

Chapter Nine

Jaina rowed steadily, deep in thought. Something was troubling Thrall. Something more than the current situation. He was an intelligent, capable leader, with a great heart as well as a great mind. But Jaina was convinced that this tacit acceptance of the graphically violent attack in Ashenvale would lead to nothing positive. He might keep the goodwill of his people, but he would lose that of the Alliance—well, what little was left, anyway. She had to hope that he would find out who was behind it and deal with them swiftly. A second occurrence would be disastrous.

She docked, secured the little dinghy, and walked toward the keep, lost in thought. She was worried about Thrall and his relationship to the Horde. In all the time she had known him, he had never seemed so . . . uncertain about his control over it. She had been stunned at the conclusions he had reached about how to proceed. Thrall would never in his heart condone such unnecessary violence. And, therefore, how could he publicly?

She smiled perfunctorily at the guards and ascended the tower that housed her private quarters. And Varian—he was still dealing, poorly, it was clear, with the integration of his separated selves. It would have been better if he had been granted some period of calm, but such was not fate's decree. The Alliance had been plunged into war with a man—if you could still call him that—who had once been her childhood friend, and who had slaughtered tens of thousands. And what of young Anduin? He was a capable youth, perceptive and smart. But he wanted a father who could—well, *father* him.

She entered the sitting room, where a cheerful fire burned in the hearth. It was late afternoon, so she was not surprised to see that the servants had laid out the tea things.

She was, however, surprised to see a fair-haired young man, a cup and saucer in his lap, who turned to her with an impish grin.

"Hello, Aunt Jaina," he said. "Your hearthstone worked perfectly."

"Goodness, Anduin!" Jaina said, startled but pleased. "I only just saw you a few days ago!"

"I did warn you that you'd be seeing me all the time," he said jokingly.

"Well, lucky me." She stepped forward, mussed his hair, and went to the sideboard to pour herself her own cup of tea.

"Why are you wearing that ugly cloak?" Anduin asked.

"Oh, well," Jaina said, caught off guard, "I didn't want to attract attention. I'm sure you don't always want people knowing it's you when you're out riding or such."

"I don't mind," Anduin said. "But then again, I don't have secret meetings with orcs in the middle of nowhere."

Jaina whirled, splashing tea. "How did—"

"Yes!" Anduin looked delighted. "I was right! You were out meeting Thrall!"

Jaina sighed and wiped at her robes, grateful that they were, actually, the rough and dirty ones rather than her nice, everyday clothes. "You're too perceptive for your own good, Anduin," she said.

He grew sober. "It's how I've stayed alive," he said matter-of-factly. Jaina felt her heart lurch in empathy for the boy, but he was not seeking pity. "I've got to admit, I'm surprised that you're seeing him. I mean, what I overheard from the Sentinels about the attack seems pretty brutal. Not the sort of thing Thrall would endorse."

She moved toward the fire with her cup of tea, pulling up her own chair. "That's because he *didn't* endorse it."

"So he's going to apologize and turn over the killers?"

Jaina shook her head. "No. An apology—but only for breaking the treaty. Not for how it was broken."

Anduin's face fell. "But . . . if he wasn't responsible, and he doesn't think it's a good thing—why not? How does that help earn trust?"

How indeed, Jaina thought, but did not say. "One of the things you'll learn, Anduin, is that sometimes you can't always do what you'd like to do. Or even do what you think is the right thing—at least not right away. Thrall certainly doesn't want war with the Alliance. He wants to cooperate for all our benefits. But—the Horde thinks differently from the Alliance about a lot of things, and displays of power and strength are absolutely key to a leader's ability to govern them."

Anduin frowned into his tea. "Sounds like Lo'Gosh," he murmured.

"Ironically, yes—that aspect of your father would have fit quite well into the Horde mentality," Jaina said. "One of the reasons he was so popular as a gladiator during his brief . . . er . . . career."

"So Thrall can't risk coming out and denouncing it right now, is that what you're saying?" Anduin popped a small cream-and-jam-laden biscuit into his mouth. For a pleasant instant Jaina was more concerned about whether they'd have enough pastries and small sandwiches to appease a growing boy's appetite than about the possibility of war. She sighed. Would that filling Anduin's teenage belly was the most pressing of her cares.

"Essentially that's correct." She did not wish to reveal specifics and so simply added, "But I know he didn't do it, and I know that personally he is appalled."

"Do . . . you think he will let it happen again?"

It was a serious question, worthy of a serious, thoughtful reply. So she took the time to give him one.

"No," she said at last. "This is just my opinion, but . . . I think this took him by surprise. He's aware of it now."

Anduin drained his cup and went to the sideboard to pour himself a second serving. While he was there, he piled small cakes and sandwiches on his plate. "You're right, Aunt Jaina," he said quietly. "Sometimes you just can't do what you want. You have to wait until the time is right, until you have enough support."

And Jaina smiled to herself. The youth in front of her had been king at age ten. True, he had a sound advisor in the form of Highlord Bolvar Fordragon, but she'd seen enough to know that he'd wrestled with many things by himself. Perhaps he had never been faced with the sort of choice Thrall had, but he could certainly empathize with it.

She found herself, as she often did, missing the wise, wry presence of Magna Aegwynn. She wished that great lady, the former Guardian of Tirisfal, was still alive to give her sound, if sometimes tart, advice. What would Aegwynn have done now, with this boy sitting at her hearth, this too-serious but good-hearted young man?

A smile touched Jaina's lips. She knew exactly what Aegwynn would have done. Lighten the situation.

"Now, Anduin," Jaina said, almost sensing the presence of the wise old woman in the room. "Fill me in on all the court gossip."

"Gossip?" Anduin looked perplexed. "I don't know any."

Jaina shrugged. "Then make some up."

Anduin returned to Stormwind three minutes late for dinner, materializing in his room to discover that Wyll had laid out his clothing. He splashed his face quickly with water from the basin, then threw on the formal dining clothing and scrambled quickly downstairs to join his father.

There were rooms for enormous banquets, but ordinary dinners for the two of them were held in one of Varian's private rooms. The last few meals they had shared together had been stiff and uncomfortable. Looming between Varian and Anduin Wrynn was the shadow of Lo'Gosh. But now, as he slipped into his chair and reached for his napkin, Anduin looked down the length of the table and saw his father without the haze of resentment that had clouded his vision earlier. His visit to Jaina had enabled him to clear his mind, to just . . . be away from all of this, even for a little while.

And as he looked at his father, he did not see Lo'Gosh. He saw a man who was starting to get faint lines at the corner of his eyes, the marks of age and weariness and not battle. He saw the strain of the crown, of the countless decisions that had to be made daily. Decisions that cost money, or even more precious a currency, lives. He felt not pity for his father—Varian did not need it—but compassion.

Varian glanced up and gave his son a tired smile. "Good evening, Son. How was your day? Do anything fun?"

"Actually, yes," said Anduin, dipping his spoon into the rich, thick, turtle bisque. "I used Aunt Jaina's hearthstone to pay her a visit."

"Did you now?" Varian's blue eyes flickered with interest. "How did that go? Did you learn anything?"

Anduin shrugged, suddenly filled with doubt. It had seemed so exciting at the time, but now that he had to recount the incident to his father it . . . well, it was just having tea, mostly.

"We talked about some things. And, um . . . had tea."

"Tea?"

"Tea," Anduin said, almost defensively. "It's cold and wet in Theramore. There's nothing wrong with having tea and eating something."

Varian shook his head, reaching for a slice of bread and cheese. "No, there's not. And you certainly were in fine company. Did you talk about the current situation?"

Anduin felt the heat rise in his face. He didn't want to betray Jaina, even inadvertently. But he also didn't want to lie to his father. "Some."

Keen eyes flickered to Anduin's face. Lo'Gosh wasn't completely present, but Anduin sensed he wasn't completely absent, either. "See any orcs?"

"No." That at least he could answer honestly. He toyed with his soup, his appetite

suddenly gone.

"Ah, but Jaina did."

"I didn't say—"

"It's all right. I know that she and Thrall are thick as thieves. I also know Jaina wouldn't betray the Alliance."

Anduin brightened. "No, she never would. Never."

"You . . . sympathize with her, don't you? With the orcs and the Horde?"

"I . . . Father, we've just lost so many already," Anduin blurted out, putting his spoon down and regarding Varian intently. "You heard Archbishop Benedictus. Almost fifty thousand. And I know that a lot of our people died at the hands of the Horde, but a lot of them *didn't*, and the Horde also suffered terrible losses. They're not the enemy, they—"

"I do not know what other term you would use to describe someone—some *thing*—that could do to those Sentinels what the orcs did to them."

"I thought—"

"Oh, Thrall replied, condemning the breaking of the treaty and assuring me he had no desire for it to happen again. But as for what was done to those elves? Nothing. If he is as civilized as you and Jaina seem to think, then why would he stay silent on something so atrocious?"

Anduin looked miserably at his father. He couldn't say what he knew, and even if he could, the information was secondhand. He wondered if he'd ever truly grasp politics. Jaina, Aegwynn, and even his father had all praised his insight, but he felt more confused than clear on . . . well, pretty much everything. What he knew was more intuition than logic, and that was something that neither Varian nor Lo'Gosh would really understand. He just knew, somehow, in his bones, that Thrall wasn't as Varian saw him. And he couldn't explain it any better than that.