



WORLD  
WARCRAFT  
BATTLE FOR AZEROTH





# A GOOD WAR

*by Robert Brooks*



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PART ONE:

# THE WARCHIEF'S COMMAND



His son lay still. He had died weeks ago, but only now was he at rest.

*I am afraid for him.*

*Do not be*, Saurfang had said, so long ago.

He knelt on the cold, unyielding stone floor of Icecrown Citadel and gathered his boy in his arms.

*They are changing our children. They have changed you.*

*The warlocks gave me a gift. I was once powerful. Now, I am the whirlwind*, he had said. *I am war itself. I shall bring glory to my people until my dying day.*

How strange those words seemed now. How tainted.

He lifted his son's body and carried him from the citadel. The eyes of dozens of champions lay upon him. Both Horde and Alliance soldiers stood aside. Some offered silent salutes, honoring him in his grief.

*Our son must not follow your path.*

*Keep him on our world, my love. He will be safe. Untouched.*

Icecrown Citadel vanished. The dry chill of Northrend was replaced with the warm sun and humid air of Nagrand. He laid his son upon an unlit pyre near the final resting places of his family. His son was now dressed in simple garments from Garadar, the place he had known as a boy.

*Before you go, what will you name him?*

*He is my heart. He is the heart of my whole world*, he had said.

He touched a burning torch to the pyre. Orange flames began to spread, first in the kindling, then in the chopped wooden logs. Shimmers of blue and white danced among the flames as the fire grew hotter. He made himself watch the flames consume his son. It was his boy's final honor—he would not turn away. He watched skin give way to muscle, to bone, and finally, to ash.

*I will name him Dranosh. "Heart of Draenor."*





Varok Saurfang woke up. The silence of his quarters was undisturbed but for his breathing. His cheeks were wet again, he noticed.

*Dreams. Such useless things.*

He did not have the sleep of the blessed, with visions that spoke of the future and offered truths about the past. Just as well. Such visions would have been wasted on him. Imagine trying to fight a war you knew you were destined to lose—or worse, destined to *win*. Nothing was more lethal to a warrior than complacency, and if the past year had taught this world anything, it was that fate was not easily understood.

No, his dreams were simply a stew of memories.

Sometimes, he dreamed of battles from decades past. He would be running through the streets of Shattrath again, his ears ringing with the screams of draenei and the choking rattles of mighty warriors poisoned by the warlocks' red mist. He would chase down humans in the streets of Stormwind, feeling his skin warm as the entire city burned. He had delighted in those slaughters. The corruption pulsing through his veins had made them a joy. There had been no thought of dishonor, no hesitation at spilling the blood of innocents.

The regrets came after waking. He would feel daggers of shame buried in his middle, as painful as the day he had been freed of that corrupted blood. He did not hate the pain. He welcomed it. He had earned it. It weighed upon him heavier with each passing year, but he would bear it silently, honorably, and without complaint as penance for his wrongs. It was a small price to pay for survival.

As a young orc, he had expected a quick, honorable death in battle. These days? He wondered if he was cursed to outlive everyone.

He rose from his simple bedding and stood at the window that overlooked Orgrimmar. Dawn was still many hours away, and the night's chill surrounded him. A sudden stir of shouts came from the south. He craned his neck out the window to catch a glimpse of the main gates leading to the deserts of Durotar. His quarters were in one of Orgrimmar's highest towers, giving him a wide view of the city. He had awoken countless times over the past year to screams and alarms. The Burning Legion's invasion of Azeroth had touched the entire world. Demons had tried to crack open the rear gates in Azshara more than once, and Orgrimmar had borne a heavy burden in victory.

Today would not be so dramatic. He could faintly see movement near the gates. The only sounds were the angry shouts of an officer of the night's guard yelling at his subordinates.

*Another spy got away*, Saurfang guessed.



Alliance sightings had become more frequent in Orgrimmar over the past few weeks. The warchief had recently humbled Stormwind's king, Anduin Wrynn, so the boy had unleashed an infestation of spies across the city—so many that it forced the guards into paranoia.

It was a clever tactic, especially since the spies kept their daggers sheathed. Killing Horde would have sparked anger and brought the two factions closer to war, but just *watching* the Horde, evading capture, and successfully doing so for weeks on end ...

Even the dumbest peon understood the message: *You cannot go to war. We know every move you make, and we will be ready.*

Sylvanas Windrunner hadn't taken the bait. If the warchief had unleashed her best spy hunters upon Orgrimmar—in the numbers she would have needed to root out the Alliance spies—many lives would have been lost, and not in a manner she could use to her benefit. So, she had done nothing.

*Watch us all you like,* was her response. *You are wasting your time.*

Saurfang approved. The season of war would come again eventually, as it always did. No reason to rush.

He went back to his bedding. The warchief had asked to speak with him today. He would need his rest.



Saurfang left his quarters at dawn to inspect the city.

The sun had risen well above Orgrimmar's walls by the time he reached the Valley of Honor. It was busy today; the monks had a new batch of students to train. The pandaren leader Ji Firepaw was demonstrating a form of unarmed combat. Firepaw smiled at Saurfang, offering a small salute without interrupting his form. Saurfang saluted back, rapping his fist against his chest, and walked on.

The rear gates were already open to merchants and travelers from Bilgewater Harbor. A new shift of guards had just taken over duty. "Lots of sightings again," reported an orc with a ragged scar on his hand.

"Spies," spat a goblin with a pair of daggers cradled on his lap. "Love to get my hands on one of them."

Saurfang left the rear gates and toured the northern cliffs, where all seemed well. He finished his inspection of the Valley of Spirits, and then, when he reached the front gates, he decided to deviate from his normal route. He left Orgrimmar and walked to the coastline. A few merchants and Horde naval ships had made dock, unloading cargo and resupplying for new journeys. There used to be more sails



waiting in the shallows, but these days, after the losses against the Legion, there simply weren't as many ships on the ocean.

Saurfang marked a dark figure creeping along the top of the battlements, following him to the ocean. "I see you," he muttered to himself. In broad daylight, a spy would have difficulty leaving the city walls without being seen. Unsurprisingly, they deemed High Overlord Saurfang important enough to be watched at all times.

It was almost time to report to the warchief. Saurfang returned through the front gates and heard what sounded like laughter from the battlements above him. He stopped. Yes, there was the booming laugh of a tauren, a sharp reply by an orc, and raucous guffaws from others.

Saurfang climbed the nearest ladder. Whoever those guards were, they had just volunteered to be today's example.



Morka Bruggu took another swig and belched loudly. "That's where I picked up this old thing." She rapped her knuckles on the plate guard strapped to her thigh. It was cracked nearly in half, and she could have sworn it still glowed faintly green at night. It didn't match the rest of her armor, but there was no rule that she couldn't wear it on duty. She had earned it fair and square.

"My hammer against the pit lord's head." She made a *splat* gesture with her hands. "And suddenly he had no more need of it."

The other Orgrimmar guards groaned. "We're supposed to believe *you* killed a pit lord?" said the tauren.

What was his name? Lanagu? Something like that. His laugh shook his entire body, and he nearly lost his balance and fell off the battlements. He had drunk at least twice as much as she had. There had been more than one hidden brew skin within reach this morning.

Morka shoved her finger in his face and lightly whacked his muzzle, making him flinch. "I didn't say I beat him *alone*, you chip-horned idiot."

He batted her hand away and snorted loudly. "Keep talking about my horns. It just tells me how much you love them."

"Love this," she said, making a gesture that caused the others to dissolve into hysterics. "There were about three dozen others in the fight. Poor Gurak got roasted and didn't make it." Morka took another drink. And then another. For Gurak. He would have wanted it that way. She passed the brew skin to her right. "The pit lord had fallen over. He was still breathing, talking about how Azeroth



was going to burn—you know demons—and I used my hammer to shut him up. So technically, yes, *I killed him*, and as far as I was concerned, that meant I had first call on the spoils.”

Lanagu tried to look at her thigh armor with skepticism, but his eyes wandered in different directions. He had *definitely* drunk too much. “That plate couldn’t have fit on his legs. His legs were as big as your ... *house*.”

She rapped on her armor again and grinned. “This was on his finger. My mate’s a smith, so he reshaped it a bit and—”

“*What are you blasted fools doing?*”

The roar wiped away every word Morka had been about to say. She should have been terrified right down to her middle, but her middle was filled with brew. She turned toward the ladder with a huge smile.

She had recognized the voice, after all.

“High Overlord Saurfang! Good to see you,” she said.

She was dimly aware of alarm bells ringing within her mind. She was drunk while on duty, and that was probably a very bad thing, but the hero of her favorite war story stood before her.

“The battle at the Crossroads,” she said. “I was there with you. Victory against the Burning Legion, *for the Horde!*” She shouted the last at the top of her lungs and was pleased to hear the echo bounce back all the way from the cliffs at the edge of the Valley of Strength.

She was less pleased that none of the others had joined her war cry. They looked scared—even Lanagas or whatever his name was.

And then she finally saw Saurfang’s expression. Truly saw it.

“The Crossroads,” Saurfang said quietly. “You were there?”

“Yes, my lord.” She slurred her words only a little bit.

“Did you travel to the Broken Isles?”

“No, my lord.”

“Did you storm the Tomb of Sargeras? Did you join the fight on the Legion’s homeworld?” Saurfang’s voice was rising.

“I wasn’t invited.” Morka hiccupped and added nervously, “My lord.”

Saurfang moved toward her. “You weren’t invited? You need an *invitation* to do your duty? Then consider yourself formally invited to stay *sober* when guarding Orgrimmar!”



He shouted directly into her face. Morka did not even dare to blink.

Saurfang raised his voice even louder. "Or perhaps you'd like to explain to the warchief why her guards are laughing and drinking while Alliance spies make themselves at home inside our city walls!"

The words escaped Morka's mouth before she could stop herself. "To hell with the Alliance and their spies. They can't stop us from enjoying ourselves."

Saurfang looked astonished. But was that a smile that flashed across his face? Impossible.

"Then perhaps I should ask *them* to take over guard duty. They can't possibly be worse at it!" Saurfang snatched the brew skin from Morka's hand. He tasted the liquid inside and spat it out, looking offended. "They'd at least know what good brew tastes like. I'd rather drink demon blood again!"

He flung the skin off the battlements and turned to one of the steel torch holders along the walls. They were only needed at night, but regulations said they had to stay alight all the time. This one's flame had gone out hours ago.

"Cold! How nice of you to provide a dark path for every Alliance rogue on the continent!" Saurfang turned his back on the guards and bellowed loudly to the city of Orgrimmar, unlit torch held high. "Isn't that right, Alliance? Don't they deserve some appreciation?"

A flame danced over the edge of the torch in his hand, caught for a moment, and then faded in the wind.

Saurfang stared at it. Morka stared at it. They all stared at it.

The flame came back and, for an instant, seemed to wave at him, a clear gesture of "thank you." Then it disappeared, leaving nothing but a wispy trail of white smoke that somehow seemed mocking.

Morka's eyes went wide. There was an Alliance spy watching right now. There had to be. And they had just made fools of every single one of them.

Saurfang set the torch back in its holder and took a deep breath.

Morka closed her eyes.

The speech that followed left her ears ringing. He insulted their ancestors, questioned the intelligence of their mates, and doubted the existence of their spines. He described their bodies as swollen with manure yet flexible enough to perform impossible acts. He suggested they all would have been better off dying at the Legion's hands than dishonoring his Horde by surviving. He even



lamented that they had not offered themselves up first to Sargeras when he had held Azeroth in his tender embrace, for the Dark Titan would surely have been driven away by their stench.

His words would be passed down from generation to generation, Morka was certain of it. A thousand years from now, her descendants would wake up in the night in a cold sweat with the high overlord's fury rattling inside their skulls.

And then, when Saurfang's voice had turned to gravel, he told them they would remain up here for the next guard shift. And the next after that. And only after that would he begin to contemplate a suitable punishment.

Then Saurfang left.

The guards stared at each other numbly. Then they returned to their posts without a word, still swaying slightly, watching the road to the city. They were still alive only because shame wasn't lethal.

Hours later, Morka realized Saurfang had never asked any of their names. Relief flowed through her. He wouldn't be able to assign them additional punishments after all.



It was past time to meet the warchief. Saurfang walked back into the city, trying to keep a smile off his face.

Orgrimmar guards drunk on duty? Appalling as a commander, but understandable as a survivor.

Most of the Horde still felt exhilarated from the Burning Legion's defeat. They all should have died—and many brave troops had—but somehow, thanks to the efforts of some truly astonishing champions, their world remained free. It seemed only right to celebrate life when it so easily could have ended for everyone.

Still, there was a time and a place for celebration. Those guards wouldn't forget that again.

He did not see anyone watching the entrance of Grommash Hold. That was odd but not a concern. The warchief was more than capable of protecting herself.

Saurfang entered the war room. Sylvanas Windrunner was waiting for him alone. That, also, was unusual.

"Only us, Warchief?" he asked.

"Nathanos is outside," she said. "He will make sure the Alliance cannot eavesdrop today."

"I didn't see him."



“No, you did not,” she said.

He joined her at the large table in the center of the room, upon which lay a detailed map of Azeroth and its continents. Even the Wandering Isle had been drawn onto it with a wax pencil—it seemed to be swimming toward the Broken Isles. The pandaren explorers must have been delighted to hear that the islands were now safe to visit in the wake of the Legion’s defeat. Relatively safe, anyway.

The map had other, more relevant markings. There were the last known locations for the Alliance fleets—no surprises that Saurfang could see—and a few locations where Alliance scouts and explorers had clashed with goblins near Silithus. The Alliance was keeping an eye on the Horde’s activities down there, but they had not made any aggressive moves to claim the region. Yet.

None of the markings offered a clue as to why Saurfang had been called here.

“I have a question for you, High Overlord,” Sylvanas said. “If I commanded you to destroy Stormwind, how would you do it?”

Saurfang said nothing for a moment. He wondered if she was joking—or rather, amusing herself at his expense. This warchief did not make jokes. “I don’t understand,” he said.

She drummed her fingers on the map as though she could crush the center of the Alliance’s military might with her thumb. She was not smiling. “It is a simple question. Imagine that I order you to destroy Stormwind today. What would you do?”

*I would challenge you to a mak’gora, because you would have lost your mind,* he thought. But the question was simple, and the answer was bleak. He could show her that easily enough.

Ringling the edge of the table were many small figures carved out of stone, each representing a different unit of military strength. He began to place them on the map around Stormwind, focusing on the Alliance forces first. How would they defend against a siege? Soldiers on the battlements. Ballistae and cannons behind them to rain down on any attempt to breach the walls. Gryphons over the hills to intercept flanking moves from the air. Ships at the harbor. Magic wielders present on every possible front. Stormwind was a port city with highly defensible terrain.

Then Saurfang moved Horde forces to challenge them. It was not a pretty scenario.

“We could not destroy Stormwind with a direct assault, not on land. We do not have enough ships to move our armies to Elwynn Forest without being challenged.” Saurfang tapped on the ocean just off Stormwind’s coast. The disastrous attack on the Broken Shore had left one possible approach, but it would be nearly impossible to exploit. “The Alliance’s navy is still their weak point. Ours could catch theirs by surprise. Maybe our fleet could take the docks. But we wouldn’t take the city.”



The Horde's fleet had been battered, too. Even if they could overwhelm the Alliance fleet—debatable at best—they would still have the same problem as a land-based approach: not enough ships to transport a suitable ground force to take and hold the city. Any landing assault in Stormwind would fail. "They would take their defenses off the walls and send them to the port, pushing us off," he concluded.

"I agree," Sylvanas said. "It would be a disaster. I have hopes that we will soon have an advantage over the Alliance at sea, but even so, our entire fleet would have to be committed to the attack. Every other Alliance nation could invade our territories in retaliation, and we could not stop them. Knowing all of that, how would you destroy Stormwind, High Overlord Saurfang?"

Saurfang kept a tight rein on his tone. "Do you want me to lie to you, Warchief? Do you want me to tell you it's possible when it's not?"

"No." Sylvanas's glowing eyes pierced into his. "Do not think of Stormwind as the first target. Think of it as the final objective. How would you get there?"

That sent a chill down Saurfang's spine. "That is a long, bloody road."

"*Lok-tar ogar*," she said.

Anger flooded Saurfang's mind. He knew he wasn't hiding it well, but he didn't care. "Are you so eager for another war? After all we've seen?" He slapped the stone figures off the table, and they clattered around the war room. His lips pulled back, baring tusks and teeth. It would take a thousand battles—no, a thousand *victories*—to even conceive of a total Horde triumph over the Alliance. The cost would be devastating. And what would the reward be? To spill some Alliance blood and burn some cities? Oh, how the Horde would celebrate as they picked through the ashes of the homes and loved ones they would lose in the fighting. "You are not Garrosh Hellscream. Why do you want to throw the Horde into the meat grinder again?"

Sylvanas's eyes did not waver, even in the face of his rage. "If I dedicated myself to peace with the Alliance, would it last a year?"

"Yes," Saurfang said curtly.

"How about two years? Five? Ten? Fifty?"

Saurfang felt the trap closing in on him, and he did not like it. "We fought side-by-side against the Burning Legion. That creates bonds that are not easily broken."

"Time breaks *every* bond." Sylvanas leaned across the table. Her words flew like arrows. "What do you believe? Will peace last five years or fifty?"



He leaned forward, too, his face inches away from hers. Neither blinked. “What I believe doesn’t matter, Warchief. What do *you* believe?”

“I believe the exiles of Gilneas will never forgive the Horde for driving them away. I believe the living humans of Lordaeron think it is blasphemy that my people still hold their city. I believe the ancient divide between our allies in Silvermoon and their kin in Darnassus is not easily mended.” There was a smile on Sylvanas’s face. It was not a pleasant one.

“I believe the Darkspear tribe hasn’t forgotten who drove them from their islands,” she continued. “I believe every orc your age remembers being imprisoned for years in filthy camps, wallowing in despair and surviving on human scraps. I believe every human remembers the tales of the terrible Horde that caused so much destruction in its first invasion, and I believe they blame every orc for that, no matter what your people have done to redeem yourselves. And I remember very well that I and my first Forsaken were once loyal Alliance citizens. We *died* for that banner, and our reward was to be hunted as vermin. I believe that there will be no permanent peace with the Alliance—not unless we win it on the battlefield on our terms. And believing that, answer this, Saurfang: what use is delaying the inevitable?”

*By the spirits, she is cold.*

Silence hung between them for a while. When Saurfang spoke, his voice had calmed. “Then we should talk of preparing for the next war, not starting it today.”

“We are,” she said. “You are the only living creature I know who has conquered both Stormwind *and* Orgrimmar, Saurfang. You say a direct attack on Stormwind is impossible with our forces today. Is the same true for the Alliance? Do we have enough natural defenses in Orgrimmar to repel a surprise assault?”

*No*, Saurfang concluded instantly. He rebelled against that thought, but every counterargument he could think of died quickly. Orgrimmar was more exposed than Stormwind. Its port was outside the city walls and thus was vulnerable. The civil war against Garrosh Hellscream had proved that. It would not be simple to crack open Orgrimmar again—Saurfang had spent years making sure of it—but it was possible, and he knew how it could happen. *Draw off our navy, land troops in Durotar and Azshara, isolate the city, begin the siege from two directions, wait for the city to starve ...*

“It’s my duty to make sure that doesn’t happen, Warchief.”

“And if it does?”

Saurfang laughed bitterly. “Then the Horde charges into battle and dies honorably that day, because there will be nothing else left for us but a slow death inside these walls.”

Sylvanas did not laugh with him. “It is my duty to stop *that* from happening.”



"The boy in Stormwind will not start a war tomorrow," Saurfang said.

Her eyebrows lowered. "With Genn Greymane in his ear? We will see."

That *was* a concern, Saurfang had to concede. In the thick of the fighting against the Burning Legion, Greymane had launched a mission to kill Sylvanas. It had gotten some of Stormwind's few remaining airships destroyed.

There were whispers that Greymane had ordered the attack without Anduin's permission, but as far as Saurfang knew, Greymane had not been punished. The implications of that were troubling, and every possible explanation led to same conclusion: the old worgen would always drive the Alliance toward war against the Horde.

Sylvanas's eyes glittered. "And the boy is becoming a man. What if that man decides that he has no choice but to launch a war on us?"

She pointed at the map. There was a large marking in Silithus, the place where the Dark Titan's blade had pierced the world. "No matter what I do, *that* will change the balance of power. Azerite sightings are coming in from across the world, Saurfang. We still do not know its full potential, nor does the Alliance. We only know that it will create a new generation of warfare. What will war look like in twenty years? In a hundred?"

Saurfang's voice had dropped to a low growl. "A hundred years of peace is a worthy goal." But as soon as the words left his mouth, he wanted to take them back. He knew what Sylvanas would say.

And he would agree with it.

The warchief did not disappoint. "If a hundred years of peace ends with a war that annihilates both sides, it was not a worthy goal. It was a coward's bargain, trading the future for temporary comfort. The Horde's children, and their children's children, will curse our memories as they burn." Her voice softened, but only slightly. "If life had any mercy at all, you and I would exist in peace for the rest of our days. We both have seen enough of war, but neither of us has seen the last of it."

*On that, you and I agree.* "Do you have your mind made up, Warchief? Are you driving us to war? Despite the cost?"

"I see an opportunity. I need a plan to achieve it," Sylvanas said.

"And if I cannot create a plan?"

"Then we do nothing, of course."

"Then explain this 'opportunity,' Warchief," he said. "Because I do not see it."



"Yes, you do. You already said it," she said. "Why is it impossible to invade Stormwind today?"

"We don't have enough ships." Saurfang looked at her suspiciously as he worked through the implications. *How is that an opportunity?* "We can commit our ships to transport or to war, but not to both—"

The answer slammed into him with such force that he literally staggered. His knees buckled, and he caught himself against the table with both arms. After a moment, he looked up at Sylvanas again, the blood draining from his face.

She had led him to a truth he had not seen, and it felt as if the entire world had changed. Only seconds ago, he had known to the very core of his being that war was impossible.

Now ...

"You understand, yes?" Sylvanas asked quietly.

He said nothing. He couldn't. He had been so focused on *defending* the Horde from the Legion that he had been blind to the consequences of that war.

There had been a stalemate, of sorts, between the Alliance and the Horde for years. Both sides were strong and had forces placed all around the world. No action could be taken without suffering a swift reprisal. That was why Varian Wrynn had decided not to crush the Horde after the Siege of Orgrimmar—he knew how many lives it would have cost his people to see it through. And, in hindsight, it would have meant the death of Azeroth, for it had taken the full strength of both the Horde and the Alliance to ensure the world's survival.

But the Broken Shore had altered the balance, hadn't it? The disastrous counterstrike against the Legion had destroyed a significant portion of both factions' fleets, and the months of warfare that followed only made the problem worse. The Horde and the Alliance still had strong positions on every continent, but they now lacked the means to reinforce them or maneuver their troops to another front.

*Until our navies are rebuilt, the high seas are wild again.*

That would take years to change. And once that happened, yes, that stalemate would return, and war would become too costly to pursue.

And by all the spirits, Sylvanas was right, no matter how strongly Saurfang tried to deny it. War would come again one day, and if both factions were strong, that war would raze entire nations. How many different peoples on Azeroth would become extinct in that fight?

*But before then, both sides have vulnerabilities and a limited time to exploit them. For a price, we can survive.*



"You believe we can secure Kalimdor," he said. "The entire continent." It wasn't a question. The Alliance's main strength was in the Eastern Kingdoms. The Horde's was in Kalimdor.

Sylvanas inclined her head slightly. "Yes."

Saurfang was already thinking it through. Where would the Horde need to strike? Mount Hyjal? Azuremyst Isle? No—there was only one true center of Alliance military power, where forces were staged and could be projected to the rest of the continent. "Darnassus," he breathed. "Teldrassil, the World Tree. Warchief, even if it is possible—"

"Is it possible?" she said. "If we marched an army to Darkshore to take the World Tree, would the Alliance be able to stop us?"

*No. Not if the attack caught them by surprise. Not if the Horde could avoid getting bogged down in Ashenvale ...*

"High Overlord," Sylvanas pressed, "speak your mind. Is it possible?"

"It is possible," Saurfang said slowly, "but not without serious consequences."

"Indeed."

"We would win one battle, not the war," Saurfang said. "If we shift the balance of power, the Alliance will respond in kind. Our nations in the Eastern Kingdoms would be vulnerable to retaliation."

"Especially mine," Sylvanas said.

He was glad she had said it instead of him. What target would Greymane demand the Alliance attack *but* Sylvanas's seat of power? "I do not know if we can protect the Undercity, not while the Alliance is united against us."

"And what if they were not?" Sylvanas smiled again. "What if they were divided?"

*Then the Horde wins.* "How would that happen? If we launch a sneak attack on the night elves' home, the entire Alliance will seek vengeance."

"At first, yes. They will be furious, united against our aggression," she said. "But what will the night elves want more than anything? They will demand that the Alliance help retake their conquered home."

*But the Alliance will not have the strength, not in Kalimdor, not with their fleets.*

Again. She had done it again. She had opened his mind to a new possibility, and the world shifted under his feet. The strategic implications spun out before him like the Maelstrom. "It will take years before they can even consider retaking Darnassus."



"You understand, High Overlord," Sylvanas said. "Think it through. What happens next?"

"They might try to conquer the Undercity ... but Darnassus becomes our hostage against that. The night elves will not allow *your* city to fall if they fear it means you will destroy *theirs*. The same goes for a strike against Silvermoon." Saurfang's thoughts raced. *She's right. This could work.* "And even if the Alliance agrees to retake Darnassus ... The Gilneans!"

Sylvanas's eyes disappeared beneath the edge of her hood. "They lost their nation years ago. The Gilneans will be furious if the Alliance acts to help the kaldorei first," she said. "The boy in Stormwind will have a political crisis on his hands. He is smart, but he is not experienced. What happens when Genn Greymane, Malfurion Stormrage, and Tyrande Whisperwind all demand differing actions? He is not a high king like his father. The respect the others give him is a courtesy, not an obligation. Anduin Wrynn will rapidly become a leader who cannot act. If the Alliance will not march as one, each nation will act in its own interest. Each army will return home to protect their lands from us."

"And that is how you defeat Stormwind." Saurfang was in awe. It was brilliant. Destroying the Alliance wouldn't take a thousand victories. It would take one. With a single strategic push, the pressure on the Alliance would cripple them for years, just as long as they could not conjure any miracles on the battlefield. "You destroy the Alliance from within. Their military might counts for nothing if their members stand alone. Then we strike peace with the individual nations and carve them away from the Alliance, piece by piece."

"If you want your enemy to bleed to death, you inflict a wound that cannot heal. That is why I need you to make the plan, High Overlord," Sylvanas said. "The moment our strike begins, there will be no turning back. We can divide the Alliance only if the war to conquer Darnassus does not unite them against us. That only happens if the Horde wins an honorable victory, and I am not blind—the Horde does not trust me to wage war that way."

Once again, she was right. Saurfang chose his next words very carefully. "It will take time to prepare this. It may not even be possible, not with the Alliance watching our every move."

Sylvanas's smile broadened. "I believe their spies will soon become our greatest assets."



PART TWO:  
THE MARCH TO SILITHUS

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A noise outside Saurfang's room woke him with a jolt. He smelled blood. He smelled an enemy.

*The Alliance has come for me.*

In one motion, he snatched a dagger leaning against his bedding and swiped at knee level. Anyone standing near his bed would have been crippled.

The blade touched nothing but air. He was alone in his quarters.

A face appeared outside, leaning around the frame of the door. "Good morning, High Overlord," his visitor said, dryly adding, "and good form on that strike."

"You still stink like a human." Saurfang set his dagger down. "That is a dangerous thing."

Nathanos Blightcaller offered a faint smirk and remained out on the walkway. "We need to talk."

Saurfang donned a loose pair of breeches and joined him. It was just before dawn, and the sky had already lightened. He would have needed to wake soon anyway. "What happened?" he asked.

Nathanos scratched his chin. It was an awkward motion, as though he still wasn't used to the shape of his face. Saurfang had never asked how the Forsaken ranger had received a new body. He wasn't sure he wanted to know. He wouldn't get an honest answer, anyway. "We spotted five Alliance spies during the night."

Saurfang grunted. These days, that wasn't unusual. "And?"

"Two of them were trying to climb the tower here, to your quarters."

"Hmph." That *was* unusual. Though likely all they wanted was a look at any letters Saurfang had in his room. "If they had orders to collect my head, they would have sent more. Did they make it up here?"

Nathanos shook his head. "I took care of the matter."

"Is that so?" Saurfang noticed, for the first time, a couple spots of liquid on the Forsaken's blue cloak, not yet fully dry. He snatched the dagger from Nathanos's belt sheath. Nathanos narrowed his eyes but didn't object. The Forsaken ranger had cleaned the blade before sheathing it, but not perfectly.



Saurfang bared his teeth. *That's why I smelled blood.* "Did you kill both of them?"

Nathanos took the dagger back. His red eyes looked elsewhere. "One. A human. He didn't have much to say to me." Which meant he had tortured the spy before killing him. "The other was a kaldorei, I think. They're skilled at night. He got away."

"Good," Saurfang said sharply. "We need the Alliance to believe they are in control. The warchief told you not to hunt their spies. Obey her."

"They will not find his body," Nathanos said.

"They don't need to." Spies disappeared for only two reasons: they joined the other side or they were killed, and no human would join the Horde. *No living human*, he corrected himself. "You get close to one again and you let them go, understand? Pretend they outran you."

"Yes, my lord." Nathanos inclined his head calmly. "Your talks with the warchief, they are going well?"

Saurfang lowered his voice. "What has she told you?"

Nathanos didn't answer, which was answer enough. *She told him nothing.*

Saurfang leaned in close, growling. "You know better than to ask about these matters in the open."

Nathanos did not flinch. "No one is listening. If I am standing next to you or guarding the room you're in, the Alliance will not hear your words. Assume they will hear everything else."

That was not arrogance. Nathanos had a knack for going where he was not wanted and rooting out others who tried to do the same. He was also the warchief's closest advisor. If he truly knew nothing, that was a good sign. It meant Sylvanas had been sincere. She was leaving this in Saurfang's hands.

So Saurfang decided to make use of him. "Silithus," he said.

That earned a sideways look. "What about Silithus?"

"Silithus," Saurfang repeated. "Remember that word, but never say it out loud."

Nathanos shifted slightly, turning his whole body toward the orc. "The land around the sword is secure, is it not? Has something happened?"

"No, you made sure that Silithus and all of its deposits of Azerite are firmly in the Horde's hands," Saurfang said lightly. "I would like to keep it that way. I will send several hundred soldiers south in a few days. They will secure the route and fortify our defenses at the sword."



Nathanos was clearly suspicious of every word, but he played along. "Secure the route? For who? How many more are we sending?"

"How many do you think would be appropriate?"

"None," the Forsaken said immediately. "The Horde shouldn't waste its armies on a desert the Alliance has no intention of invading. It would split our strength while the enemy lurks in our city."

Saurfang offered a small shrug. "Perhaps the warchief agrees with you. Perhaps I will march the soldiers down there regardless in a month."

The orc watched Nathanos carefully. The undead man blinked once, twice, and finally, he nodded. "Perhaps I will not be very happy about that. But in the interests of serving the Horde, perhaps I will keep that to myself. Except on certain occasions. Perhaps I let my frustration show once too often, where there are enemy eyes to see it."

*He understands.* "But most importantly," Saurfang said, "the Alliance will wonder why we're marching *now*. What provoked me to this action? The entire Horde will wonder the same thing. Questions and rumors will flow. The Alliance will do everything they can to find out the truth."

Nathanos's eyes narrowed. If there were an answer to that question, if the Horde had discovered some compelling reason to march down there, he would have already known of it. "And when they cannot find an answer, even with their army of spies, they will become uneasy."

"I cannot predict what they will do," Saurfang said. "But they will do something. Perhaps that will create an opportunity."

"Not much of a plan," Nathanos remarked, but the corners of his lips twitched. "Yet the strategy is entertaining. I prefer it that way."

With that, he turned and left, disappearing into the tower stairwell. Now there were three in Orgrimmar who understood the deception Saurfang would try to create. That circle would widen slightly over the next few weeks, but not by much. It couldn't.

To conquer Darnassus, Saurfang would need to mobilize the Horde for war. Thousands of troops would make ready for a long march, gather endless amounts of supplies, and prepare themselves for battle in countless ways. He could not hide that from the Alliance. He half-expected Stormwind to have a better accounting of the Horde's soldiers and supplies than he did. He even expected them to follow the Horde on each step of their journey, taking every opportunity to sabotage cart axles, destroy weapons, and do other such nonsense.

So how, then, could the attack come as a surprise?

*By making the Alliance's intelligence tell the wrong story,* Sylvanas had said.



She was right. If this campaign was going to succeed, the Alliance's spies needed to become the Horde's greatest assets. They needed to tell Stormwind that the Horde was aiming far to the south, not the west, and that they were preparing for a war years down the road, not weeks.

It was time to get to work.



Nargol the quartermaster stared at the sheet of parchment with a look of growing horror. "Where did this list come from?"

"High Overlord Saurfang," said the troll courier.

The orc scratched his chin. "He wants more than I have. I'll have to shift our food shipments around, and we'll have to pay a *lot* of merchants for their carts for transportation. The blacksmiths will have to work night and day. Even then, it will take me two months to gather all of this." *And that will take a miracle.*

"You be havin' one month," the troll said.

"*What?*" Nargol looked at the parchment again. These were enough supplies to feed half the Horde army for a year. "What is Saurfang planning?"

The troll just shrugged.



It was a miracle the explosion had not killed anyone. The forge had started sparking, whistling, and leaking molten metal, giving everyone enough time to run before it had shattered violently, filling the Burning Anvil with blazing hot shrapnel.

The master smith Saru Steelfury had come out unscathed but chatty. "One of my apprentices must've left some fel slate cooking too long. You know how that demon steel gets."

The noise had startled half the city and badly damaged the interior of the building. Speculation immediately turned to the idea that the forge had been the victim of Alliance sabotage.

"That is nonsense," Steelfury told everyone who would listen. "Just one of my fool apprentices. Mistakes happen."

Even High Overlord Saurfang had come down to inspect the damage. "Orgrimmar honors every smith and every forge," he announced, "so I will make sure everything is repaired, just like new, in less than a week."



Saurfang had even promised it in writing. *Every scrap of Azerite that was lost in the explosion will be replaced soon.*

Steelfury was confused. He would accept every ounce of Azerite he could get, but there had been none in the forge that day. He was certain of it. Saurfang must have been misinformed.

*Then again, he thought, if I'm seen as the only smith in Orgrimmar who knows how to craft with Azerite, that can only be good for my reputation.*

He kept the letter inside a leather hide pack hidden behind a panel underneath his favorite forge. A few days later, he noticed a scratch mark on the panel, as though someone had forced it open to look inside. But that didn't seem likely. Nothing was stolen. Everything, including the letter, was right where Steelfury remembered placing it.

Well, maybe the letter was in the wrong pocket, but ...



Sylvanas Windrunner took a deep breath and then hissed it out in frustration. "If we have no other options, I will handle them myself."

Saurfang said nothing for a while. It was a bad idea, but at the moment, it was the best one they had.

Saurfang and Sylvanas had discussed strategy and tactics for days, and it had become clear that there were two huge, inescapable points of failure in their plan: Malfurion Stormrage and Tyrande Whisperwind. The leaders of the night elves were powerful, dangerous, and perhaps even unbeatable on the field of battle. No matter how surprised the kaldorei would be by this attack, those two would be a terror for the Horde once the fighting began. They had lived for so long, and survived so much, that Saurfang had to consider the possibility that they could hold off the Horde long enough for the Alliance to send help. Ashenvale was their land, after all. They would rally nature itself to their cause.

Sylvanas could match one of them—perhaps—but even she knew that taking them on by herself was ... not an ideal tactic. Disinformation would not be very useful toward solving the dilemma. What false information could you hand a flock of Alliance spies that would make Darnassus conclude that *both* of its leaders needed to stay out of the war once it began?

"We wait for an opportunity," Saurfang muttered. "And if they give us one, we take it."

Sylvanas agreed.

They continued to meet every day. That would be noticed, so there needed to be an explanation. Saurfang tried to construct it carefully. He never spoke out against the warchief, and he



openly professed his loyalty to her, as an honorable orc should. But he also made sure he left every meeting with her looking visibly shaken and humiliated.

It paid off. Sylvanas showed him a scroll from a spy in Stormwind. “The Alliance suspects you and I spend our days at each other’s throats,” she said. With a hint of irony, she added, “And they believe you are pushing hard for open military action, despite my concerns.”

Nathanos must have outdone himself with his feigned complaints. Spies looked for hidden information and trusted almost nothing they heard. You did not fool them by telling them a lie straight out. You fooled them by burying a lie so deep that it took great effort and personal risk to uncover it. It was only natural to believe that the secrets your enemy desperately tried to hide were the truth. That bias would color every report the spies sent back to their masters.

And it would be easy to believe that Saurfang chafed under the command of Sylvanas Windrunner—because in certain ways, he did. It would be easy to believe that the old orc was eager to spill some blood in battle while the Banshee Queen wanted to find advantages by working in the shadows, because that was how both had traditionally waged war in the past. They were nothing alike. They came from different peoples. They saw the world in different ways. It would be no surprise they were spending their days in conflict.

Perhaps the Alliance would even believe that Saurfang wanted to go to Silithus just to get away from her.

And if the Alliance believed that, what would they make of the other information they received?



“Anyone who kills an Alliance spy will receive a thousand gold coins,” Saurfang bellowed.

A shocked murmur rippled through the ranks of the Orgrimmar guards standing before him. This reward was significantly more than any offered thus far.

“This is *our* city. But if the Alliance insists on staying here, we will prove ourselves generous hosts,” Saurfang said with a sneer. He swept his arm behind him, gesturing to Grommash Hold. A dozen clean pikes hung from the tower’s overhang some fifty feet off the ground. “This is where we will mount their heads. What better view of Orgrimmar could they have but this?”

The guards murmured in excitement. Saurfang could see that many of them were already thinking of ways to spend the thousand gold. Too bad. He would be surprised if even one of those pikes were used.



And the Alliance would likely notice something else: hadn't the warchief offered five hundred gold for the *capture* of spies only a few days earlier? Saurfang was doubling the offer but demanding that the spies be killed, not captured. He wanted tensions to ramp up, and he was subtly defying his warchief to make it happen. Signs of a rift between a leader and her commander were the best news an espionage agent could report.

Sylvanas had been pleased. "You learn the ways of deception well, High Overlord," she said. "But what's the next step? The one that lets the world know the rift between you and me is widening?"

"Do you have something in mind?" Saurfang asked.

"You and Nathanos need to come to blows. In public."

Saurfang was delighted. "We should warn him. If he believes we are truly fighting, he might force me to kill him."



Nathanos raised his chin. "How *hard* am I allowed to strike you, High Overlord?"



"Guards! Guards! Help!" Morka yelled.

*I caught one*, she thought with delirious joy. *I caught a spy*.

Morka had spotted a slight shimmer to a nearby shadow. She had thrown her shield and scored a lucky hit, dazing the rogue.

Now the gnome was wriggling in her grip, snarling and bucking harder than such a small creature should ever have a right to. A black cloak was wrapped around his head, and his dagger lay just out of reach.

*By the spirits, he's slippery!* Morka used her body weight to pin the gnome to the ground, ignoring the gouges that his fingernails tore into her arm. A clatter of footsteps meant backup would arrive any second. Her hand struggled to pull one of her small axes from her belt. She hoped to have his head off before anyone else could claim her prize.

"I'll make this quick," she sneered into his ear. "There's a pike waiting—"

A blade was laid against her throat. "Let him go. Slowly," a voice said.



*Of course. Of course there was more than one.* She caught the scent of a human. His blade pressed into her neck hard enough to draw blood. One twitch, and her veins would be opened to the air, and death would claim her shortly.

“Do it *now*,” the voice insisted.

She bared her teeth, but she had been caught. She let the gnome go. He sprinted into the shadows without a look back.

The human voice continued. “Now, step back with me, and—”

She grabbed the wrist and pulled. The knife fell to the ground.

But her attacker threw powder before her eyes with his other hand. It ignited, and the flash blinded and deafened her. She rolled on the ground, holding her ears, unable to hear herself scream. When new hands grabbed her around the shoulders a few moments later, she fought mightily until she realized they belonged to an orc and a tauren. Allies. Friends. They lifted her upright and waited for her disorientation to clear.

A red haze swam before Morka’s eyes. Shame, rage, and humiliation warred in her soul. “They got away,” she growled.

The others charged off to search for the spies, but she sat it out, furious with herself, shaking off the lingering dizziness while letting another guard bandage the scratch wounds on her arm and neck.

The human’s blade still lay on the ground, so she picked it up and inspected it. Strange. This was Orgrimmar steel. *Why would a human have this?*

The next hour passed in a blur. Morka stayed put, studying the knife, until an officer found her.

“High Overlord Saurfang would like to speak with you,” Nathanos Blightcaller said. She didn’t know him personally, but she knew his reputation, and his voice sounded familiar. He seemed to be limping today.

*This day could still get much worse.* Rumor had it that Nathanos and Saurfang had fought each other outside Grommash Hold yesterday. Being in the same place with both might be unpleasant. Morka stilled her unease. “Of course. Lead the way.”

She followed him to the Valley of Spirits. He opened a tent flap and gestured for her to enter.

Morka stepped inside with trepidation. There was a wounded orc, bandaged and sleeping comfortably. High Overlord Saurfang sat cross-legged with his back to the tent flap. One of his eyes was swollen shut. “You are the one who caught the spy?” he asked.



“Almost, my lord,” Morka said. Would Saurfang remember her? He showed no sign of recognition, which was a relief. “He had a friend. I let them get away.”

“You aren’t the first. Sit.” He waited for her to find a comfortable position. Indicating the wounded orc, he said, “The spy you encountered attacked this orc earlier. He’s a courier, carrying important messages for me.”

She grimaced. “Will he live?”

“Yes, but I’m afraid the spy got away with everything he had.” Saurfang leaned forward. “Did you see the second spy? The one who attacked you?”

Morka shook her head. “I smelled a human. He was carrying this.” She showed him the knife. “It has Orgrimmar smith markings. My mate might have made this dagger. Why would a human have it?”

An odd smile flashed across Saurfang’s face. “An interesting question. Blightcaller?”

The Forsaken poked his head into the tent. “Yes?”

“This guard has your dagger,” Saurfang said.

Morka’s mouth moved, but no sound emerged. *What did he just say?*

Nathanos scowled and held out his hand. Morka gave the blade to him without a word, and Nathanos left the tent again.

Saurfang watched her expression closely. Morka didn’t know what to say—or rather, everything she wanted to say would get her executed for insubordination. “My lord, I ...”

He held up a hand. “We needed that spy to get away. The Alliance must see what he stole,” he said quietly. “It was important. I am sorry. But understand this: you have done very, very well.”

“Thank you,” she said in a voice that was calmer than she felt.

“You are being trusted with a great secret,” Saurfang continued, “and you’ve proved yourself capable. That deserves consideration. I am going to need personal guards for a new military matter. Would you like to be one of them?”

*Instead of staying on the battlements for another year? Absolutely.* Her confusion and anger settled slightly, but she didn’t know how to respond.

Saurfang changed the subject. “You said you have a mate. He is a blacksmith?”

“Yes, High Overlord.”

“Do you have any children?”



"Eight," Morka said.

Saurfang's eyes went wide. "Eight! By the spirits ... I never had the courage to even *try* for that. Let me say this: you fought with me before at the Crossroads, and I hope you will fight with me again. Soon, just as then, you will witness a victory that will make your children proud."

Morka spoke without thinking. "Will I get to kill some Alliance?"

"Yes, you will."

"Then I accept, High Overlord," she said.

"Be ready. We're supposed to march in a few weeks. It may happen much sooner than that."

It wasn't until the next day that she realized he had remembered, without asking, that they had fought together at the Crossroads. *He does remember me from the battlements.*

She felt very, very lucky he had given her a second chance.



The warchief was deep in thought. "The Alliance has taken the bait," Sylvanas said. "But perhaps we are moving too quickly."

Saurfang nearly laughed. She *is concerned we're moving too quickly?* "This is more than we could have ever dreamed. The Alliance did not just take the bait—they left the door open. They do not even *imagine* what we are planning!"

The warchief had just received a shocking piece of news from her spies. Stormwind had grown so concerned about the Horde's apparent fixation on Silithus that they had asked the night elves to send their fleet there to keep an eye on the Horde's movements. Even now, most of the kaldorei ships were on their way to Feralas, planning to create a staging ground high in the hills around the sword of Sargeras.

Saurfang had not guessed they would do that, but he was genuinely impressed. It was a brilliant strategic move ... *if* the Horde had been truly sending their armies there: take defensible high ground, keep an eye on your enemy, and have a position prepared to move on the region in force. It was shrewd and far more decisive than he would have believed of Anduin Wrynn.

And, unfortunately for the Alliance, it had not stopped there. Tyrande Whisperwind was planning to remain in Stormwind for weeks to construct a long-term strategy for dealing with the Horde's strange movements. She had already left Darnassus. It was the perfect time to strike.

But for some reason, the warchief was hesitating.



"You wanted to launch the attack in three weeks, High Overlord," she said.

"That was when I believed we needed to handle Tyrande *and* Malfurion. Now we only need to contain one of them," he replied. "We'll have a few less soldiers ready for the fight, but we'll still outnumber the night elves—eight-to-one instead of twelve-to-one."

Sylvanas considered that. "What stops Tyrande from rushing right back to battle? Moving an army from Stormwind in a blink is not possible. Moving a single creature is much easier," she said darkly.

It was possible, Saurfang knew, but not likely. "How many innocent lives will Tyrande sacrifice to kill a few of our soldiers?" he asked. "That is the question she will face. She will not know of the attack until it has begun. By the time Stormwind makes sense of it, it will be clear that we will overrun Darnassus. Tyrande can slow us down by joining the battle after we've already made major strides into their territory, or she can use her power to speed up the evacuation and heal the wounded. If she does not believe she can stop us, there's no choice to make. She will save her people."

Nathanos finally spoke up. "And it will give you a chance to hunt Malfurion alone, Warchief."

The look in Sylvanas's eyes gave Saurfang pause. She was more annoyed than he would have expected. If the Horde managed to kill both Tyrande and Malfurion, yes, it would be a great victory that would weaken the Alliance, but the objective was supposed to be conquering the World Tree. That wedge would split the Alliance no matter who ruled the night elves.

Saurfang considered, not for the first time, that Sylvanas wasn't telling him everything.

*Does that matter?* Saurfang asked himself.

*No*, he decided. She wasn't lying about the importance of this objective, and if she had plans beyond the coming battle, well ... she was warchief, was she not?

Sylvanas tapped her fingers on the table, thinking. "Let us make sure Tyrande does not return. The kaldorei evacuation—it helps us if they use every resource to get their people off the World Tree before we arrive, correct?"

"I believe so, Warchief," Saurfang said. It would reduce the number of prisoners the Horde would need to care for, it would take fighters off the line to guard the evacuation, and it would mean that most of the Alliance's magic wielders would need to remain on Teldrassil to assist instead of joining the battle in Ashenvale.

She pointed to the map. Darkshore. "We need to frighten them before we arrive here. If they decide to fight instead of run, the final step of this battle will be messier than all the rest," she said. "What can we do to make the civilians of Teldrassil so afraid they can think of nothing but running?"



Nathanos grunted. “The threat of imminent death works wonders. Can we bring your new plague with us, Warchief?”

“No!” Saurfang exploded. “Absolutely not, you blasted idiot! If we murder every person on the World Tree, we will unite the Alliance against us!”

“I was suggesting that we bring it as a *threat*, not a promise,” Nathanos said.

“It would not work,” Sylvanas said. She seemed to consider something, but then shook her head. “Saurfang is right. The Alliance would never believe we would use it. It is unthinkable, wiping out an entire city like that—a bluff with no teeth.”

“Siege weapons,” Saurfang said suddenly. “We double the number of siege engines.”

He walked to the map and began placing the stone figures on Darkshore. “If we bring enough siege weapons to Darkshore and aim them toward Darnassus, we have won. We can rain down death with impunity if they resist. They will make their stand *before* Darkshore, not after. They will evacuate rather than see a final battle destroy their home. When we arrive, the tree will be undefended.”

Nathanos studied the map and nodded. “He is right, Warchief.”

Sylvanas considered it. “It will slow us down. You will need to task guards to keep the siege crews safe, for they will become prime targets for the kaldorei.” Finally, she nodded, too. “But it will work. Put your plans in motion, High Overlord. We begin in one week.”

Saurfang rattled his axe against his armor. “For the Horde,” he said.

She smiled at that. “For the Horde.”



Within a day, Saurfang began to reveal the true plan, but only to those who would execute the first strike. It took a long time to brief large numbers of rogues in any plan—these were not individuals who liked crowds or lectures, so he had to do it two at a time. Nathanos was elsewhere, briefing two more. Between them, they could get a few hundred in place before the week’s end.

It took three minutes to lay out the basics. In simultaneous strikes across Ashenvale, Horde infiltrators would attack every night elf patrol and outpost. At least, that was the goal. The accelerated plan meant little time for scouting and preparation. Saurfang would be happy if half the strikes were successful. But he wouldn’t admit that to his soldiers.

“Any questions?” Saurfang asked the two rogues in front of him.



Of course there were questions. The first rogue, a sin'dorei named Lorash Sunbeam, pointed at the map on the table marked with night elf outposts and patrol routes in Ashenvale—the known ones, anyway.

“You are asking us to start a war with the Alliance,” he said.

“Does that trouble you?”

Lorash’s eyebrows twitched. “Not in the slightest. But you are not offering us enough of a reward. If you expect us to launch our attacks at the exact same time on the exact same day ...” He sighed. “Some of us will have to strike at inopportune moments. That is a large risk.”

Saurfang considered that. “I have trusted you with this much information. I can spare a little more. Here is our final objective.”

He tapped on the map. Darnassus.

And then he waited.

Rogues were not the easiest creatures to shock. Saurfang enjoyed watching their eyes widen, their mouths drop open, and their startled glances between each other. Lorash even laughed out loud, wearing a vicious smile.

Saurfang waited until they had properly digested that news. “The World Tree has strategic value, and so the Horde will keep it. The city of Darnassus is filled with a tremendous amount of priceless treasure. Most of it does *not* have strategic value, and so the Horde will *not* need to keep it. Those who take risks in the Horde’s name will be rewarded, I can assure you.”

The other rogue, a Forsaken named Rifen, looked happy. Lorash had one more question. “If we are targeting the night elves, I presume Malfurion Stormrage will be involved.”

“You will not be asked to face him,” Saurfang said.

“And what if I would like to?” Lorash asked.

Rifen snorted and shook his head but said nothing. Saurfang spread his hands, a gesture of permissiveness. “If you bring down Malfurion Stormrage in battle, you will be rewarded,” he said. “I might advise you to avoid that fight, however.”

There were no more doubts among this duo. *Two down, many more to go.*



The day had come. Thousands upon thousands of Horde soldiers woke at dawn, assembled outside Orgrimmar, and began to secure their supplies for the long and uneventful march to Silithus.



None of them spoke openly of any misgivings, but Saurfang caught snatches of quiet grumbling about the assignment.

He couldn't blame them. They believed Saurfang was moving a large portion of the Horde's ground troops to Silithus for six months to a year. Patrolling a desert for months on end would be torture.

"I hope the Alliance attacks us," he heard one orc groan. "We all know it's going to happen sooner or later."

It was a struggle to keep his expression under control. This was the beginning of the Horde's new era on Azeroth. With this victory, they would ensure their survival for a hundred generations, and if they couldn't hold on to the world longer than that, well, by the spirits, there was nothing else Saurfang could do.

Most of Orgrimmar had come out to watch the army depart. Curiosity ran high; the Horde did not fully understand what was so important about Silithus. Hopefully, the Alliance felt the same confusion.

A familiar face pushed through the milling soldiers toward Saurfang. The orc smiled broadly. "Old friend, it is good to see you," Saurfang said.

Baine Bloodhoof, high chieftain of the tauren, clasped his arm firmly. "Off to war without me again?" he asked, mockingly grave.

"If you want to sit in the desert for a few months, you are welcome to join me," Saurfang said lightly.

"Is that where you're going?" Baine's tone did not waver, but his eyes were ice.

Saurfang did not let himself show surprise. *Baine knows the real plan*, the orc realized. He didn't know *how*, but the tone of the tauren's voice made it clear he knew something. *I need to stop underestimating him*. This was Cairne's son, after all, and no fool. "It will be over sooner than most think," he said evenly.

"Most of the Horde doesn't understand the goal of this mission. Or why it must be done now," Baine said. *Neither do I*, he meant.

"I believe they will, very soon," Saurfang said. "There is an opportunity now, and there is danger on the horizon. It is best to deal with it quickly."

"And cleanly, I hope," Baine said. "Tell me, is this your plan or the warchief's?"

"Mine," Saurfang said simply.



The tauren seemed relieved to hear it. "Then I wish you well. Fight with honor, friend. Lok-tar ogar."

"Lok-tar," Saurfang replied.

It was time to depart. Saurfang ordered the massive army caravan, with all of its carts and siege weapons and soldiers on foot, to begin its march. Baine stepped back, never taking his eyes off Saurfang, even as the caravan stretched out into the distance.



Nathanos rode on a cart just behind Saurfang.

The warchief had done very well in giving the reins of this plan to the orc, Nathanos had to admit. Saurfang had learned warfare before he had learned to walk, and it showed. His reputation and legacy were well earned. He had sacrificed much for his people, and the Horde trusted him to make the right decisions, even in dark days.

*Although, Sylvanas has earned that reputation a thousand times over, yet she is still mistrusted.*

Too many in the Horde were short-sighted and weak-willed. Sylvanas had seen what lay beyond this life. She knew what waited on the other side. What else could she do but act on that knowledge? If her actions sometimes seemed cruel, well, life was cruel. Existence was fleeting. Her plans soared over the horizon of mortality, and that frightened many.

It did not frighten Nathanos. It *delighted* him.

Saurfang twisted in his seat, looking at Nathanos.

The Forsaken lifted his chin. *Now?*

Saurfang nodded back. Now.

It was noon. The Horde was halfway to the junction that led to the Barrens. Unbeknownst to almost everyone in this caravan, the first strike against the night elves had begun. If everything was going to plan, night elves were already dying. Soon, panic would set in. Then the counterattacks. Then the despair, for Sylvanas Windrunner could not be stopped, and the kaldorei would know it in their souls.

Nathanos did not dream much, but he could see victory in his mind. Soon, he would stand beneath the branches of Teldrassil, walk the paths of Darnassus, and take kaldorei lives upon their own soil. All he had to do was wait. It would come to pass simply because Sylvanas had willed it.

He had no doubts. Not about her, not about this plan.





Lorash felt sorry for this group of kaldorei. Their leader marched them up and down the forest as if they were fresh recruits who needed to be whipped into shape the hard way. If his eyes weren't deceiving him, these were all experienced veterans, not trainees. Overtraining was an actual danger—grinding elite troops into complacency was one of the biggest mistakes a leader could make.

Their exhaustion was his advantage, but he still felt a pang of sympathy. He had had awful leaders, too.

Unfortunately, though this officer was wearing out her troops, she demanded they stay in perfect formation at all times. That annoyed him. No stragglers to pick off. He liked attacking from above, but he wouldn't take the chance in broad daylight—not while these night elves were in the open, alert, and working together. That would be a great way to get a few kills and then die.

It was half an hour past the time he and Rifen were supposed to have launched their attack. Time was running out. They were a short distance away from Silverwind Refuge, a kaldorei outpost. Other rogues had been assigned to attack that place. Even if there were no survivors, patrolling night elves would find the dead before long. Once they understood how many kaldorei outposts had been attacked, they would be even more difficult prey.

A leaf rustled behind Lorash. "Back so soon?" he whispered.

The Forsaken rogue silently crawled next to him in the brush. The crushed leaf had been a courtesy; rogues knew better than to sneak up on their peers without a friendly noise.

"I see at least a dozen, maybe more," said Rifen. His fingers poked absently at his exposed collarbone, a tic that never failed to unnerve Lorash.

"We are already late," Lorash muttered. "If we do not strike soon, we should retreat."

Twelve versus two. And they would have to push into Sentinels. Very dangerous enemies. The only thing that kept Lorash from calling a retreat immediately was the prize in front of him. "I think one of them is the night elf commander," he said.

"The commander of Ashenvale?" Rifen's tone noticeably brightened. "Which one?"

Lorash raised his arm slowly, so the motion would not attract any attention. His finger extended. "The tall female. Scars across her entire face. Matches the description."

They were one hundred paces away, but that facial feature was obvious enough. Rifen said nothing.



They waited a few minutes longer. The night elves were still marching back and forth, and then, because one of them did not perfectly stay in sync with the others, the commander forced them to begin a grueling series of physical exercises.

Lorash sighed. "They are not stopping. Make the call, Rifen. I will follow your lead."

"Normally, I would suggest we retreat and live to collect another payday," the Forsaken whispered calmly. "But I've never killed a commander before. And she's exhausting the people who might protect her. Let's get closer."

Lorash shrugged and crawled forward. Neither made a sound. There would be no more talking, not this close; there would be only hand signals.

A galloping beast drew his attention. Someone was approaching. The two rogues watched as a night elf Sentinel—riding a nightsaber—crashed through the brush, rushing to meet the larger group.

"Commander! Commander!" she shouted. "We have come under attack!"

All of the night elves turned to look at her.

A small lapse, but a useful one. The elves were not paying attention to the rest of the world any longer as they gathered around their new arrivals.

Rifen laid a finger on Lorash's arm. *Stay here*, he gestured. Then he crawled quietly through the brush to a tree and began to climb it. Lorash couldn't stop him, not without alerting the enemy.

*I suppose this is our opportunity*, he thought. Striking from above still seemed reckless. Rifen wanted the glory, though. And the payday.

Lorash only caught pieces of the night elves' conversation. The scout reported that multiple attacks had taken out outposts all across Ashenvale. That caused quite a stir. The commander began barking orders so loudly that any noise Rifen might have made was drowned out.

He raised his eyes and watched Rifen crawl along a branch, preparing to drop down. This was going to be a dramatic entrance.

The blood elf silently patted his sleeves, feeling the shurikens hidden within, and then drew his daggers. Every blade he carried was coated in poison, different ones for different purposes. A scratch was all he needed.

Rifen stepped off the branch and plummeted downward. Lorash gritted his teeth. The commander was beginning to issue orders. Waiting a couple of minutes would have seen the group disperse. *Too bloody impatient.*



The nightsaber—a night elf druid, of course—lifted his nose, sniffed, and then roared an alarm.

Too late.

Rifen held his daggers close to his body, aimed downward. He landed on the commander's back, stabbing wildly as they tumbled into the forest brush, startling every one of the night elves. Before they could react, Rifen had rolled to his feet and swept a dagger across another elf's neck. Blood sprayed outward.

*Time to make an impression.* Maybe Lorash could distract the group enough to give Rifen a chance to run. Lorash covered the distance in three leaping steps and slashed, killing one. Then he went to work on the rest. Rifen was a blur in their midst, and Lorash was a wraith whirling around their perimeter.

Six elves had fallen before they began to fight back effectively, and that meant it was time to leave. *We are not under orders to engage in a fair fight,* Lorash thought with a smile. The commander had been killed. Mission complete.

Lorash stepped back. A touch of Shadow made it look as if he had simply disappeared, but the night elves did not panic. They fired arrows and magic into the gaps between the trees, hoping to catch him running. Lorash simply stood still, his back against a tree trunk, until nobody was looking his way.

A raspy scream of pain put an end to his growing feeling of satisfaction. Rifen hadn't made good his escape. Lorash risked a single, momentary glance, and saw the Forsaken rogue falling under the weight of a pouncing nightsaber. Rifen's arm was gone, lying several paces away.

Lorash clenched his jaw. With a wound like that, Rifen was done. *Damn.* Rescue was impossible, not with this many kaldorei left alive. Lorash could leave, or he could die.

Easy choice.

He crawled one hundred paces away before he risked standing up to run. *One of us lived, the other died, and we killed six.* He wondered if Saurfang would consider that a success.



Nathanos watched Saurfang carefully as the caravan approached the junction. This was the last moment to pull back. It would be foolish, but Saurfang could order the entire Horde to turn around and go home. Once they made the turn north, toward Ashenvale, the Horde would be committed.



Saurfang had not told the lead caravan drivers his decision yet. Nathanos smoothly hopped from his cart and jogged to Saurfang's, keeping pace with it on foot.

"Your orders, High Overlord?" Nathanos said blandly.

"We have time yet," Saurfang said.

*Perhaps he is losing his nerve.* Nathanos allowed an edge to creep into his voice. "What are you waiting for?"

Saurfang's eyes swung over to Nathanos, and his hard stare made the Forsaken realize that Saurfang wasn't afraid at all. He was simply preparing himself for what was to come. "Tell them yourself, if you wish. We're going north."

Nathanos felt a brief flash of shame. He jogged to the front of the convoy to have a conversation with the drivers on the lead carts and the officers near them. "Saurfang has new orders for you. When we get to the junction in the Northern Barrens, bear right."

"What?" asked a tauren. "We're going *right*? To Ashenvale?"

"That is what Saurfang commands. Obey," Nathanos said.

A half hour later, there was some hesitation at the junction. Everyone had been prepared to turn left, toward the Crossroads and on to Silithus. But in the end, they did indeed obey.

A stir went through the entire Horde army as they realized the change. Conversations sprung up and died, for there were only questions, not answers.

Saurfang just looked straight ahead, apparently contented with his choice.



Morka said nothing, but she could not stop herself from exchanging glances with the other guards. They looked just as shocked as she was. But as the Horde marched toward Ashenvale, she put the pieces together. All of the odd tasks Saurfang had given her, all of the clandestine acts—she had not known what to make of any of them. But he had also promised that she would fight the Alliance soon.

She walked alongside Saurfang's cart, and when she glanced at him, it was clear that he had planned this. She was not witnessing a deviation from the plan; she was witnessing his grand strategy. She just couldn't see it yet.



Within an hour, the convoy came within sight of the old Horde fortifications at the edge of the territory. A few years ago, Mor'shan Rampart had been the bulwark against the night elves pushing into the Barrens, but it had been abandoned when Garrosh Hellscream had been deposed.

There should have been night elves on those fortifications. There weren't. Instead, there were two Horde rogues—an orc and a goblin—sitting comfortably on the structure, legs dangling in the air. They waved at the convoy as it approached, prompting another flurry of chatter among the army.

As Saurfang's cart rolled underneath the rampart, he stood and climbed to the top so he could stand above the Horde convoy. "Soldiers of the Horde, hear me!" he bellowed.

The caravan rolled to a stop. All conversation and chatter disappeared. Nobody wanted to miss a word. Morka scarcely breathed.

"We are not going to Silithus. We were never going to Silithus," Saurfang said in a clear voice. By now, none of the Horde seemed surprised to hear it. "We are embarking on a mission with a simple objective: we will conquer Darnassus, the home of the kaldorei."

Saurfang gave them a moment before continuing. "The Alliance does not know we are coming. They have not *prepared* for our coming. Our first strike has already happened, and the night elves' scouts in Ashenvale are in disarray. But that does not mean this will be easy. They will fight hard. They will fight desperately. But they cannot stand against the Horde!"

That broke the dam of shock. The entire caravan roared back at him, lifting their weapons and shaking their fists. Saurfang let the sound build and build, and then he motioned for silence. He got it in an instant.

"I cannot give you six months of peace in the desert," he said with a smile. Then he raised his voice in a shout that shook leaves off the nearby trees. "All I can give you is a few days of glory! Lok-tar ogar! *For the Horde!*"

Morka and the thousands of her brothers and sisters of the Horde joined in. The reply did not shake the trees. It shook the hills.

It would shake the *world*.

*"For the Horde!"*



*PART THREE:*  
**THE BATTLE OF ASHENVALE**

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The fighting grew fiercer when night fell. Against kaldorei, that was expected. Bathed in the moonlight of Elune, they stalked through the forests like predators, seeking any enemy who dared take another step toward their home.

“My lord, they burned the bridges,” rasped one of the Forsaken scouts. She had a fresh scar across her armor, but the remnants of her flesh seemed untouched. “We think they burned all of them.”

Saurfang grunted. The Falfarren River was not terribly deep or wide, but recent rains had left it swollen. “Set up the siege engines close to the river. Fire everything we can. Force the elves to stay under cover. And keep looking to see if they missed something. Any bridge will do. A big log. Something.”

The scout saluted and ran off. She would relay the orders to every other scout she encountered. Saurfang took one last look at the map and made another mark on it. He had suspected the night elves were going to make a stand at this river. It was a natural obstacle, but narrower upstream—easier to cross, and thus better defended? Saurfang decided to find out. “We’re moving north,” he told his aides.

They rolled up the command map and slid it into a tube that had been treated by one of the Horde’s finest magi. It would resist fire, corruption, and most physical blows. The blood elf who carried the tube had orders to run, not fight, should violence erupt nearby. The real plan was in Saurfang’s mind, but if the night elves managed to remove his head from his body—and they were going to try—the warchief would need that map to carry on the fight.

It took only a few minutes to prepare Saurfang’s command post to move. He did not need some complex hierarchy of officers to cater to his whims and make sure his feelings were coddled. He needed a small circle of clever tacticians who could quickly communicate his orders to roaming groups of soldiers. Add a decent contingent of skilled guards to deflect any assassination attempts, and it was a relatively small group. It had to be. This was the forest. The battle here would not be fought with armies marching in straight, organized lines—Saurfang hated that sort of business anyway. This was going to be a thousand desperate skirmishes among the trees. Maneuverability was critical. Knowledge of terrain was critical. The Horde would have a disadvantage in both. This was kaldorei territory. But the night elves were badly outnumbered and had been caught off guard.

Once the first blow had been struck, Saurfang and Sylvanas’s carefully crafted deception shattered into pieces. The Horde could have only one reason to storm across Ashenvale, and that was



to conquer Teldrassil and the city in its branches. Stormwind surely knew the attack was underway by now, and they would surely send reinforcements.

But they also surely knew that they would not arrive in time. Not without a miracle. The night elves knew that they were fighting to protect their homeland and that it was almost impossible to save it.

Yet there was a lot of distance between here and Darnassus. It would not take many disasters to stop the Horde cold.

A loud *thunk* echoed through the forest, followed by a distant, crackling explosion. Saurfang pointed toward the source of the second sound. "That way." The rest of his troops followed. In a few moments, they came across half a dozen siege engines, broken and burning among the Horde ranks. Horde soldiers were desperately trying to put out the fires as though the weapons could be saved.

"Leave them!" Saurfang roared. "They're destroyed! Care for the wounded and the dead and *find out who did this!*"

The soldiers swept the forest to the rear and then searched the banks of the Falfarren River, but no culprits were found.

*The night elves got away.* Saurfang snarled. He kept moving. These soldiers had needed a kick, but their minds were back in the war.

A short distance away, behind the main lines, was another group of siege weapons. One of the unit's officers, an orc with a sour expression and a false smile, sat near a pristine demolisher. He snapped off a fast salute as Saurfang approached. "My lord, it is good to see you."

Saurfang loomed above him disapprovingly. "Would you care to join the Horde in battle? Or is the weather too nice back here?"

The officer's green skin flushed to a satisfying shade of purple. When you implied an orc was a coward, they took it personally. "You ordered us to deploy at a safe distance. For protection."

"Who's going to protect these weapons from an ambush? You? Alone?" Saurfang jammed a finger into the officer's breastbone, pushing him backward. "You have an entire army a few steps ahead. Perhaps *they* could protect you."

Saurfang stopped, remembering something. "How far back are we from the front lines?"

"Several hundred yards, my lord."

Saurfang growled at the officer. "And what is the maximum range of these weapons?"

The officer wilted. "A couple hundred ...?"



Saurfang turned to the siege crews. "We're moving forward. *Now!*"

They obeyed swiftly. When the siege engines arrived within sight of the river, the high overlord saw dozens of Horde troops taking shelter near some downed trees. Several boulders lay near them. A tauren looked up, spotted Saurfang, and waved him off frantically. "Move back, my lord. We're taking fire!"

"Is that so? From which direction?" Saurfang asked.

"We don't know!"

Saurfang gave the siege officer a glare that should have killed him. The officer certainly looked as if he wanted to die. "Then we will give you some cover fire. Line them up!"

The siege engines moved into position without delay. The unit's officer might have been weak, but the crews were not. When they were ready, they looked to Saurfang. He gestured without a word, and six heavy boulders sailed over the Falfarren River and landed with an impact that Saurfang could feel through his feet. He nodded approvingly.

"Excellent. Again. Make them afraid to step out of cover."

While they reloaded, Saurfang rounded on the officer. "I wish you well in the battle ahead," Saurfang said quietly. "I hope to hear of your many victories on the front lines. Is that understood?"

"Y-yes, my lord."

"Good." With that, Saurfang moved on, leaving the ashen-faced orc behind.

Saurfang's command group continued north. A pair of troll scouts met with him. The hottest fighting was just south of Xavian, the old elven ruins that had now become a small lake. The night elves were holding strong across the river, they reported, preventing all crossings so far. Every time the Horde pushed, the night elves had let them come across the river, surrounded them, and destroyed them.

That was troubling. The kaldorei shouldn't have had the numbers to do that in more than one place at a time.

"Very well," Saurfang said, and he sent the scouts back into the field.

Saurfang let their information simmer in his thoughts, only half listening while his subordinates discussed options.

"Are the night elves stronger in numbers than we had anticipated?"

"If they have reinforcements, the entire strategy needs to change."



Saurfang interrupted them. "We're going to Xavian." The night elves could not have the numbers they appeared to have. It was impossible. It was time to apply some pressure and prove it.



Lorash Sunbeam heard the hammer of a rifle clicking loudly. He slowly turned his head to the right. A couple of paces away, just a bit too far for a reliable dagger strike, the cold eye of a gun barrel was aimed between his eyes. Lorash stayed still. His fingers crept toward the shurikens hidden in his sleeves.

The goblin holding the rifle looked carefully at his face. "Silvermoon?" he whispered.

Lorash smiled. "*Doral ana'diel?*"

The gun lowered, and the goblin spat on the ground. "You elves all look alike to me."

That was probably all the apology Lorash would get. He glanced at the forest around him. There were a couple of shadows he didn't trust a few trees away, so he gestured silently toward the goblin. *Aim there.*

The goblin swung the rifle where Lorash had indicated, covering the right side of a tree. Lorash crept forward on the left side, daggers ready to strike.

Nobody was hiding behind the tree.

Lorash turned to the next suspicious tree and crept forward. He sensed that the goblin was once again covering him. That tree was clear, too. So was the next, and the one beyond that. Lorash finally relaxed and returned to the goblin.

"Well, that was fun," the goblin said, checking his powder.

The blood elf extended his hand. "My name is Lorash. Yours?"

The goblin reached up to shake. "Chikkers."

Lorash raised a brow. "Your name is *what?*"

The goblin looked ready to spit again. "You don't always get to choose your own nickname, pal. Not where I grew up. Your friends give you your name."

"They called you Chikkers? And you let them?"

The goblin's expression soured. "You wanna keep talking about my name? Really?"

Lorash decided he didn't. "My partner is lost. Are you alone, too?"

"Lost?" The goblin frowned. "As in, 'we got separated,' or as in ..."



"He is dead. He took one of the night elf commanders before he went, though."

"Hooray for him," Chikkers said. Then he grimaced. "Sorry. Not trying to be a jerk. I get stressed out behind enemy lines, ya know?"

"I understand." The Falfarren River was several miles away, and the sound of the Horde's siege weapons faintly rumbled through the air. This was night elf territory—for the moment. Lorash had some ideas that might change that. "Do you have a companion?"

"I got the Captain with me."

"I see." Lorash didn't. "The night elves are maneuvering quickly. I think they have groups traveling from one hot spot to another. Any time the Horde tries to cross the river, they run to stop us. And I believe it has worked so far. Have you seen anything like that?"

The goblin snorted softly. "Yeah, I saw it." He pointed up, toward the branches. "Druids are running in packs up there. Go a little further down. They're close to the path."

*They are running across the branches?* Interesting. It explained why Lorash was having such a difficult time finding tracks on the ground. And running in packs ... dangerous. Effective, if they could do so undetected, but dangerous. Step on a weak branch at the wrong time, and the whole pack might fall.

"That sounds like an opportunity, my friend," Lorash said. "How many of them?"

"Lots," Chikkers said.

"Care to join me in changing that?"

Chikkers grinned and patted his ammunition pouch. The soft jingle of metal bullets was answer enough.



Saurfang had a strong impression of what was happening. The night elves were sending their best fighters up and down the river, bolstering any place where the Horde pressed their attack. They'd let the advance force get a few steps past the river and then ambush them. Not a bad idea, but not a long-term strategy. Exhaustion alone would end the tactic by sunrise, if the Horde's infiltrators did not kill their roaming groups first.

It would be hours until morning, and Saurfang had little desire to wait. The survivors of the failed attacks across the river had all reported facing enemy druids. There were ways to solve that problem. He found himself enjoying the thought.



*By the gods and spirits in all the cosmos, it is good to fight a good war.*

Saurfang called for nearby spell wielders to report to him. Within a few minutes, a decent mix of seven magi, warlocks, and shaman had answered the call. Perfect. "I want you to join the siege units for the next hour," he said.

He explained his plan in simple terms. Their eyes widened—with shock? Excitement? As he spoke, a troll warlock's enthralled imp began to chatter with fear. The troll raised a hand as if he was going to cuff the demon, and the imp quieted down to soft grumbles.

"Is there a problem?" Saurfang asked.

"Dis little one scared of startin' a fire. It might get out of control," the troll said.

"That's why we're not using fel fire. Understood, everyone? Shaman, it falls upon you to keep things contained. Do not make their jobs impossible. We set the forest ablaze, and our attack is over."

That gave Saurfang pause. What if the night elves set fire to their own forest? With all of Ashenvale burning, the Horde's advance would stop dead, and plenty of his forces would not escape the flames. He hadn't thought of that.

*Because it's unthinkable,* Saurfang decided. *No chance they burn down their own territory.*

"Wait for the signal," he said. "If an hour passes, return here for new orders."

They murmured agreement and ran off to obey. Saurfang told his aides to prepare to move again. "We need to find the warchief."

They found her fifteen minutes later near the edge of the river, farther south. Sylvanas Windrunner and Nathanos Blightcaller had joined a group of archers who were sending a shower of arrows over an embankment and onto the gathered night elf forces behind it. Sylvanas noticed Saurfang's approach. "Keep firing," she told the others.

Saurfang huddled together with her and Nathanos. The Forsaken ranger said, "We're not making a lot of progress with your plan, High Overlord."

The orc ignored him. "Warchief, have you been behind their lines?"

"Briefly. I know a trap when I see one. He is there, Saurfang, waiting for me," Sylvanas said.

*Malfurion Stormrage.* The warchief showed no fear, but Saurfang couldn't help but feel a chill. It was one thing to face the possibility of an honorable death in war. In a duel against Malfurion, he had no doubts he would lose. "How would you like to handle him?"

"If you can shatter their lines, he will come to stop you," Sylvanas said. "And I will follow him. Stand against him for a few minutes. I will drive him away."



It was a sound plan. “Lok-tar ogar,” he said, and began to move off. The best place for a breakthrough would be a narrower part of the river to the south. “We begin soon. For the Horde!”

The archers around her whooped and roared. “For the Horde!”



The druids were quiet. Shockingly quiet. There were perhaps a dozen of them coming—no, more than that—but Lorash could only hear the soft patter of paws and the creaking of branches bending beneath their weight. Most had taken the forms of large cats—powerful, quick nightsabers who could leap from branch to branch effortlessly. A few took the forms of birds, their huge wingspans spread wide as they glided just below the canopy of the forest.

Lorash was impressed. They were invisible from above because of the canopy, and obscured from below by the branches and leaves. Quiet as they were, they had no way to hide from the moonlight filtering down through the trees.

*Not like I can*, Lorash thought.

He was perched on a branch seventy feet off the ground, motionless, waiting. He had taken position in the tree trunk’s shadow and employed a touch of the *other* Shadow to make himself truly unseen. One hand held onto the tree. The other held a dagger, but when he saw the druids coming, he put it away. The time for close-up work would come, but he needed to get the night elves on the ground first.

They were only seconds away. Lorash let go of the tree and crouched on the branch, balancing on the balls of his feet. He reached into his sleeves. Two shurikens—poison-tipped, their metal scuffed and dulled so it would not reflect the moonlight—fit snugly between his index and middle fingers.

The sabers’ eyes gleamed in the dark. He could see each tusk jutting from their mouths, each feather on each bird.

One of the sabers leapt past him. His head turned, looked straight at Lorash. And the druid kept running. The blood elf could not keep his mouth from twisting into a grin.

Half of the druids passed him in the same way before he struck. His wrists rotated. His hands opened. The shurikens flew. Two of the birds shrieked, flapping their wings erratically as the poison went to work. One slammed into a tree trunk with a sickening sound, and the other spiraled toward the ground.

He had six shurikens left. Two more whistled through the air. One hit; the other missed.



The pack turned. They knew they were under attack, but they did not know from where. Lorash showed them. He leapt from his branch, passing through a beam of moonlight. He landed on a branch in the next tree and leapt for the next.

Snarls and growls echoed behind him. They gave chase. He kept running, using the druids' route, traveling at almost a full sprint the way they had come. At the very least, he was leading them away from the battle lines.

The branches shivered under his feet. The druids were calling upon the forest to stop him. In a few moments, the branches would shy away from his footsteps, vines would entwine around his ankles, and perhaps the trees themselves would open up, drawing him inside to suffocate within their bark. He had heard tales of such things.

Lorash landed on a branch of a gnarled tree. The branch was capable of holding the weight of a single creature. He turned to face his pursuers, letting two more shurikens fly. Both were misses, but they made the night elves scatter. *Two left.*

A druid leapt for him. The cat's huge mouth was open, tusks primed to slash his throat. Lorash ducked, drew his daggers, and swiped in an upward arc. Blood showered onto his head and neck, and the druid offered a strangled, gurgling cry as she fell to the ground far below.

The other druids roared with rage. Lorash stood up, smiled, and gestured to them with his bloody daggers. *Come on, then. Avenge your friend.*

Four eagerly jumped to his branch.

He stepped off calmly. He fell freely for a heartbeat before slamming a dagger into the tree trunk, dragging himself to a stop about halfway down. Then he let himself fall the rest of the way. He had misjudged the distance a bit, and his knees complained loudly upon his landing, but they held his weight, so he ignored them.

Above him, the druids had landed on the branch together. It had instantly snapped under their weight, and they all fell. Most hit the ground awkwardly, the impacts making the soil shiver under his feet. As the rest of the druids climbed or flew down to help, Lorash went to work. The stunned druids had little chance, not against blades wreathed in poison. Roots peeked up from the soil, but Lorash danced away from them easily.

A terrible squawk filled his ears. Sharp talons and an angry, snapping beak descended upon him.

*KHOOM!*

The sound half-deafened him. The bird's head jerked as though struck. She fell upon Lorash, her dead weight pinning him to the ground.



No, not dead, not yet. The blood elf felt the bird's heart thumping hard. A twist of a blade fixed that, but still, he was trapped underneath her corpse.

*KHOOM!* Chickers's rifle thundered again. Lorash heard the goblin's whistle over the chaos. "Go get 'em, Captain!"

Lorash shoved and raged, trying to free himself.

*KHOOM!*

*By the Sunwell, that goblin can shoot fast!* He paused in his struggles. He heard a new sound, something he had never heard before in battle. A large creature was crashing through the forest, its footsteps overlapping in a strange chorus.

*... Chikker-chikker-chikker-chikker ...*

Then he heard screaming.

When Lorash finally dragged himself out from underneath the bird, dripping with sweat and blood, the gunshots and screams had stopped. A single creature stood amid the bodies of the druids. "You must be the Captain," Lorash said.

The huge, four-legged crawler clicked its claws—pincers?—together and turned its eyes toward him. It stood nearly as tall as Lorash's waist. Chickers stomped his way out of the brush, grinning, his smoking rifle casually resting on his shoulder. The crawler's light blue shell was almost as big as the goblin, and probably weighed twice as much.

"She ain't bad, is she?"

Lorash had no idea crawlers could do anything but taste delicious. He kept that thought to himself. "No, she is not. I did not realize they could survive outside the ocean."

"You learn something new every day, right?" Chickers admired their handiwork. "Unless my eyes deceive me, she took down more than you, bud."

He was wrong, but not by much. Angry wounds in the shape of the Captain's pincers were carved into at least a half dozen of the druids. But before he could form a reply, he felt a shiver in his feet. Lorash stood still, listening.

And then he whispered, "*Hide.*"

Chickers turned and squinted into the night. The cocky expression slid off his face. "Yeah. Hide."



They hid behind one of the larger tree trunks and waited, the crawler following them into the brush. The rumbling Lorash had heard grew louder. Chikkers slowly thumbed back the hammer on his rifle, but the elf put his hand on the gun.

*No*, Lorash mouthed.

Chikkers nodded stiffly. The Captain, bless her encrusted heart, stood still and made no noise.

The rumbling grew louder. It nearly passed their tree. Then it stopped. Lorash risked a glance.

A large stag stood in the middle of the dead druids.

Lorash stiffened. *Is that ...?*

The stag shifted in a flash of mist. When it cleared, a tall night elf, powerfully built, metal claws strapped to his wrists and large antlers rising above his head, stood over the bodies of his fallen people.

Lorash leaned back behind the tree. His heart pounded, but not out of fear. No. It was not fear at all. He had hoped for this ever since High Overlord Saurfang had revealed the true plan to him.

Chikkers was staring. *Who is it?* he mouthed.

*Malfurion*, Lorash mouthed back.

The goblin swallowed hard. His dry throat clicked.

Malfurion spoke softly. "Rest easy, my brothers and sisters. Your sacrifice will not be in vain. I swear it."

Lorash's hands twitched toward his sleeves. *Two more shurikens*. Did he dare? Killing Malfurion would all but guarantee victory for the Horde, but that was not at the front of his mind. Would his poison slow Malfurion down by even a heartbeat? If half the stories about him were true, it might not.

A hand gripped Lorash's wrist. The elf ignored it, thinking through his plan of attack.

*Step out ... throw ... retreat ... move ... get behind him ...*

The hand gripped tighter. Finally, Lorash looked at the goblin with a frown. Chikkers was mouthing something, but Lorash did not recognize the words at first. It was as though he were speaking a foreign language. Then he realized the goblin was silently cursing at him in a way that only a goblin could. But Lorash caught the gist of it: *Step out there and I'll kill you myself*.

Lorash nodded, and the goblin finally relaxed. They waited until Malfurion finished paying his respects and ran off.

Chikkers heaved a huge sigh of relief. "Are you outta your mind, buddy?"



"I want Stormrage's head," Lorash said curtly. "Will you help me ambush him when he retreats?"

The goblin chuffed loudly. "You're a real piece of work." He grimaced, shook his head, and checked his ammunition. "The answer is no. Not without another, I dunno, twenty to twenty-five soldiers to help us out. But I'll back you up until then."

They walked into the forest. The crawler obediently followed them.

... *Chikker-chikker-chikker-chikker* ...



A mage sent a massive fireball into the sky. It bathed the forest in a flickering orange glow that could be seen for miles. It was time.

"Horde! With me!" Saurfang bellowed, charging across the river. This was only one attack of many. At least two dozen other crossings would happen simultaneously. The night elves could not possibly stand against them all.

Two magi, an orc and a troll, had had the idea to freeze this area of the Falfarren River, allowing an attack party to simply walk across. It was so simple and so brilliant that Saurfang had instantly agreed to it. As Saurfang charged across, the war cries of about fifty others sounded behind him, along with the loud whistles of magic-touched siege payloads flying overhead. The payloads exploded on the ground, lighting up the forest. Saurfang scanned the shadows on the other embankment between flashes, looking for hidden enemies. He saw none.

Then he lost his footing on the ice and saw nothing but sky. Saurfang bellowed again, this time in outrage, as his back slammed into the frozen river. Many of the Horde leapt past him. A few others slipped and fell around him. He scrambled to his feet with a snarl, stomping off the ice and up the embankment. He heard the fighting before he saw it—blades against blades, shouts and screams.

Another mage's spell flashed across the forest, giving a blink of illumination. It was enough to see a druid in saber form leaping toward his throat. Saurfang swung his axe once. The enemy was dead before hitting the ground.

*A clean kill*, his soul sang.

He ran, charging straight into the fighting. An arrow clanged off the armor across his throat—*close one*—and he rotated his axe, holding the blade low. He swept upward, and would have split an elf in two had his target not jumped backward. But she did not retreat. She jumped at him



so boldly that he did not have time to react. Her heel slammed just above his armor into his bare temple. Saurfang staggered back, bright stars in his vision. Only sheer will kept him conscious.

She came after him again, her fists a blur. *She is unarmed!* But the pain in his head suggested that wasn't quite true, was it? A monk's hands and feet were weapons in their own right.

As skilled as she was, she revealed her weaknesses. The way she deftly avoided the blade of his axe told him that she was focusing on it too much. Saurfang spun his axe in a double loop, and when she ducked, he leaned forward and planted a heavy boot into her stomach. She stumbled back and fell into the brush. She wasn't dead, but Saurfang turned to the rest of the battle; getting absorbed in single combat when dozens of enemies were within reach was a quick way to die.

A pair of Horde warriors sliced at roots and branches that had emerged from the ground. Saurfang joined them. He could not see the druid who was causing it, but that did not matter. When the plants were quelled, all three of them charged at the night elves' rear guard. The momentum turned quickly. If the kaldorei really did have an elite unit of reinforcements, they had chosen to fight at another crossing—or, less likely, they had been waylaid and destroyed.

The kaldorei were too badly outnumbered to win, and their lines were breaking. Still, they weren't running.

*This is not the place to hold your ground, fools.*

Or was it? The night elves certainly did not fight like fools. A chill ran through Saurfang's belly. They were buying time for a reason. There could only be one.

He raised his voice above the din. "Rally! Rally to me! Form up!"

It was too chaotic for everyone to hear him, of course. An orc with an axe in each hand ran past Saurfang, howling a war cry. Saurfang jutted out his own axe shaft, whacked the orc around the ankles, and watched him fall face first into a pile of dirt. "Rally!" he roared again. "Form up!"

His cry took flight. Horde warriors began to chant: "Form up! Form up!"

Slowly, the Horde soldiers disengaged from their individual battles. The tripped orc scrambled to his feet and stood beside Saurfang, breathing heavily, eyes twitching from humiliation. Saurfang pretended he had not seen him fall. "Go back across the river," Saurfang told him. "Round up the magi, the warlocks, the shaman. Anyone with command of magic. Get them here *now*."

The orc rapped his fist against his chest and sprinted off without a word, brushing the dirt off his armor.

Saurfang directed the others into small groups. "Archers, in the back. Shields, up front. Spellcasters will go in the middle. Be ready for a counterattack."



Almost all of the Horde troops had obeyed his command. The night elves had stepped back as well because, yes, they were not fools. That confirmed Saurfang's suspicions. *Where is he? Where is the trap?* Saurfang searched the dark woods for a sign.

*There.*

In the distance stood a silhouette backlit by beams of moonlight—a single elf, feathers on his arms and antlers on his head, eyes glowing in the darkness. One by one, the other Horde soldiers caught sight of him.

Reinforcements arrived from across the river. Saurfang issued orders without looking away. “Magi to the left, warlocks to the right, shaman with me. Hold!”

They obeyed, finding their positions and holding fast. Still, the elf in the distance did not move. For one minute ... two minutes ... three ... nothing moved.

Saurfang was patient. Others were not. “Lok-tar ogar!”

Saurfang's head snapped to the right. The cry had come from a small squad of orc warriors some distance away, still wet from crossing the river to the north. They had spotted the elf and were charging in.

“To me! Rally to me!” Saurfang bellowed.

Too late. The elf's eyes shifted toward the orcs. The forest of Ashenvale came alive. The full-throated war cries of the orcs were cut off. There were no screams, no thrashing, no prolonged combat—simply a flurry of movement in the darkness, and then the sound of armored bodies hitting the ground.

The elf hadn't even lifted a finger. Such was his command of nature. His eyes locked once again onto Saurfang, and his voice carried easily through the trees. “This is not your land, High Overlord,” Malfurion Stormrage said.

“It is now,” Saurfang replied calmly. “You and your people have a chance to leave in peace. Take it, Archdruid.”

“Peace?” Malfurion's words carried such anger. “The Horde will pay in blood for each step it gains.”

The Horde ranks stirred, either from nervousness or excitement. Anyone who got a lucky shot on Malfurion would be a legend. Many of them were probably consumed by the thought.

“Do nothing until I give the command,” Saurfang whispered. And then, loudly, “Come, then, Stormrage. Make us leave.”

Malfurion did not move. He just watched them.



He had set a trap. Saurfang was sure of it. The night elves had held out for far too long, spent too many lives at this river, to have lacked a reason. If the Horde had kept pushing, if they had succumbed to bloodlust and lost themselves in the joy of routing a beaten enemy, they would have blindly rushed forward into Malfurion. Only a few had taken the bait.

The other night elves retreated. Malfurion now stood alone. The kaldorei had to pull back. Once they had lost one portion of the river, they had lost all of it. The Horde would soon cross the river, surround Malfurion, and make his escape impossible. Strong as he was, the night elf would fall if he tried to make his stand here.

And the archdruid had to suspect that Sylvanas Windrunner was nearby, lurking in the dark, waiting to ambush him.

So, Saurfang would wait. He could not lose if he simply waited.

Malfurion knew it, too. After a few minutes, he finally stepped back, disappearing into the darkness without another word. Dozens of the Horde sighed in relief—and a few in disappointment. Saurfang waited a few minutes longer, just to make sure the danger had passed, and then he raised his voice again.

“The Horde has taken the Falfarren River,” he said.

Roars of victory erupted all around him. Weapons and shields rattled together. One of the blood elf magi launched a celebratory fireball into the sky. Saurfang made no move to stop them. *Let Malfurion be chased away by the cheers of his enemies. Let the entire kaldorei know that their defeat comes now.*

Saurfang sent runners up and down the river to spread the news, and before long, the faint sound of celebration rose in the distance. The Horde had seized one of the few obstacles standing between them and victory. The battle had just begun, and the rest of it would not be easy, but ...

This was going to work. The Horde would soon earn a magnificent, honorable conquest.

And what a prize Darnassus would be.



Lorash hung high in the air, his ankles interlocked around a tree branch. His mind was still, calm. And eager. *Very* eager.

Oh, yes. He had waited a long, long time for this chance.

Chikkers had tried to talk him out of it. “You’re outta your mind, pal. You and I can’t take on *Malfurion Stormrage* by ourselves.”



"If we surprise him—"

"I ain't taking the Captain into that, get me?" The goblin had been resolute. "You do this, you do it alone."

And so, Lorash was alone. He had faintly heard Malfurion's booming voice and Saurfang's taunting replies. Many of the night elves had retreated this way, so he suspected Malfurion would, too. The night elf leader would need to join them to plan the next phase of their defense.

And maybe, just maybe, Malfurion would be distracted. He had suffered a loss. His mind might be occupied.

The sound of a foot pressing down on soft leaves brought a smile to Lorash's face. The time had come. *For my father ... for my mother ... for my people!*

His ankles moved. He fell headfirst toward the ground, a dagger gripped tightly in each hand. He had timed this perfectly. Malfurion was directly underneath him, not looking up.

Lorash swept both daggers in an arc. When they crossed, they would meet Stormrage's neck, removing his head.

They never crossed.

Malfurion stepped aside. The instant before Lorash crashed into the ground, tree roots burst out of the earth and slapped his wrists. He dropped his daggers. He cried out in surprise as he landed on his right shoulder and neck. There was a sharp jolt of pain. His right arm went numb, but Lorash could still move.

More roots took that away from him, too. Before he could leap to his feet, roots wrapped tightly around his wrists, ankles, and neck, pinning him to the ground, immobilizing him.

*Damn.*

Lorash fought against the roots for only a moment, but it was useless. They could have already killed him, crushed the life out of him, or ripped his limbs off his body. But they hadn't. The blood elf stared up hatefully at Malfurion, who looked back down on him with pity.

"This is senseless. This invasion is *senseless*," Malfurion said softly. "Brother, we should not be enemies."

Lorash's daggers lay several feet away from him. They might as well have been worlds away. He had two shurikens tucked in his sleeves, but that was it. He had no doubt he would die if he tried to throw them. Not unless he could distract Stormrage.

"The rest of the Horde, I can fathom. Sylvanas, I can fathom," Malfurion continued, "but our peoples once lived together. We fought together in the same wars, and we died for one another. It was



true long ago, and it was true only a few months ago, out on the Broken Isles. There should be no divide between my kaldorei and your sin'dorei."

Lorash hissed through the root that gripped his throat. "And who created that divide, Stormrage? Who exiled my people?"

"I remember the faces of those who left that day. Yours was not among them," Malfurion said. "Are you invading *my* homeland because you heard stories from before you were born? Or are you blindly following orders from your fallen warchief? I cannot decide which is worse."

Lorash still wasn't dead. That surprised him greatly. *Malfurion wants to talk*. A leader of the night elf people genuinely believed that the blood elves had no reason to take part in this battle.

Lorash was happy to educate him.

"Yes, that all happened before I was born," he said. "I was born in Tirisfal Glades. As a child, I had to flee with my family and all the rest. I remember wandering for years. I remember a long winter trapped in the mountain peaks. I remember my father hunting despite the cold, losing one finger to the frost, then two. I remember one day he never returned at all. How many of your people have frozen to death, Malfurion? Do we share that history, too?"

Malfurion did not answer. Lorash smiled inwardly. He could not use his daggers, but he could still make Stormrage bleed.

"I remember centuries of warfare against the trolls," Lorash continued. "I remember seeing pieces of my childhood friends decorating the huts and villages of the Amani. Trophies, you see. Was it the kaldorei who came to our aid in those days? No. I remember the day death itself marched on our new homeland. When my mother died and was raised into the Lich King's army, who had to kill her and put her to rest? Was it you, Malfurion, who stood with us as we lost our homeland?"

"My people had just repelled the Burning Legion and, in doing so, lost *our* homeland," Malfurion said sharply. "And despite the years of war between our two factions, we never attacked your home. We have never even *dreamed* of it."

"I have dreamed of little else," Lorash said.

"Then I am glad most of your kind is not as lost as you."

"And I am glad that you will live to see my kind conquering *your* home," Lorash said. *How far can I push this?* His heart told him he had already gone too far. His soul told him to go even farther. "Does that thought fill you with disgust? The temples of Elune filled with sin'dorei?"

Lorash saw a flash of movement, dark and swift, out of the corner of his eye. Someone was coming.



Malfurion looked up. He had noticed it, too.

"You," said Malfurion.

"*Isbnu-dal-dieb*," said Sylvanas Windrunner, raising her bow.

This was Lorash's chance. His only chance. His hands wrestled against the roots, and his fingers desperately stretched toward his last two shurikens. It took only a heartbeat.

In that heartbeat, a war raged above him.

The blood elf watched in awe. Shadow-wreathed arrows and green-laced magic darted through the air. A burst of dark power shoved Malfurion back, and Lorash felt the roots binding him go loose.

Lorash drew both arms back, shurikens held so tightly he felt the tips pricking his palms. He didn't care if he poisoned himself. He was so close, so *close* ...

Malfurion looked at him, at the weapons in his hands, and the root around Lorash's throat squeezed.

Lorash heard a grinding crunch. His eyes were still open, his mind was still racing, but his body wouldn't obey him. His lungs wouldn't draw breath. His entire body was numb. His thoughts were fading.

"Your kind has not conquered my home *yet*," he heard Malfurion say. Was that to him or Sylvanas? Lorash did not know.

A few moments passed. Blackness pulsed in his vision. That was his own poison, probably. Sylvanas Windrunner stood over him, saying something he couldn't hear. If Lorash was seeing her, Malfurion must have retreated.

*Damn. He still lives.*

Lorash had failed. He wondered if he would see his family on the other side.



Chickers cautiously emerged into the clearing. The Captain shuffled along right behind him.

Lorash lay motionless on the ground. A root was wrapped around his throat, and his head rested at an unnatural angle from his body.

"Ah jeez," Chickers breathed.

The warchief turned toward him, bow still pulsing with dark power, red eyes searching his soul. "Did you know him?"



“We were fighting together.” Chickers had to ask the obvious question. “He didn’t make it, did he?”

“No. He challenged Malfurion alone, and he died for it,” Sylvanas said.

“Guess everyone’s got to go out sometime,” the goblin muttered.

The warchief did something he didn’t expect. She smiled.

“Very wise words,” she said. “Report back to High Overlord Saurfang. This war is just beginning.”



*PART FOUR:*  
**VICTORY AT DARKSHORE**

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A hand squeezed Saurfang's shoulder. "We've arrived, High Overlord," Morka said.

He was awake instantly. "How bad is the fighting?"

Morka shook her head. "Already done."

Saurfang hopped off the cart and squinted upward. The sun was still low in the sky, so he hadn't slept long, perhaps fifteen minutes. After days of fighting, that was a luxury. It would not lift the weight of fatigue that hung over his mind, but it refreshed his thoughts.

A lake lay before him. An island was in the middle of it, splitting the waters nearly in two, and upon that spit of land stood a small kaldorei village. Astranaar. One of the last night elf strongholds on the way to the coast. Water on all sides, only two bridges allowing access—perfect as a staging ground. If the night elves had already lost it, that was an astonishing victory for the Horde.

"They didn't defend Astranaar?" Saurfang asked.

Morka shrugged. "The night elves were dead before we got here. Our scouts say their bodies show signs of poison. Our infiltrators must have been ... productive."

Impressive. Saurfang would need to learn which rogues had done such a thorough job. "Sweep the town one more time for saboteurs, and then bring everything to the inn. Astranaar is the last command post we need to secure Ashenvale," he said. Perhaps he would even get to sleep in a bed for a few minutes, instead of a wooden cart rolling over a bumpy path.



It was quiet—as quiet as a battlefield could be.

Sylvanas Windrunner was concealed in a large thicket of trees several miles ahead of the Horde's front lines, hunting for Malfurion Stormrage, but she could hear the sounds of a hundred different skirmishes far away. The shouts of the victors, the cries of the dying—they all sounded the same from a distance, the formless scream of war.

Sylvanas ignored it. She was hunting bigger prey, if she could find his trail again.

Malfurion Stormrage was playing the game better than expected. He had not let himself become cornered. For days, he had struck the Horde hard, tearing their ranks asunder, and then faded



back into the forests before Sylvanas could catch more than a glimpse of him. He was not letting anger drive his actions.

But it would change nothing about the outcome of this battle. He had to know that.

Where would he be now, if not here? Sylvanas worried away at the problem while she watched the forest around her. Here—right here—it was *quiet*. The sort of silence that came only from death. Dozens of the slain surrounded her, every one of them Horde.

“In the end, death claims us all,” Sylvanas Windrunner whispered to them.

A faint eulogy, but there were no words to ease what they had suffered before their ends.

Sylvanas had seen death in every form and circumstance. Bodies told a story. The evidence of the fallen’s horror was written in the footsteps that had crushed grass and leaves, in the soil that had been disturbed by roots leaping out of the ground to snare arms and legs, and, of course, in the scorched earth that marked where they had died.

A group of night elves—most, but not all, had been druids or magi—had been hiding in the depths of this thicket. When the pack of Horde troops passed by, the kaldorei had unleashed arrows, magic, blades, and every other instrument of war, wounding almost the entire raiding party.

All thirty of the Horde had been brought down within seconds. The druids had called upon nature to subdue most of them, and the magi had trapped a few in ice. Perhaps one or two had died quickly. The rest had been helpless—in pain, but alive.

And only then had the killing truly begun.

These Horde soldiers had not died in a flash of fire—they had burned slowly, in agony, screaming. The night elves had done everything they could to prolong the horror, to maximize the pain.

*Malfurion would be very upset to see what his people have done, Sylvanas thought. The wound is open. The bleeding has begun, but they use their hatred in such pitiful ways.*

The kaldorei knew they were outnumbered. They knew their homeland was lost. Maybe a few of them knew in their hearts—just as she knew—that Darnassus would one day burn to ashes. All they could do, in their rage, was make these poor souls suffer.

They had used their power not to win a battle or buy time for their people’s evacuation, but to inflict pain and nothing else. Their fury had stripped away every civilized pretense, every semblance of honor, and they had shown who they truly were.

That was what war did. That was what it was *for*: to give civilized beings permission to do the unthinkable. Only then could you achieve the impossible.



Sylvanas had learned that the hard way. Too many others probably never could.

Malfurion ... even in his rage over the inevitable, he was not losing his composure. Perhaps he *could* not.

*And that is why he will lose.*

Would Saurfang ever understand that? He had glimpsed the same abyss she had. His son, Dranosh, had been a bedrock of honor, but that hadn't mattered a whit when death had come for him. Saurfang had watched as his son danced on the Lich King's puppet strings. That day had wounded Saurfang's soul. Even he believed he had been broken.

Sylvanas had privately suspected he would never return to war. But he had. The wound had not healed; he had simply learned to live with it. Now he seemed to imagine that honor would sustain him to the end of his days.

Honor was all Saurfang had left. Honor and the Horde. She did not know what he would do if either were taken from him.

*He would become my enemy, a terrible one.*

Fortunately for him, honor and restraint were exactly what she needed now. Perhaps he would find a glorious death on the battlefield before he ever had to face a choice that would destroy him.

*Or maybe the old orc will surprise me, she thought. Maybe he will face the world as it is and choose to fight onward at my side. If he doesn't, well ...*

*That can wait.*

Malfurion had been on the northern border of Ashenvale for a while, and then he had traveled south. Sylvanas was certain of it. For some reason, he had not passed by this thicket. What had drawn his attention?

There weren't many possibilities. There were no sounds of battle to the south. Astranaar was that way. It should have been a war zone. If it was not, that was by design.

She left the thicket, traveling south. Her instincts were calling her to Astranaar.



The battle was coming to its end. Saurfang knew it. The Horde knew it. The night elves seemed to know it, for they were fighting more desperately than ever.

Saurfang leaned over the largest table in the inn's common room, carefully studying the map of Ashenvale with his tacticians. His subordinates had already marked the most recent Horde movements



and Alliance sightings on the map. The front lines had jumped ahead on the southern end, but the northern side was catching up quickly. Malfurion had ripped hard into the Horde in the north, but reinforcements had arrived and replaced their losses. On the map, it seemed that the night elves' last dregs of resistance in Ashenvale were crumbling under an avalanche of wax markings.

There were no known night elf strongholds remaining, not from the Northern Barrens to Astranaar. The kaldorei had roving scouts who took every opportunity to sow chaos behind the Horde's lines, but that was a minor concern. The supply routes were well guarded, and the front lines had enough supplies to push to Darnassus in any case.

*We've taken Ashenvale.* He did not say so out loud. Best not to tempt fate, especially when he wasn't sure he believed it. The victory had come too easily.

And still, Ashenvale was not the final objective; it was just the biggest piece of the puzzle.

Saurfang's fingers traced along the coastline, from the edge of Ashenvale to Darkshore, where the Horde would launch their assault on Darnassus itself. "We need to begin preparations for the final push," he said.

"No stopping until Darkshore?" asked an orc.

"We'll anchor ourselves on the coastline to the south." Saurfang tapped on a location not far away. Zoram'gar Outpost. The Horde hadn't used it much since Hellscream had been deposed. It was a good place to regroup. "There's a clearing from Ashenvale to the beach. The night elves won't challenge us in the open. We can take the coast easily."

"The night elf fleet may return soon," said a blood elf. "If we are lucky, they are days away, but they may return from Feralas as soon as this afternoon. We could be exposed to their fire on the beach."

"If the fleet bombards us instead of evacuating the rest of their citizens ..." Saurfang trailed off. That was exactly what the fleet would do, wasn't it? Those ships could evacuate plenty of night elves from the World Tree, but they wouldn't have time to load them aboard. More civilians would escape if the fleet slowed down the Horde instead of trying to assist the evacuation. "You're right. How many siege weapons do we have left?"

That prompted some discussion. After the tacticians compared information, they reported that the night elves had managed to destroy or damage about half of the Horde's siege weapons. That was more than Saurfang would have liked, but not a disaster. They were the most important target for the night elves, after all. If the Horde could not put siege engines in Darkshore, there would be no covering barrage for the assault on the World Tree itself.

*But we still have enough. More than enough.* Saurfang rattled off more orders. "Bring the siege weapons here. They'll be safe until we have the shore."



Over the next hour, the weapons and their crews rolled into town and parked along the central path through Astranaar. Saurfang scarcely noticed as he stared at the table, watching his subordinates draw new information onto the maps. Someone unrolled the map of the oceans between Kalimdor and the Eastern Kingdoms and marked the progress of Alliance reinforcements. Their fleet was still days away. Too far to make a difference.

There was still a long way for the Horde to go, Saurfang reminded himself—a *long* way. It would require a lot of killing and dying, but the strategy that had gotten them this far would carry them all the way to the western coast.

The fighting had taken on a rhythm that the night elves could not stop. Saurfang's armies moved forward in small groups until they faced resistance, and then they stood fast. The night elves only had the numbers to hold the line in one or two locations—Malfurion was a front all on his own, but Sylvanas was on his heels, daring him to rest long enough for her to catch him. Every other part of the offensive would push forward. If the night elves pulled back, they would be harried by Horde scouts. If they held position, they would be quickly surrounded. The Horde did not need to break the night elves' defenses, not when they could go around them.

That made it seem clean and easy, of course. War was neither of those things.

There had been plenty of instances where Horde soldiers had pushed forward into an ambush. Malfurion struck hard all across the Horde's lines, killing those foolish enough to charge into battle with him. When the final numbers were tallied, there would be more slain Horde than kaldorei.

But Saurfang had anticipated that. He didn't like it, but when you threatened an enemy's home and invaded their land, you paid a certain price.

*If this is the cost of ending the next war before it truly begins, it is worth it.*

A messenger arrived at the inn—a Forsaken, bearing the mark of the warchief's personal honor guard. "High Overlord Saurfang? Outside, now."

Saurfang turned a scathing eye toward him for only a moment. *This one needs to learn respect.* Then he returned his attention to the maps. "Deliver your message and get out."

"The warchief is waiting for you. Do you not follow her commands, High Overlord?" the undead man asked.

If Saurfang had spoken like that to his first warchief, Blackhand, his head would have been lopped off his shoulders. But he obeyed. *This one isn't worth killing.* Saurfang took three steps toward the door and then remembered his axe, still lying on the table. Fatigue was catching up with him. With a grunt, he returned for it.



Morka, the guard, stepped past Saurfang, her eyes locked onto the messenger. "What is your name, errand boy?"

"I am the emissary of my queen," the messenger said. "That should be enough for the likes of *you*."

Saurfang's hand closed upon the handle of his axe. "She asked you a question," he growled. "What is your name?"

"You have your orders. Outside, High Overlord. How long will you disobey the warchief?" the Forsaken asked blandly.

Saurfang's jaw clenched hard. He slipped a glance toward Morka and stepped forward.

"I do not believe you care a bit for the warchief," Saurfang said. Not even the most blindly fervent Forsaken would act this way. But someone who was trying to *imitate* one ... "Tell me, night elf, what name does Malfurion call you?"

The messenger's expression did not shift, but his fingers twitched. Toward his waist.

That was enough. Saurfang raised his axe and roared. "Draw your blades, assassin, or die running!"

Then he charged.

The Forsaken-disguised creature snatched up his hidden daggers. The tips of his blades drew black trails of faint smoke in the air. Even a scratch would likely prove fatal. As Saurfang swung his axe, the assassin dropped to a knee and sliced at the orc's legs.

*He must be young*, Saurfang thought. Older fighters knew better than to waste their one chance of survival on a complicated strike.

Before the knives could reach him, his boot caught the assassin beneath the chin, lifting him to his feet. The axe struck home, cleaving through the neck and slamming to a stop against his backbone.

The disguise vanished, and Saurfang stared into the eyes of the night elf who had tried to kill him. He *was* young—barely more than a boy by night elf standards. Saurfang wrenched his axe free and let the enemy fall. The youth hit the floor with a sickening thud, and the wooden boards became wet with his blood. His eyes still held on to Saurfang's face.

Saurfang would remember his expression. It was one of the terrible truths of war: the young died, and the survivors were cursed with remembering how it happened. "Rest easy," Saurfang told him. "You died with honor. No one can ask for more."



The elf's face contorted, and for a moment, Saurfang believed he was about to cry. But no—with his last breath, the dying rogue spit onto Saurfang's boots, leaving streaks of blood and saliva across his armor. Then he went still.

Morka stepped next to Saurfang, a small axe in each of her hands. It had been over too fast for her to use them. "Defiant until the end," she noted. "His people would be proud."

Saurfang agreed. *Such spirit. And I never even learned his name.*

"You did well, spotting this assassin," Saurfang told her. "But he never should have come this far."

He strode outside, snarling. There were siege crews, guards, and soldiers all around. Astranaar was swimming with Horde, and not one of them had marked the stranger walking through their midst. Not one had challenged him.

He would enjoy explaining that to them in excruciating detail.

"Listen well!" he began. Heads turned toward him. Eyes glanced at the blood on his axe and armor. "Does the Horde need a reminder that *we are in a war*? Does the Horde need—"

And then he stopped. His next heartbeats seemed to last an eternity. His fatigue-addled mind had finally caught up with his hard-earned survival instincts. That boy had not been sent to kill him.

He had been trying to lead Saurfang *outside*.

In his haste to lecture his guards, Saurfang had done exactly what that boy had wanted. *You just killed yourself, you old fool.* He turned and flung himself back into the inn. An instant later, the ground shook as Malfurion Stormrage landed where he had been standing.

"*Lok-Narash!*" he yelled. *To arms!*

His advisors and tacticians were already forming a line in the common room, pulling him behind it and standing at the ready. Like many night elf buildings, this one had open walls on three sides, giving them a view of the chaos roiling outside. Siege crews scrambled away from Malfurion, only to fall from arrows and blades in their backs.

This wasn't just Malfurion. This was the kaldorei's last stand in Ashenvale, a decapitation strike on the commander of this battle. And Saurfang—they had drawn him in so easily. Astranaar was an island with limited access. Easily defensible.

Impossible to escape.

And Saurfang had just taken shelter in a building with few walls. To fight an archdruid.

*This is the end.*



As the sounds of chaos rose outside, the inn darkened. Malfurion Stormrage stepped through the doorway, eyes fixed on Saurfang. Three of the high overlord's advisors charged him.

"Stop!" Saurfang shouted.

Malfurion moved, and the metallic claws strapped to his wrists made short work of the two orcs and the blood elf. He stepped forward, over their bodies.

Morka grabbed Saurfang by the shoulder. "Run, High Overlord," she said. "We will give you time."

No, they wouldn't. Not more than a heartbeat. It was time to die with honor. "Take the maps," he whispered. "Get them to the warchief."

Morka's eyes went wide, but Saurfang turned away, roaring, "Malfurion Stormrage! I challenge you to mak'gora!"

The words sounded bizarre to his own ears. What use did a night elf have for an orcish duel to the death? It didn't matter. Malfurion was here for Saurfang. He would not pursue a bunch of advisors.

Saurfang looked at the other Horde soldiers in the inn. Seeing their confusion, he raised his voice even louder. "Stormrage is *mine*, you gutless whelps! If you are not out of this inn in five seconds, I will kill you myself!"

Morka looked furious, but she obeyed. She snatched up the map container and sprinted out of the building. The rest quickly followed.

Malfurion's eyes did not leave Saurfang's. "A duel, Saurfang?" he asked in a soft voice—soft like the eye of a storm, like the freshly dug soil of a grave. The archdruid stepped forward calmly to where Saurfang waited. "Do you think I care in the slightest for a duel?"

"You can run, if you're afraid," Saurfang said. He was buying time. That was all. The only victory Saurfang could hope for was for the latest Horde troop movements to be delivered to Sylvanas's hands so the battle might continue. "Or fight me, and see if I will fall."

Malfurion said nothing. He raised his arms. The inn trembled. The wooden floor and ceiling creaked and groaned.

Saurfang's lips pulled back into a snarl. The power of nature was not found in the swing of a fist or the slice of a blade. It was found when a forest was rent to dust by fire and yet returned in only a few years. It was found when a mighty city was claimed by overgrowth after being abandoned for a decade. It was found in a thousand generations of predator and prey, which lived and hunted by the instincts of their ancestors.



In the hands of a druid, that power could be condensed from centuries into a minute. In Malfurion's hands ...

This inn, and everything in it, would be returned to the earth in seconds.

Saurfang leapt forward, axe swinging, as vines and roots tore apart the inn. Malfurion stepped clear of his blow effortlessly, and the metal claws strapped to his hands darted toward Saurfang's head. The orc batted them away with his axe shaft. Barely.

Saurfang roared, his axe whistled, and Malfurion's second strike snaked through a gap in his armor around the shoulder.

Blood dripped to the floor. Roots, countless roots, a whole *forest* of roots grabbed at Saurfang's ankles. He danced away, chopping the plants whenever they tried to snare him.

When pieces of the inn started to fall around the orc's head, he accepted his death. Against a creature like Stormrage, there was no dishonor in failure. Saurfang simply had to meet his end without surrender.

A sudden blast knocked him from his feet, dazing him. Saurfang closed his eyes. *It is done.* His hands went numb, tingling from the dark power that roared through the ruins of the inn—

*Dark power?*

Saurfang opened his eyes. Malfurion was not looking at him. His arms were crossed in front of his face as an arrow, wreathed in shades of violet smoke, exploded just before him. Emerald light rose against the darkness, and Malfurion charged to fight Sylvanas Windrunner, who had another arrow nocked and drawn at point-blank range.

Saurfang would have leapt to his feet, but his legs wouldn't obey his commands.

Then the inn collapsed on top of him, and he was surrounded by darkness and pain. But he wasn't dead. Not yet.

Death wasn't supposed to hurt this much.



*The truly irritating thing about the night elves, Nathanos grumbled to himself, is that they are far too steadfast.*

Most creatures lost a step when the jaws of imminent defeat snapped shut around them. A frightened animal would bolt with unnatural speed, but when the inevitability of death asserted itself, they would slow down. The last bit of comfort they could give themselves was not to die tired. The



kaldorei did not see things that way. Nathanos was forced to hunt down each and every one of them to the bitter end.

It had lost its fun a while ago.

He returned to Astranaar, berating himself. Dozens of night elves, including Malfurion Stormrage, had escaped the village after their assault. Nathanos had only tracked down two, and he doubted anyone else had gotten a single one. Even Sylvanas would probably return empty-handed.

But then, she was tracking the biggest prey of all. He had no excuse.

Astranaar was no longer in chaos. The wounded were being tended to, the dead were accounted for, and the living had returned to the business of war, albeit a touch shaken. There was nothing quite like facing a creature who had commanded the wilds for more than ten thousand years.

*If nothing else, the ungrateful masses of the Horde will finally give the warchief the respect she has earned.* Over and over again, Malfurion had come to crush groups of Horde, and she had intervened. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of lives had been saved because of her.

She had always deserved nothing less than their total devotion, but now, she would also have their regard.

*It is about time.*

Several soldiers dug frantically through the rubble of the town's inn, where Saurfang had apparently fallen. If the rumors were true, he had perished in a duel with Stormrage. The rescue was overseen by an orc Nathanos recognized. *She took my dagger from me*, he thought with amusement.

"Did he die well?" Nathanos asked.

Morka looked up from the rubble with irritation. "He was still alive, last I saw him. Care to help?" Her voice had an edge to it.

Nathanos wordlessly began lifting rubble away. Whether Saurfang was dead or alive, the Horde needed to move forward, and sentimental types would have trouble doing so until they knew the high overlord's fate.

Ten minutes later, someone shouted out, "He's alive!" A flurry of hands descended to lift the last few beams and planks off the orc commander, and Saurfang was pulled to his feet to rousing cheers from every soldier in Astranaar. The orc was bloody, weary, but clearly alive.

*Good. I would hate to miss witnessing the death of so thick-headed an orc.* Nathanos waited for the healers to assess the damage—a few gashes, some cracked ribs, and a host of bruises, all of which were mended quickly—before approaching the high overlord. Saurfang sat on the rubble, catching his breath, looking down at the ground.



"Did you have a good rest?" Nathanos said.

Saurfang coughed and snorted. "Best sleep I've had in days. How goes the battle?"

"You tell me, High Overlord," the Forsaken said. "What is our next move?"

"Did Stormrage get away from you again?" Saurfang gave him a flat stare.

Nathanos tamped down a flash of anger. "After he escaped you, yes."

Saurfang spit. "Then we proceed as planned. What are our scouts telling us? Where are the night elves pulling back to?"

Morka spoke up. "They're leaving Ashenvale. We think they're abandoning this land."

A murmur ran through the assembled Horde. The soldiers in the central path moved aside. Sylvanas Windrunner had returned, striding straight toward Nathanos.

Disappointingly, Malfurion's head was not in her hands.

Saurfang raised his voice. "Is it true, Warchief? They have abandoned this region?"

Sylvanas nodded. She spoke to the entire crowd. "Ashenvale belongs to the Horde."

A roar went up, spreading quickly. The soldiers raised fists and weapons, bellowing cries of victory. Nathanos did not smile. The war was not yet won.

Sylvanas turned toward Saurfang. Her voice slipped beneath the din so only Saurfang and Nathanos could hear her. "Can you still fight, High Overlord? Are you prepared for the end?"

Saurfang rapped the flat of his axe against his armor. "I am ready, Warchief. Let us take Darnassus for the Horde."



The night elves had completely pulled out of Ashenvale. Once the Horde realized there were no more ambushes, no more traps, and no more enemies, they raced forward. Everyone wanted to be at the front when the time came to assault the World Tree. The promise of glory danced in the mind of every soldier—Saurfang knew it.

The army's front lines reached the west coast of Kalimdor within a few hours. Saurfang quickly assessed the terrain. The path from the enchanted forests of Ashenvale bent north into a smaller forest. That path would lead all the way to Darkshore.



Resistance would be fierce. The night elves had given up Ashenvale because it offered no more places to make a stand. Here, along the coast, the impassable mountain ranges squeezed the forest into a narrow strip of land. Darnassus's last, desperate defense would no doubt happen there.

Malfurion would be in charge. The longer the Horde delayed, the more time the archdruid had to prepare.

Saurfang ordered the army to set up a brief staging ground on the open shores near the ruins of Zoram'gar Outpost. The night elves would never leave the safety of the trees to attack an exposed space, so the Horde could repair their equipment, eat, drink, rest, and tend to their aches and pains without fear of reprisal.

"We are close, Horde," Saurfang said. "This is your last chance to rest. Be ready. We will take the World Tree before nightfall."

Saurfang and Sylvanas crouched over the map to plan their final moves. They agreed there was no need for complicated maneuvers—push forward, find the enemy, and deal with them as best as they could.

"I will lead the assault," Saurfang said. "You should stay behind."

That earned him a raised brow from the warchief. "Malfurion will be there, High Overlord," she said.

"I need him to unleash everything. Stormrage wants my head. He will not hold back. From that, we will see the extent of his defenses, and we can plan how to overcome them."

The corners of Sylvanas's mouth twitched. "I will stay on the edge of the forest, if you wish." It was clear she did not expect him to survive.

He didn't blame her.

There was no shortage of volunteers to accompany Saurfang. Within ten minutes, he and more than one hundred Horde soldiers stepped into the woods to the north, keeping a little distance between each other while remaining close enough to fight together. Saurfang gripped his axe tightly, eyes scanning the trees before him, waiting for Stormrage to show himself.

Minutes passed. The Horde moved forward, step by step, silent but for their footfalls on dirt and leaves. The terrain was not flat, but it was not difficult to traverse. Small creeks cut through the forest, and each time Saurfang crossed one, he expected arrows to whistle toward his head, or roots to snatch his ankles and pull him beneath the water. Neither happened. A few wisps flitted about idly, but they were harmless in small numbers. Most of them stayed up high in the branches.



The forest was quiet. Still. Empty. The Horde soldiers kept glancing upward to inspect the trees, but the canopy wasn't as thick as in Ashenvale. The wisps up there glowed, offering plenty of illumination and banishing the shadows. The night elves could not ambush the Horde from there.

*There is no chance they abandoned this place*, Saurfang thought. But that was how it appeared.

Before long, he saw the sandy beaches of Darkshore through the trees, and still there was no enemy. He faintly saw movement—night elf civilians on the shore, evacuating from the World Tree. A few of them pointed at Saurfang and the Horde, shouting out warnings.

*Is Malfurion waiting for nightfall?* The sun plummeted toward the horizon, but the Horde would have Darkshore long before dark if they faced no resistance.

Saurfang's skin crawled. His instincts told him he was walking into a trap, but retreating before it was sprung would gain him nothing. He kept moving forward. *We have to force Malfurion to reveal himself.*

A wisp flew past Saurfang's eyes. He absently waved it away with his left hand. It stung—the wisp seemed to lash out at Saurfang's exposed palm. It darted around and then landed on the top of his scalp, covering his head.

Saurfang snarled as the wisp snapped its power onto his skin again. He swatted it away, hard. More wisps floated high in the trees, moving in distressed, agitated patterns. Saurfang supposed they didn't like what he had done.

Whispered curses and grunts drew his attention. Other Horde members were slapping more wisps away. Saurfang went still. It wasn't unusual for wisps to gather and frolic before sunset, but they were not aggressive. Not normally.

But he had seen it happen before, hadn't he?

High above Mount Hyjal, a demonic lord had stridden toward Nordrassil, intending to claim its power for the Burning Legion. Saurfang had fought in that battle, desperately holding back the tides of demons ...

... while Malfurion Stormrage had beckoned for the aid of his ancestors ...

... and thousands, nay, *millions* of wisps had answered his call ...

In small numbers, wisps were harmless.

In large numbers ...

"Retreat!" Saurfang bellowed. "Horde, retreat now! Run!"



Most of the Horde soldiers obeyed his command, but many did not recognize the danger and were slow to flee.

A voice thundered through the forest, promising vengeance. “*Ash karath*,” said Malfurion Stormrage.

The wisps descended from the branches as a solid, writhing, glowing wall. They surrounded the stragglers and the slow runners, embracing them in a cocoon of light from which only screams of agony escaped.

“*Run!*” Saurfang shouted again, and now, there was no more hesitation. The Horde fled, dropping weapons and shields and armor, scrambling to safety. None of them had been at Mount Hyjal that day, but they all knew the story.

Wisps tore at the high overlord’s armor. He covered his head with his arms and ran desperately. The heat of the wisps’ fury—the rage of the kaldorei’s ancestors—tried to burn through his armor, to sear the flesh within, to burrow into his bones and guts and rip him apart.

The power of wisps had destroyed a demonic lord. They would butcher the mortals of the Horde.

Saurfang’s armored boots were heavy, threatening to catch on roots and rocks in his way. To lose his footing would mean death, but he kept running until finally he escaped the woods and emerged onto the shore. Gasping, he turned back to see how many others would make it.

More than a hundred Horde had entered the forest. Less than a dozen emerged on the shore near Zoram’gar Outpost. The wisps buzzed angrily at the edge of the woods, weaving in erratic patterns, waiting for the Horde to step into their embrace again. They stretched in a solid wall from the shoreline to the mountains. The entire forest to the north was protected.

Sylvanas stood motionless in the open, watching it all, her expression unreadable.

The wisps parted in the center of the forest, just a bit, allowing the Horde soldiers to see deep within the woods. There, standing atop a small rise, were Malfurion Stormrage and many other night elves.

“This ends now,” Malfurion said. His voice carried out of the forest and across the exposed shore. “The Horde will not take a single step farther into our land, not without paying with their lives. This I vow.”

The wisps closed ranks, and Malfurion disappeared.

Sylvanas did not take her eyes away from where he had been.



Saurfang stared for a while, collecting his thoughts. His terror had passed. Now, he considered tactical options. The wisps were going nowhere. They would fall upon any enemy who approached.

*We cannot cross that line. Not easily.* He could fling his entire army into that death trap, but he was not sure the Horde would win. He could order every mage to set fire to the trees, but he was not sure the flames would catch—the wisps might simply circle the fire and dissipate the heat.

Siege weapons. That was the answer—ranged attacks arcing into the trees from a safe distance until Malfurion and his allies were forced to retreat. The Horde held the shore already. All Saurfang needed to do—

“Alliance! Alliance ships! Southwest!”

The cry pierced his thoughts, and Saurfang’s heart sank. Flashes of weapons’ fire rippled across the sea. Glaives and cannon shots soared over the water, and explosions rattled across the exposed shoreline, gouging great holes into the ranks of the Horde.

The night elf fleet had returned. Perhaps the ships had been waiting—just out of sight beyond the edge of the coast—for the Horde to walk into Malfurion’s trap. Now they could fire uncontested on the Horde army.

*The night elves have found their miracle.* The Horde could not hold the shore. It would be a slaughter if they did not retreat. “Back to the trees! Back to Ashenvale!” Saurfang called out.

His subordinates picked up the cry, and soon, the Horde was moving. Retreating. Alliance fire chased them all the way into the cover of the forests to the east.

Sylvanas did not move. She barely even glanced at the ocean. Saurfang and his guards remained near her at the edge of the northern forest. The fleet would not fire upon them, not here, so close to their departed ancestors.

“The night elves have outmaneuvered us, High Overlord,” Sylvanas said. She sounded irritated.

“Yes, they have.”

“We cannot advance into this forest, and we cannot bring our siege weapons onto the shore without losing them,” she said. “The Alliance’s reinforcements will arrive before we can break this the hard way. Do you disagree?”

“No, Warchief.” Saurfang could not imagine a solution that would work. And yes, the “hard way” would take too long, if it worked at all. Maybe—*maybe*—with some teamwork between magi, warlocks, and shaman, the Horde could force the wisps back one tree at a time and then destroy the tree, eliminating cover inch by inch. But managing it all while under attack from the water? It



would take weeks. The Alliance reinforcements would arrive, making it impossible to cross the waters from Darkshore.

As it stood, the night elves would win this battle.

Now the Horde needed a miracle.

Sylvanas stepped closer to the wisps, regarding them calmly. Saurfang ground his teeth but said nothing. She faced down the wall of swarming lights as though it were Malfurion himself. And perhaps, that was not inaccurate.

Sylvanas spun around. "I am prepared to duel Malfurion alone."

Saurfang wasn't sure he had ever heard a worse idea, not with circumstances this dire. "Warchief—"

She cut him off. "I know. I would be facing him, his remaining army, *and* the spirits of his ancestors by myself. That will be ... difficult to overcome," she said dryly. "But we almost have them. I will not retreat."

The night elven ships fired again. Shots landed close by, explosions sending geysers of sand leaping into the air. A few of Saurfang's guards flinched. Sylvanas didn't. Neither did Saurfang. *They're just testing their range*, he knew.

"Wisps are dangerous only in large numbers," Saurfang said. "Can you ... kill them, Warchief? Enough of them?"

Sylvanas eyed the wisps for a few moments, then shook her head. "Not enough to matter. But we can disperse them. Take anyone you need, Saurfang, and go into Felwood. Find a path over the mountains into Darkshore, and sweep into this forest from the rear. When I hear the attack begin, I will lead the remainder of the Horde through the front. We will squeeze Malfurion from both sides. He will fall today."

"Warchief, there is no route through Felwood," Saurfang said.

"Find one or make one," she responded coldly. "Leave the siege weapons under my command, along with any of your guards who can swim."

"Swim?" Saurfang said.

"I will need them to deal with the fleet," she said.



"How many smugglers do you know?" Saurfang asked.



Nathanos narrowed his eyes. "I beg your pardon?"

"The warchief has commanded us to find a route over the mountains in Felwood." Saurfang removed his armor and splashed water on his face before downing an entire waterskin. It was going to be a hard journey. "There's a road to Winterspring up there. Unless I am supposed to believe that the black market ships all its cargo through Azshara"—*though, with Gallywix in charge, that wouldn't surprise me*—"then there has to be a hidden route somewhere in Felwood. Somewhere with access to Darkshore, away from the eyes of the kaldorei."

"Most smugglers do not advertise," Nathanos said, "and they will not want the attention of the high overlord."

"These are the warchief's orders, Blightcaller," Saurfang snarled. "All we need is *one* smuggler more loyal to the Horde than their profits. Do you truly know of *nobody* who can help?"

"I know somebody," Nathanos said curtly.

"Find them and bring them." Saurfang turned toward his guards. "Who among you can swim well?"

Almost all of them raised their hands.

Morka spoke up. "I want to accompany you, High Overlord."

He shook his head and pulled his armor back on. "I need speed, not protection. And the warchief needs swimmers. Follow her orders, and I will see you all when the battle is done."

Saurfang hopped into the saddle of a timber wolf and took the reins. Many other riders scrambled to prepare for the journey. "Felwood will not be friendly to us," he told them. "But we succeed, or the Horde will know defeat. Let's ride!"

He dug his heels into the wolf's ribs. The beast lurched forward, racing toward Ashenvale. Nathanos cursed, furious at being left behind.

Saurfang felt not a whit of sympathy. *He'll catch up*. If there was one thing Nathanos would never do, it was let down his warchief.

The line of riders stretched out behind Saurfang. The dust they kicked up hung in the air, dimming the falling sun.





Twilight came. Sylvanas remained close to the forest, only a few steps away from the swarm of wisps. They shivered and spun among the trees, agitated at her presence. She could feel their hatred, their rage. Even these gentle spirits of fallen kaldorei loathed Sylvanas for what she was.

She let their hate wash over her. It was as sweet as nectar, knowing that they despised her so. They would love to rip her to shreds, but they would have to dart out into the open to do that, and that would make them vulnerable. Even after death, these creatures still clung to existence.

She understood that impulse perfectly.

One of the wisps spun anxiously, jittering with fury. Sylvanas turned a smile toward it. "Stop me, if you can," she whispered.

The wisp sprang forward alone, whirling straight toward the warchief's head. She caught it between her hands, and the spirit shrieked with panic. It shimmered, writhing and struggling.

Sylvanas held it up before her eyes, studying it closely. "You wish to defend the living?" she asked.

The wisp's light flickered with terror.

"Is that all you can dream of now? To protect your descendants?" She cupped her other hand over it, trapping it between her palms. It bounced against her hands, trying to escape. "You did a poor job of it in life. Why should death be any different?"

She squeezed, and the spirit's power crackled and vanished. When she opened her hands, only blackened dust remained. She wiped off her palms and turned her back to the forest.

*Soon, Malfurion. Soon.*

The night elves' ships fired again, though not at any particular target; the shots landed on empty shorelines, killing nothing but a few crawlers. It was intimidation and little more.

The Horde's scouts had used their spyglasses to give Sylvanas the information she needed. The ships were fully crewed, including a complement of archers on a few vessels, and well stocked for an extended mission in southern Kalimdor.

The sane thing would be to bombard the vessels with artillery until they retreated. Unfortunately, she would lose almost every siege weapon at her command. Sylvanas would give that order only as a last resort.

For now, she did nothing. They could sit out there, firing on the shorelines, and she could wait. She would use the time to prepare the next stage of this battle—the final stage, one way or the other.

She returned to the army inside the eastern forests. "Soldiers of the Horde, listen carefully ..."





“... You will be outnumbered. You will be outarmed. They will kill every one of you if you are spotted. Even if they do not, your fellow Horde soldiers may do the job for them and slay you by accident,” Sylvanas had told them. Then she had smiled. “Now ... how many of you would like to volunteer?”

Everyone gathered before her had raised their hand, including Morka. *What a story this will make for my children*, she thought. Even if she did not survive, they would sing songs about everyone who took part in this raid, she was certain of it.

“Very well,” Sylvanas had said. “Siege crews, stay under cover until you see me enter the northern forest. Only then will you roll out onto the sand and begin your bombardment. Raiders, begin your swim the moment Saurfang launches his attack.”

As ordered, the volunteers had organized themselves into small groups. Fifteen per ship—that was how it would shake out. Against a full kaldorei crew, each group would indeed be outnumbered. But the goal was not to win in a fair fight, oh no. Sylvanas had assigned magi to each siege crew. When the Horde fired back, they would do so with unstable, explosive, arcane-touched payloads that could set an entire ship ablaze.

Morka stripped off her armor and kept only a couple of small daggers lashed to her leather belt. She would swim beneath the artillery barrage to eliminate the ships the Horde’s siege engines could not reach.

*Or even better*, Morka thought, *take the ships for the Horde*.

Warchief-approved piracy. Was there anything better?



Nathanos’s irritation faded long before he caught up with Saurfang. He clung tightly to the reins of the Darkspear raptor as it raced through Felwood. The beast huffed with each step, but it had kept its pace all through Ashenvale, even with two riders on its back.

The other passenger, a troll named Rejiji, had grumbled the entire ride. “Be wantin’ more action dan dis,” he said again and again.

Finally, Nathanos spotted Saurfang’s large group of soldiers on the path ahead. The raptor skidded to a stop, and Rejiji was thrown off its back, landing hard on the ground.



Nathanos nimbly leapt from the raptor, checking on the troll. It would have been just perfect to have the Horde's source of information break his neck in a stupid accident, but Rejiji jumped to his feet, skin flushed with embarrassment.

Saurfang pretended he had not seen the mishap. "Nathanos. We have not been able to find a route on our own. Have you brought an answer to the Horde's problems?"

"I have," Nathanos said, gesturing toward the troll. "This one had close dealings with the Shatterspear tribe."

Saurfang's brow furrowed. "Shatterspear?"

"Used to be livin' near Darkshore," Rejiji said, brushing the dirt off his cloak. "Fled after da Cataclysm."

"And there is a path connecting Felwood and Darkshore?" Saurfang asked.

Rejiji lifted his chin. "So I be hearin'. Many be escapin' along it. No easy journey, but I hear we be takin' anyting we can get."

"You heard correctly." Saurfang gave Nathanos a suspicious glare. "But you've never walked the path yourself?"

"No, High Overlord," the troll said.

"Can you find it?"

The troll shrugged. "Probably."



By midday, Saurfang was exhausted.

The troll hadn't lied about the journey's difficulty. The route to Darkshore wasn't so much a path as a cliff. But the steep rocks and soil had enough handholds to allow the Horde troops to scramble up the mountain and lower themselves down the other side. They'd had to leave their mounts behind, but that wasn't unexpected.

Most of the soldiers had managed the climb safely. Several had slipped and would have to ride back through Felwood nursing broken bones.

Rejiji had scaled the route as though he had done it a thousand times before. *He probably has*, Saurfang thought. He wasn't angry at being lied to. Nathanos was right—no smuggler would want to admit what they were to the high overlord. If the troll wanted to pretend he had picked up this



knowledge from Shatterspear refugees, Saurfang would play along, even if the system of ropes and pulleys scattered along the way marked the path as a smuggler's route.

Once they cleared the mountain peak, Saurfang got his first unobstructed view of Darkshore in a long time. He could see all the way north to the World Tree and very nearly all the way south to where the Horde was currently stymied.

Beneath the mountains, on Darkshore, night elf civilians milled around the beaches. They had taken small boats from Darnassus, and they looked as if they were waiting for larger, passenger-bearing vessels for a long journey.

Saurfang pointed out the small boats to Nathanos. They were only lightly guarded. They would be destroyed the moment the night elves understood that the battle was truly lost. "Once we reach the shore, secure those," he said quietly. "They will be useful when we take the tree."

He half expected Nathanos to argue, but the Forsaken agreed. "I want to be in the first assault on Darnassus," he said.

"Fine," Saurfang replied. "We'll wait for the warchief to join us."

He could see the remainder of the night elves' army, scattered among the trees, guarding Malfurion Stormrage, who stood atop a hill in the center of the forest.

There were no wisps near him. They were all on the front lines, holding off the bulk of the Horde's forces.

Saurfang and the others silently crawled down to the wreckage of the Shatterspear encampment, which had been abandoned but for a large family of foxes that hid the moment they saw the Horde approach.

"You know what to do," he whispered to his troops. "You know the goal."

He peeked over the edge of a rise, looking at the unsuspecting kaldorei. "We take the shore, we take the forest, and then we take Darnassus."

Saurfang leapt over the hill and charged down. Nathanos and the rest, the hundreds of Horde who had followed the high overlord over the mountains, kept pace, echoing his war cry.

"For the Horde!"



Sylvanas smiled. The wisps were flickering. They looked confused. Indecisive. Some of them left the front and raced back into the trees.



An unmistakable cry echoed through the forest. "For the Horde!" The flanking attack had begun.

*Excellent work, Saurfang.*

It was time. Sylvanas stepped into a cluster of wisps. She reached out, searching for those tiny motes of life that were the spirits of the kaldorei's ancestors. Before they could attack, she unleashed her power. The pain and horror of the terrible, terrible gifts the Lich King had given her escaped her mouth in a shriek, and dark smoke radiated from her.

The wisps fell all around her, winking softly in their futile attempts to cling to life, like snowflakes caught in the rays of sunrise. The Horde roared their battle cries and charged into the forest behind her, clubs and blades at the ready.

Sylvanas nocked an arrow and strode through the forest. No more wisps approached her. The Horde soldiers swung their clubs and the flats of their blades, swatting the wisps out of the air. A few flickered and disappeared. Many simply fled.

*Malfurion knows it is over.* He had decided to spare his ancestors from their inevitable end at the hands of the Horde.

Soon enough, she saw him, waiting for her. The other Horde gave him a wide berth, but she strode toward him without hesitation.

Malfurion Stormrage looked sorrowful. "There will be no forgiveness for this, Sylvanas."

"I know," she replied.

And then the time for talking had passed.

*Lok-tar ogar*, she thought, unable to suppress a sharp grin.

Behind her, on the shores, her siege weapons fired their payloads. Then came the explosions, both on shore and far out to sea.



Morka came up for breath and emerged into a world on fire.

*The warchief wasn't kidding*, she thought, fighting back panic. *Someone could get hurt out here.*

The Horde's siege engines launched fiery barrages into the sea, their arcane-touched payloads spreading fire around the night elves' fleet. In return, the ships unleashed volleys of cannon shots and glaives onto the shore.



Morka's group of raiders swam past the front lines of the fleet, surfacing only to take a quick breath every few strokes. Soon it became dangerous to surface at all. The siege weapons' magic-laced shots were lethal even in water, fire blooming outward, stubbornly burning as though the ocean were as flammable as a drought-ravaged forest.

The raiders had been forced to swim beneath the flames for almost a full minute before they found a clear patch of water.

Morka's raiding party surfaced near her, gasping for breath. Morka did the count in her head. *Eleven ... twelve ... fourteen ...* Nobody was missing. That was close to a miracle.

A tauren had surfaced last. He seemed to spit up half the ocean before regaining his composure. He turned an evil eye toward her. "We're *past* the fleet now," he snarled.

"You're welcome to swim back," she retorted. Then she looked closely at him. "Don't I know you?"

He snorted, accidentally inhaling a bit of water in doing so. It took a moment for his coughing fit to end. "We shared a few drinks in Orgrimmar not too long ago."

"Oh. *Oh.*" What was his name? Lanagu? Something like that. She made her best guess. "Are you ready, Lanagas?"

He looked confused. "My name is Hiamo."

"I'm terrible with names. Ready?"

He nodded. The others had gathered around. Morka made the last few strokes to the night elven ship and climbed the side, using small gaps in the wooden planks as finger holds until she reached the cannon ports.

Morka peeked into a port. She was on the seaward side of the ship. Inside, the kaldorei crew loaded and fired cannons and glaive throwers, and through the portholes opposite, she could see other ships on fire and sinking. This ship had been untouched, though. The Horde siege engines had targeted vessels closer to shore first.

Nobody was manning the cannons on this side. Nobody was even paying attention. After all, why would attackers approach from the *ocean*?

Hiamo gripped the same cannon port and glanced inside. "What do you think?" he whispered.

Morka waited for a few others to join them. An idea was forming. "I see a couple choices. We could set a few fires, jump back in the water, and swim to shore underneath a half-mile of flames," she said.



A blood elf raised a brow at her. "Or?"

"Anyone care to sail to Darkshore instead?"

She saw every Horde face grinning back at her.



Saurfang stalked openly through the forest. The kaldorei had tried to defend in two directions, and their last stand had crumbled. Their battle lines had broken; their ranks had scattered.

Now the survivors were doing the last, desperate act a losing army could do—bunching up into small groups and defending against all sides until they were brought down. Saurfang believed he had seen one of the night elves' ranking officers, a Sentinel, fight on despite being hit by several arrows. Brave. Honorable. And hopeless.

Saurfang fought anyone in his way, but there were fewer and fewer elves left standing. He followed the sounds of a terrifying battle. Near the shore was a monstrous clash between two powerful creatures.

*The warchief battles Stormrage alone.*

If Sylvanas fell, it would be up to Saurfang to finish the job. He was not sure he could.

The fighting was still hundreds of feet away. Saurfang crept toward it, watching flashes of dark violet and emerald green ahead.

There was a tremendous explosion of darkness, and then a rising sound of collapsing trees. Saurfang ducked behind cover as an object flew through the air, bouncing off tree trunks before slamming to a halt in the dirt only thirty feet away.

The object raised its head—*his* head.

Saurfang saw antlers. Without thinking, he threw his axe.

The moment it left his hands, he wanted to call it back. That was Malfurion Stormrage, alive and preparing to rejoin the fight against the warchief.

The axe flipped end over end, crossing the distance in a second.

Malfurion did not sense it. Not until it was buried deep in his back.

Malfurion staggered, lifted his eyes to the night sky, and let out a breath. He collapsed. Saurfang's axe handle stood at an angle, embedded in the elf's flesh.

Saurfang felt no elation, only horror.



This was wrong. This was ... shameful.

War was war, but Saurfang had lost a duel with Stormrage. And now he had struck him down from behind.

*A dishonorable blow, Saurfang thought numbly. He is a hero of ten thousand years of war. I once fought at his side. And now I've felled him like a coward.*

Saurfang did not want to look upon what he had done, but he forced himself to. Malfurion lay on his stomach, bleeding, breathing shallow, rattling breaths.

"I am sorry," Saurfang told him.

"Do not be."

Saurfang turned. Sylvanas stood next to him, smiling contentedly. "You did well."

"I did not mean to interfere," Saurfang said.

"I was having trouble finishing him. He was wasting my time." Sylvanas ripped the axe free from Stormrage. The night elf grunted with pain, and blood gushed out of the wound, but he made no other sound.

"Finish him and be done with it," Saurfang said quietly.

Sylvanas hefted his axe, considering it. Then she looked back at Saurfang. He could not read her expression, but he did not like it.

She handed the axe back to him. "I leave it to you, High Overlord."

"This was your fight."

She was already walking away. "This is your victory. None of this—not this battle, not Malfurion's defeat—would have happened without you. You have earned this honor. Take a moment, if you'd like, and then take his head. I will meet you in Darkshore."

And with that, she disappeared over a rise to the north.

Saurfang felt numb. *You have earned this honor.*

He looked down on Malfurion again. "I truly am sorry."

Malfurion turned his head. One eye looked up at Saurfang. He rasped, "You have led your Horde in the service of death. You will regret this day until you die."

"You fought well, Malfurion," Saurfang said. "Rest in honor. You deserve it."

He lifted his axe. And hesitated. Seconds passed, then whole minutes, and Saurfang could not bring it down.



He felt light and warmth shine upon him from above. It held sorrow, hope, and love. Perhaps this was Elune welcoming Malfurion to the next life. Perhaps that made this acceptable.

*But this kill is not mine.*

Perhaps it would be honorable to let Stormrage live.

*In Sylvanas's care? It is more merciful to end him now.*

Still his axe did not move.

And then, very suddenly, he could not move at all.

Bright light enveloped Saurfang, paralyzing him, making it impossible to twitch a muscle. A mighty blow slammed into his head, throwing him five paces away. He hit the ground hard. The wind left his lungs in a single rush as he tumbled to a painful stop. When he looked up, he saw the light of Elune, in all its fury and beauty.

Tyrande Whisperwind.

She stood above her mate, arms raised, white dress rippling in the soft breeze. A dozen points of Elune's light hovered over Saurfang's head, poised for a final blow.

The orc did not move. His head was ringing. Those daggers of light trembled above him.

Struck down by the power of justice? It felt appropriate.

But just as he had hesitated, so did she. Tyrande knelt slowly, not taking her eyes off Saurfang while she laid a hand on Malfurion. The ground itself seemed to glow as she used her power to stem his bleeding, repair his injuries, and drag him back from the brink of death.

After a few moments, she stood. "You did not kill him. Why?"

Saurfang decided to tell her the truth. "I struck without honor. I did not deserve to end him."

The answer only seemed to enrage her. "This whole *war* is without honor. What is wrong with you? How dare you spill so much blood for nothing!"

"We dare because we must," Saurfang said. "And we must succeed."

Tyrande's face grew dark. The points of light above his head went still, aiming true at his neck. "The Horde may win this battle, Saurfang, but we will reclaim our home."

"Perhaps," Saurfang said.

"You spared Malfurion, so I will give you a choice," Tyrande said. "You can die trying to stop me from taking him away, or you can stay there, lying in the dirt, and live."



That was fair. Saurfang grunted. “You have the same choice. You can take him back to Darnassus, and both of you will fall when we conquer it, or you can take him far away from here, and you will both live.”

She said nothing. Her free hand produced a white stone with glowing blue markings. A few moments later, both she and Malfurion had vanished.

Saurfang blinked. Where had they gone? For their sake, he hoped it was not Darnassus.

He stood and brushed the dirt off his armor, shrugging away his aches and pains. Malfurion would recover, and when he returned to battle, he would make the Horde pay in blood. Saurfang was certain of it.

Still, a great burden had been lifted from his soul. It felt right that Malfurion had survived. It felt honorable.



The night elf crew had numbered about two dozen. About half had died in the initial fighting, and Morka counted five who had jumped overboard once the battle started to turn.

Seven night elves surrendered. Most were wounded, and all of them stared hatefully at the Horde soldiers who celebrated their victory on the ship.

“What are we going to do with them?” Hiamo asked, lazily twirling one of the night elves’ spears in his huge hands.

Morka gave the prisoners—*her* prisoners—a quick glance.

“First things first. We tell our friends to stop shooting at us,” she said. “Someone take down the flag!”

A goblin scampered to the mast and lowered the flag of the kaldorei. They had no Horde flag to raise in its place, but the message was clear enough. They could hear faint cheering from the shoreline.

A spyglass rolled freely on the blood-smeared deck, and Morka picked it up. She extended it to its full length and swung it in an arc across the battlefield, looking at the other night elven ships. “A few ships burning ... another one to the south captured ... The rest are all running away.” Morka snapped the spyglass closed and smiled at the others. “Victory for the Horde!”

“For the Horde!” the others shouted back.



Morka knelt by one of the wounded night elves. He had a gash in his left forearm and was stemming the bleeding with his right hand. "Tell me, kaldorei," she said, "can you swim with that injury?"

"No," he said.

"Then I suppose you need to stay on this ship," she said lightly. "You and your friends know how to sail, yes?"

He said nothing.

She nodded as if he had said yes. "That is fantastic news, because me and my friends don't. Care to help us sail to Teldrassil?"

He spat on the deck. Several of the Horde laughed.

Morka leaned in close, offering her most insincere smile. "You earn your place on *my* ship by being useful. Hiamo, is the ocean still on fire?" She asked the question without looking away.

The tauren bellowed back in a singing voice, "Yes, it is, oh Captain."

"Make your choice, kaldorei. Be useful, or start swimming." Raising her voice, she added, "That goes for the rest of you, too."

No one chose the ocean.

In a few minutes, the ship lurched north. It was not smooth sailing. The night elves were reluctant help. Through the spyglass, Morka saw that the siege engines were on the move toward Darkshore, traveling faster than the ship.

She didn't care. Morka held the ship's helm and steered with a grin on her face. She could get used to this.

And soon, she would have a front-row seat to the Horde's greatest victory.



The Sentinels were not surrendering. Even as a tide of Horde flooded Darkshore, they fought on, trading their lives to give the civilians of Teldrassil every chance to evacuate.

Sylvanas had no objection. More dead enemies? Fewer prisoners? They were doing her a favor.

She stood away from the front lines, bow slung across her back. The fight was won, but not finished. Her Horde swarmed over the beach carefully. Victory was within reach, across a short expanse of calm ocean. None wanted to fall now.



Nathanos stepped out of the fray, behind the front lines. Sylvanas caught his eye and raised a brow. He approached, absently cleaning blood off his short blades. "Where is Saurfang?"

"Taking a trophy from the biggest prize of the battle," she said.

His eyes widened. "*He* killed Malfurion?"

"How do you think the kaldorei will take it?" Sylvanas asked. "Their legendary leader, the one who's guided them through ten thousand years of trials and terrors, killed by an orc with an axe?"

"Badly, I would imagine."

"So would I," she said.

Nathanos looked past her. His eyes narrowed. "There he is, Warchief. I see no trophy."

Sylvanas turned. Saurfang was indeed striding out of the forest, head held high and hands empty. She felt a hint of irritation. Perhaps he had done something foolish, like burning the body so no trophy could be taken. He looked far too content now, considering how distraught he had been. "Where is Malfurion's head, High Overlord?"

"Attached to his body, as far as I know," he said.

She was not amused. "And where is *that*?"

Saurfang met her eyes without flinching. "Stormwind, I'd guess. Tyrande intervened and took him away."

It wasn't often Sylvanas was left speechless.

It didn't last long. "Malfurion *lives*?" she snarled. "You let him *escape*?"

His lips did not smile, but his eyes did. He was happy—*happy*!—about this. "I could not stop Tyrande. Perhaps you could have."

"Perhaps I made a mistake in trusting you," Sylvanas shot back. Her hands twitched toward her bow. *No. Not yet*, she decided.

Nathanos was at her side, his words cold and biting. "How many Horde lives will Stormrage take in vengeance, Saurfang? Their blood will be on your hands."

"I will deal with that when it comes," Saurfang said simply.

Nathanos stepped forward, chest to chest with Saurfang. "You will deal with me. Perhaps for every drop of blood Malfurion spills, I will collect from you, even if I have to—"

"Enough. What's done is done," Sylvanas said. "This battle is not finished."



She walked away from them. Shortly, she heard footsteps on the sand behind her. Her champion and the high overlord were following her, blessedly holding their tongues. She could imagine their expressions—Saurfang at peace, Nathanos seething—but she did not want them to see hers. Not until her rage had cooled. She needed to think.

*Malfurion will live.* Sylvanas could scarcely believe it.

She took the bow off her back, drew an arrow, and fired. The arrow arced over her Horde and slammed into the back of a Sentinel leader. The night elf was still fighting hard, even with other arrow shafts buried in her body. Sylvanas's blow finally made her fall. With that, the last flickers of real resistance on Darkshore collapsed. She put her bow away again.

This battle was not about a piece of land. Even Saurfang knew that. Taking the World Tree was a way to inflict a wound that could never heal. Losing their homes *and* their leaders would have ended the kaldorei as a nation, if not a people. Even the loss of one leader would have been enough to create a tide of despair. The wounds of this battle would have bled, festered, decayed, and rotted the Alliance from the inside out. Anduin Wrynn would have lashed out in a final, desperate war, looking for a miracle, because only a miracle would save them.

But a miracle already had. A miracle granted by the honorable hand of a foolish old orc.

*And an overconfident warchief.* Best to lay blame where it belonged. This was her mistake as much as Saurfang's.

This conquest of Darnassus would rattle the kaldorei people. They would grieve for their lost, fear for their imprisoned, and tremble at the thought of the Horde ransacking their homes. But they would not fall to despair. Not anymore. Malfurion's impossible survival would give them hope. Their wound would heal.

*Even in this dark hour,* they would say, *Elune still watches over us.*

And that was almost certainly true, wasn't it? Elune *had* intervened. Perhaps she had even stayed Saurfang's killing blow. And she wouldn't be the only force beyond the Alliance to oppose Sylvanas's true objective.

Sylvanas's anger grew cold.

She had known this would happen. It had simply come sooner than expected. That was all.

She strode toward the shoreline, ignoring the last few skirmishes and the wailing of those unfortunate kaldorei who had been unable to escape Darkshore. She studied the shape of Teldrassil towering above her in the moonlight. Soon, it would be in the hands of the Horde.

"Secure the beach," Sylvanas said. "Prepare to invade the tree."



*A wound that cannot heal.* Sylvanas needed to think of a new way to inflict one. There was no turning back.

“Why?”

The voice drew Sylvanas’s attention from the tree. It had come from a mortally wounded Sentinel, the very one Sylvanas had felled only minutes ago. She was coughing. Weak. Dying.

“Why? You’ve already won,” the night elf said, struggling to force the words out. “Only innocents remain in the tree.”

That was good to know, if it was true. Sylvanas knelt next to her. “This is war,” she said.

Saurfang and Nathanos were already discussing logistics for the next step of the battle. She let them talk. Before her was an elf who was dying for her people.

She rather reminded Sylvanas of herself.



Saurfang issued orders rapidly. He organized the siege crews on the beach and made sure they were aimed toward Teldrassil. Scouts undoubtedly watched the Horde from the top of the World Tree. He wanted them to report that the Horde might open fire at any moment.

He glanced over at his warchief. Sylvanas was kneeling next to a dying night elf commander. An impromptu interrogation, Saurfang guessed. *Hopefully she extracts something useful.*

Nathanos conversed quietly with a few soldiers who had some experience at sea, ordering them to sweep the shoreline for every night elven boat and dinghy they could find.

“You may join the first wave, Nathanos,” Saurfang said.

The undead’s eyes glowered from beneath his hood. “I do not need your permission. I have a list from the warchief. Sights I would like to see. People I would like to meet.”

*Too bad for them,* Saurfang thought, ignoring Nathanos’s smoldering contempt. An odd sight at sea caught his eye—two night elven ships sailing very close to the shoreline. “What is that?”

Nathanos squinted. “No night elf flags. We might have captured them. The warchief said it was possible.”

Yes, Saurfang could see the faint outline of a green-skinned orc at the helm of one of them. He raised his axe high above his head. The orc waved back. Saurfang concealed his laughter.



"That might make things very easy for us, Blightcaller," he said. "How many can you fit on each of those ships?"

Nathanos showed teeth. "A lot."

"Find anyone who knows how to sail. Looks like they'll need the help. Then select your assault team." Saurfang visualized the assault in his mind. There was still much to prepare for. He needed raiders up front, support forces close behind, maybe a few wind riders to guard the air between Darkshore and Darnassus.

Some of his best soldiers were exhausted after the battle on Darkshore. They would be disappointed to be left behind, but fresh troops would be more useful in the critical first wave, just in case the night elves resisted.

*I wonder if we'll have enough time—*

"Burn it."

The warchief's words cut through Saurfang's thoughts. He stared at her.

*Burn ... what?*

Nathanos looked just as confused. They exchanged glances. Sylvanas faced them with white-hot anger in her eyes.

She shouted the order again—past Saurfang. "Burn it!"

Nathanos turned without a word and motioned to the siege crews.

It happened fast. Faster than Saurfang could comprehend.

A troll mage spread fire across the payloads, and with a pull of a lever on half a dozen siege engines, the Horde flung death into the air.

"No," Saurfang whispered. He watched, speechless, as fire arced across the ocean.

Every single payload hit its target. Orange flames began to spread across Teldrassil.

Silence fell over the Horde. Even the cries of the captured night elves vanished. Everyone watched in disbelief.

"No," Saurfang whispered again, louder.

A second volley launched, and that broke the shock that had paralyzed him. "No!" he roared. "Stop firing! Stop!"



It was too late. The second barrage hit, and within moments, the lower half of the World Tree was engulfed in flames. The fire moved as if it were alive, climbing the tree, scrambling toward the city in the heights of its branches.

“Why ...? Why ...?” Saurfang breathed. He looked again at Nathanos. The Forsaken’s eyes were wider than the orc had ever seen.

Sylvanas had her back to Saurfang, watching the fire spread. Saurfang tried—desperately tried—to rationalize her order.

*Did that dying elf tell her something? Were they planning to resist? Is the Alliance about to arrive with reinforcements?*

A dozen different explanations rushed through his mind. They all died quickly. There were no sails on the horizon. A couple of kaldorei ships were frantically moving away from the World Tree as burning branches rained down upon them. Even the captured ships were awkwardly steering out of the way. They had not expected this.

Nobody had.

*What about Sylvanas?*

That thought struck Saurfang cold.

*Was this her plan all along?*

No. It couldn’t have been. She’d had a strategy in mind. Conquering the World Tree—taking it intact—would have been a brilliant move. Destroying it was ...

*... madness.*

The entire tree was now engulfed in flames. Shimmers of blue and white grew and faded as the fire burned hotter and hotter. The edge of the fire circled around the tree. And then, the city of Darnassus began to burn.

Saurfang heard screams. The heat reached across the water, along with the terrible smell of an uncontrolled wildfire. The captured night elves on Darkshore shrieked and wailed, now begging and pleading for the Horde to rush *into* the tree, to save their families from certain death.

The sounds washed together, a symphony of horrors.

Men, women, children ... the fire would not care. Fire had no honor, no reason, only the urge to consume until there was nothing left.

Everyone still in Darnassus would die.



And with them, every hope the Horde had of winning a clean war against the Alliance. Teldrassil was supposed to be the wedge that would destroy Stormwind. Now, it would be the Alliance's rallying cry until every nation of the Horde was rent to dust.

Anduin Wrynn would declare war immediately—and every one of his allies would answer his call. The Alliance would stop at *nothing* in their search for vengeance.

"There is no honor in this!" he roared at Sylvanas.

She finally turned away from the World Tree. Her eyes were steady, the anger within them gone. What was left in its place? Emptiness? Satisfaction? Saurfang couldn't read her now. Maybe he never could.

"They will come for us now. All of them!" he said.

"I know." She was calm, as though nothing were wrong. "They will attack the Undercity in retaliation. You will need to plan our defenses. Begin evacuating my people."

He struggled to form words. Finally, pure hatred made him spit out a condemnation. "You have damned the Horde for a thousand generations. All of us. And for what? For *what*?"

Her expression didn't waver. "This was *your* battle. Your strategy. And your failure. Darnassus was never the prize. It was a wedge that would split the Alliance apart. It was the weapon that would destroy hope. And you, my master strategist, gave that up to spare an enemy *you* defeated. I have taken it back. When they come for us, they will do so in pain, not in glory. That may be our only chance at victory now."

He wanted to kill her. He wanted to declare mak'gora and spill her blood in front of Horde and Alliance alike.

But she was right.

*A wound that can never heal.* That had always been the plan. And Saurfang had failed to inflict it. The story of Malfurion's miraculous survival would have spread among the armies of the Alliance as proof that they were blessed in their cause.

War would still have come. That had been certain the moment Saurfang had led the Horde into Ashenvale. And it would have been what he had feared most: the meat grinder, spending so many lives to achieve so little, ending with a whimper, and thus dooming future generations to a war nobody could win. Once again, Sylvanas had seen it before he had.

And so ...

She had sent a message. This was not a war that would end in a stalemate. Not now. The Alliance and the Horde would both understand that the only choices were victory or death. Lok-tar



ogar. Darnassus would not be the last city to burn. The loss of life on both sides would tower over this atrocity. And it would all rest on his shoulders. Every moment would be a nightmare.

Sylvanas turned back toward the World Tree, watching it burn. Saurfang made himself watch the flames consume city and citizens alike. He would not dishonor himself further by turning away.

The screams continued. They reminded him of Shattrath. He had loved the sound, then.

Smoke filled the air, reminding him of Stormwind, of racing through the streets as buildings burned all around him, finding cowering humans and butchering them as they begged for their lives. He had loved the slaughter, then.

And he had loved this war, too, hadn't he?

Saurfang did not move for hours, not until the screams faded and the flames had burned themselves down to embers. Before him stood a smoking husk that had once been a great civilization. Inside him was a feeling of despair, a feeling of shame. There was no haze of corruption now to soften the horror.

Saurfang would remember this moment in his dreams forever. He would relive this shame, and all the new ones to come, over and over again.

*You have led your Horde in the service of death*, Malfurion had said.

How could Saurfang face the soldiers he had led into this war? How could he explain what they had done?

He couldn't. He would never know how.

But the burden would be his, always, until his dying day.

As Saurfang turned away, he hoped that day would come soon.



# CREDITS



## *NOVELLA CREATED BY:*

Alex Afrasiabi, Hector Bolanos, Caroline Wu Bonti,  
Robert Brooks, Michael Carrillo, Sean Copeland,  
Steve Danuser, Keith Ewing, Cate Gary, Adam  
Heine, Erik Jensen, Julie Kimura, Christi Kugler,  
Brienne M Loftis, Allison Monahan, Ken Murayama,  
Justin Parker, Glenn Rane, Chris Robinson,  
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