes squeezed closed. Spittle dripped from the corner of his lips.

The Warsong guard kept glancing toward the Stones of Prophecy. "Is he dying? Is Hellscream?" he asked.

Garrosh gestured down the road. "Go. I will stay here. If need be, pull Hellscream free of the mist."

The guard needed no further encouragement. He sprinted toward the stones. Garrosh knelt down next to Zhanak, feeling a strange sense of relief. "Do you understand?" he asked the elder. "This is why I traveled here. To stop *this*."

The shaman clutched his chest, fingers digging into the skin just above his heart as he writhed and muttered. The gash on his palm, where he had cut himself on the shard, left red streaks across his robe. "Not meant to be. Must not happen. Not meant to be. Must not happen." His breaths came shallow and quick. He opened his eyes. "Still hope. Redemption. *Redemption*."

"Yes," Garrosh said softly. "Redemption. That is why I'm here." He grasped one of the old orc's arms and felt the racing, fluttering heartbeat. Was he dying? Possibly. "I will give our people redemption."

Zhanak didn't seem to hear. "Hellscream has the heart. The heart to change it all."

"Yes," Garrosh agreed.

"The heart to resist. To fight. To unite all orcs. To lead."

Garrosh sat cross-legged and propped up the shaman's head on his lap. "Yes. All of those things and more." He gently patted the elder on the shoulder. *At least the old fool understands now.*

"Peace... we might see peace..."

Garrosh's hand went still.

* * *

Lok-tar ogar. Victory or death. The vision showed both. A victory against the draenei and then the death of this world as fel magic corrupted it all.

The elements themselves would be driven to ruin. Grommash could feel their dismay shaking the Stones of Prophecy. This vision was as surprising to them as it was to him.

Then came another magnificent idea from Gul'dan—invasion of a new world. Azeroth. The Horde charged through a portal, earning victories, destroying cities, slaughtering all who stood in their way.

The victories didn't last. When defeat came, it was total. The orcs who survived were rounded up and held captive in camps.

And they didn't fight back.

Even those who had been Warsong. *They didn't fight back.* Their corrupted power had vanished, leaving them listless.

Our souls. Our souls will be gone. Grommash wanted to weep.

* * *

Zhanak's eyes focused again on Garrosh's face. "You've seen. You know. A united people. Protecting one another. Glorious. Hellscream could lead his people there. He has the heart. Glorious..."

"That is the Horde, elder," Garrosh said.

"Hellscream can *bear it*. He can overcome it. The corruption will not be the end." Tears streamed down Zhanak's face. His voice was laced with joy and hope. "One world in ruins, but the other stronger than ever. Hellscream's sacrifice saves us all. You've seen it..."

The vision took him again and he began to tremble anew.

Garrosh glanced around. The two guards were pacing at the edge of the mist, clearly debating whether to interrupt the vision. Nobody else was in sight. If this shaman had caretakers or apprentices, they were not nearby.

"I have seen it, elder," Garrosh said. He reached down, pinching the old shaman's nostrils shut with one hand and pressing the other firmly across his lips. "And I will not see it again."

Muffled grunts escaped around Garrosh's fingers, yet the shaman could bring no air into his lungs. Zhanak's hands clawed at Garrosh.

"The ancestors will welcome you home," Garrosh murmured, staring straight ahead.

He waited for the muffled grunts and the squirming and the heartbeat to go quiet. They did. Still he kept his hands in place for a thirty count.

Then he gently laid the shaman down. "The ancestors *will* welcome you home," Garrosh said again, meaning it. The elder had commanded respect even from Grommash Hellscream. It was a shame he needed to die.

Garrosh strode down toward the Stones of Prophecy. Perhaps the elements would be enraged by what he had just done. Or perhaps they had not seen anything at all. The vision seemed to have enthralled them.

And that reminds me...

Gorehowl was in the arms of one of Grommash's guards. Garrosh smiled and reached for it.

* * *

Captivity. Horror. Death. Even the orcs outside the camps could barely scavenge an existence on this unfamiliar world. Even Grommash Hellscream, the orc with the iron will, the orc with the giant's heart, the fearsome leader of the Warsong... he fought a losing battle against lethargy and despair, living his life hiding from the orcs' conquerors, secretly longing for death.

His thoughts mirrored her voice. Golka's voice. He finally understood. She had not been weak. Not for a moment. How had he not seen that?

... give me the warrior's death I deserve...

"This cannot be!" Grommash howled. *"This must not be!"*

The elements echoed his emotions. *Must. Not. Be.* The demonic taint would nearly eradicate them as well. They would all suffer together.

This must not be. Ever. Grommash felt conviction sinking into his bones. Conviction and anger. *My clan will never fall to such depths. Any price to avoid this fate.*

Any.

The vision continued. A new orc, raised by humans, was forced to fight for their amusement. Strong though he was, he was humiliated and beaten constantly, even given the name *Thrall*. But soon he dreamed of escape, and—

"You fools, pull him out!"

The voice came from outside the vision. Grommash ignored it. What could be more important than this? He watched as the mist showed the young orc learning to read and—

"It killed the shaman! We have to stop this vision now!"

The handle of Gorehowl entered his eyesight—his *real* eyesight—and swung downward. Pain shot through Grommash's wrist. His hand opened by reflex, and the shard of glass that had channeled such horrifying visions fell to the ground. The mists vanished. The sights and sounds disappeared.

It was over.

Grommash fell to his knees, gasping.

"Chief Hellscream!" The stranger was kneeling at his side. He held Gorehowl. "Are you well?"

Grommash slowly regained his composure. Very slowly. He did not look up until his breathing had calmed. The air continued to swirl around them. The elements were distressed.

Finally, Grommash stood. "Give me that," he said, extending his hand. The stranger handed over Gorehowl. "Why did you interfere?"

The stranger pointed past the edge of the stones, toward the tree where the shaman was waiting. "The vision killed the elder, Hellscream," he said. "I never imagined it could be so dangerous. I feared it would kill you too."

"His heart could not bear to see what I saw." Grommash seized the stranger by the throat and hurled him backward against one of the stones. An instant later, Grommash placed Gorehowl against his neck. "What happened next?"

"What?" the stranger asked.

"I saw slavery and death. *That cannot be how it ended.*" The edge of Gorehowl pressed deep, just shy of breaking skin. "What happened to me? What happened to my clan?"

"You fought to the end, Hellscream. You and others." That sounded like an admission the stranger didn't want to make. "But it was too late. Our hearts had been ripped out. Do you see now? The price for Gul'dan's power is—"

"Everything," Grommash interrupted. His voice was hoarse. Slowly he pulled Gorehowl away. "It will cost us everything."

"Yes. But you saw something else, Hellscream."

Grommash's eyes were haunted. "What?"

"You saw the might of unity," the stranger said quietly. "All orcs marching under one banner. Imagine that with no masters. No corruption. *Imagine it.* A Horde with Warsong leadership. What limits would there be? What world could stand against us?"

Grommash turned away. His mind still reeled. "Weakness. I thought myself strong, and that would have led me to ruin." *Oh, Golka. I vow I will have your strength. If I fall, I will fall in battle... I will spill oceans of blood to avoid the fate the stranger has shown me. Even my own. I swear it.*

"Yes, Chief Hellscream," the stranger said. "But now you know what you face. There are enemies waiting to enslave us. Gul'dan's masters. Those on this other world. Who else but you could rise to such a challenge? Who else but you could be a father to all clans?"

Nobody. Nobody else. None but he could know the sheer horror of their fate. None but he would do anything to avoid it.

"This other world conquered us. They are strong. We must be stronger." Grommash felt his soul roar. *I will be stronger.* "We may fail, stranger, but if so, we will die trying, won't we?"

"*Lok-tar ogar,*" the stranger said.

The two Warsong guards repeated it softly. "*Lok-tar ogar.*"

Grommash lifted Gorehowl to eye level, inspecting his reflection in the polished metal. "We will never be slaves. Not on this world or any other." *Any price to avoid this fate,* he thought again. Grommash looked at his reflection and then over to the stranger. "You remind me of someone."

"Who?"

Her, Grommash didn't say out loud. It was impossible. But had he not just seen the impossible with his own eyes? "It doesn't matter. How long do we have, stranger?"

"Months. Beyond that, I do not know."

"This must be kept hidden from Gul'dan. We want him blind until the day comes." He turned toward the two guards. "Run back to camp. Tell our scouts to prepare quickly. We will need to send messages to all the other clans in secret. Go!"

They did not hesitate. Grommash and the stranger watched them sprint away.

"We must warn them not to even *consider* touching Gul'dan's new power," Grommash grunted. "This will not be easy."

"Indeed."

Grommash gave the stranger a long look. "Will you fight with the Warsong?"

"To the death."

"I thought so," the clan chief said. "You indeed have the heart of a Warsong. Stay by my side. We have a long road ahead of us."

The stranger's eyes gleamed.

"I will enjoy every step," he said.