

Chapter Four

It was a festival the likes of which Cairne had never seen in Orgrimmar, and he wasn't altogether sure he liked it.

It was not that he did not wish to honor the soldiers who had fought so valiantly against the Lich King and his subjects. But he knew as well as others, and better than some, the cost of war on all fronts, and frowned a little to himself at the lavishness with which the veterans were received.

The parade, he had recently discovered, had been Garrosh's idea. "Let the people see their heroes," he had stated. "Let them march into Orgrimmar to the welcome they deserve!"

An unkind soul than Cairne might have mentally amended, *And make sure everyone knows that Garrosh Hellscream was responsible for the victory.*

Still, Garrosh had insisted that everyone who had been involved with the campaign in Northrend be encouraged to participate. No one expected to see Forsaken or sin'dorei veterans in this parade, although they would not have been denied the right to march had they attended. They had their own concerns and had waged their own campaign in the northernmost continent of the world. No, this parade was mainly comprised of those who dwelt in the hot, dusty lands of Kalimdor—orcs, trolls, and tauren. And it looked to Cairne as if every one of those races who had raised a weapon or a curse against the Scourge had come. The line stretched all the way from the gates of Orgrimmar well past the zeppelin tower.

Scorning the softer traditional rose petals that the Alliance often used on such occasions, Horde workers had paved the road with pine branches that, when crushed underfoot, produced a pleasing scent. Durotar did not offer much in the way of pine branches, so Cairne knew that these had been shipped in from a great distance. He sighed deeply and shook his head at the extravagance.

Grom's boy was at the head of the parade, the first at the gate when it opened, along with his Warsong Hold veterans. Cairne did not begrudge him the position—after all, Cairne had stayed behind in Kalimdor and Garrosh had gone to Northrend, as had all

these brave warriors. And most of them were orcs, and this was orc territory. Still, it rankled him that most of the crowd kept pace with Garrosh, cheering him on, seeming to care little for the ranks of other military units who had fought just as hard, and in some cases had sacrificed even more bright young lives to the cause but who lacked a charismatic figurehead.

Thrall himself was standing outside Grommash Hold. He was clad in the instantly recognizable black plate armor that had once belonged to Orgrim Doomhammer, for whom Orgrimmar was named. In one giant green fist, the warchief of the Horde bore the massive Doomhammer itself. Thrall was an imposing figure whose legend preceded him at every turn, and on more than one occasion a battle had been won simply by his appearance on the field so clad.

Beside him, slightly stooped but still powerful for an orc in his late fifties, stood Eitrigg. Eitrigg had left the Horde after the Second War, in which his sons had been betrayed by fellow orcs and were killed in battle. Sickened by the corruption and waste he saw in the orcs, Eitrigg had felt his duty to his people was over. He had rejoined the Horde when Thrall had risen to command it and return the orcs to their shamanic roots. He was one of Thrall's most valued and trusted advisors and had only just returned from aiding the Argent Crusade in Zul'Drak. In his arms, he bore an object wrapped in cloth.

Thrall's bright blue eyes, rare among orcs, were fastened on the approaching line of warriors. Garrosh drew to a halt in front of him. Thrall looked at him for a moment, then inclined his head deeply in a gesture of respect.

"Garrosh Hellscream," he said in his deep, rumbling voice that carried easily over the crowd, "you are the son of Grom Hellscream, my dear friend and a hero to the Horde. You once did not understand how great an orc he was. Now you do, and it is clear that you, too, are a hero of the Horde for what you have achieved in your campaign in Northrend.

"We stand in the shadow of the armor and the very skull of our great enemy, Mannoroth, whose blood tainted us and clouded our minds for so long. The enemy that your father slew, and in so doing, he freed his people from a terrible curse."

He nodded to Eitrigg, who stepped forward. Thrall took the bundle he bore and unwrapped it. It was an axe—not just any axe, but a named weapon, a famous weapon. Its wickedly curved blade had two notches in it. When the wielder swung it, it sang its own battle cry—just as its owner had once done—which gave it its name.

Many of the spectators recognized it, and murmurs rose throughout the crowd.

"This," said Thrall solemnly, "is Gorehowl. It is the weapon of your father, Garrosh. It is this blade that killed Mannoroth, an almost inconceivably brave deed that cost Grom Hellscream his life."

Garrosh's eyes widened. Joy and pride shone on his brown face. He reached out to accept the gift, but Thrall did not surrender it at once.

"It killed Mannoroth," he repeated, "but it also took the life of the noble demigod Cenarius, who taught the first mortal druids. Like any weapon, it can be used for good or ill. I charge you with being the best of your father, Garrosh. With using this weapon wisely and well, for the good of your people. It is my honor to welcome you home. Receive the love and thanks of those whom you have served with your blood and sweat and spirit."

Garrosh took the weapon and hefted it experimentally. He swung the blade as if he had been born to do so—and, mused Cairne, perhaps he had. It shrieked and howled, cutting the air as it had once and would again cut down the enemies of the Horde. He lifted the axe high above his head, and again cheers swept through the Valley of Wisdom. Garrosh closed his eyes for a moment, as if literally basking in the adoration. Cairne did not think for a moment that it was undeserved, but thought a bit of grateful humility for both the weapon and the accolades might have served Garrosh well.

"Veterans, the taverns are open to you this night. Eat and drink and sing of your glorious deeds, but be mindful that the citizens of Orgrimmar are those whom you have served and not your foes." Thrall allowed himself a smile. "The haze of alcohol can sometimes blur such lines."

Good-natured laughter rippled through the crowd. Cairne had known to expect this. Thrall had agreed to reimburse every inn and tavern for food, drink, and lodging the

entire day. However, it was up to the tavern and innkeepers to police their customers—the Horde would not pay for damaged chairs or tables, and there were *always* damaged tables and chairs. Not to mention a few broken noses, but such were borne as a necessary part of the celebrating. Cairne, who did not indulge in such wild behavior—had not even done so as a younger tauren—did not approve, but he had not protested when Thrall had suggested it.

Thrall waved, and several carts pulled by kodos and raptors were brought forth, covered by heavy blankets. At Thrall's nod, several orcs stepped forward and, on the count of three, pulled off the blankets to reveal dozens of kegs of strong beer.

"Let the revelry begin!" shouted Thrall, and wild cheering and applause filled the air.

The parade now officially over, the veterans moved eagerly to the kegs, beginning what was certain to be a long night and likely a hangover-heavy morning. Cairne strode toward the entrance of Grommash Hold, pausing for a moment to eye the skull and armor of which Thrall had spoken.

The armor had been securely chained to an enormous dead tree for all to see. The skull of the great demon lord, which was set atop the tree, had been bleached white by the sun. Long tusks curved out from the pale bone, and the plate armor was gargantuan, unwearable by even the most powerful orc, troll, or tauren. Cairne regarded it for a long moment, thinking about Grom, thanking his spirit for the sacrifice that had set the orcs free.

With a long sigh, he turned and trundled inside. He had, as was his right, brought a retinue with him. He had selected who among his people would have the honor of attending the feast tonight. Ordinarily his son Baine would be among them, but Baine had opted to remain behind in Mulgore.

It is a high honor that you ask me to attend such a ceremony, Baine had written, but the higher honor is making sure our people are safe until you, their leader, have returned home for good.

The response pleased but did not surprise Cairne. Baine did exactly as his father would have done in the same situation. While it would have made him happy to have his son

by his side, Cairne felt better knowing that the tauren people were watched over and cared for in his absence.

In Baine's stead was the venerable archdruid Hamuul Runetotem, who was a good friend and trusted advisor. Also present were members of several of the individual tauren tribes such as the Dawnstrider, Ragetotem—a tribe with a warrior focus who had sent several of its sons and daughters to fight proudly in Northrend alongside Garrosh—Skychaser, Winterhoof, and Thunderhorn, among others. Included for politics' sake rather than personal preference was the matriarch of the Grimtotem, Magatha.

Alone among the tauren tribes, the Grimtotem had never formally joined the Horde, though Magatha lived on Thunder Bluff and her tribe enjoyed all the rights of being a tauren. A powerful shaman who had come to lead the Grimtotem thanks to the tragic, accidental death of her mate—a death that, it was whispered, was not quite so accidental as it had appeared—she and Cairne had clashed before. Cairne was more than happy to make her welcome on Thunder Bluff and to invite her to important ceremonies such as this one, as he firmly believed in the old adage, "Keep your friends close and your enemies closer." She had not opposed him openly, and he doubted she ever would. Magatha might plot and scheme safely in the shadows, but in the end Cairne believed she was a coward. Let Magatha think herself powerful for merely running her own tribe. He, Cairne Bloodhoof, was the one who truly led the tauren people.