

## Chapter Ten

Thrall awoke, instantly alert to the sound of horns blowing a warning. He leaped out of his sleeping furs immediately, the acrid smell of smoke telling him what the emergency was before he heard the words that he knew would strike terror into the heart of every citizen of Orgrimmar:

"Fire! Fire!"

Even as he threw on clothing, two Kor'kron burst into the room. It was obvious that they, like Thrall, had only just heard the news.

"Warchief! What would you have us do?"

He pushed past them, barking orders as he did so: "Bring me a wyvern! All hands to the pond near the Spirit Lodge save the shaman—rouse them and direct them to the site of the fire! Form a bucket brigade to sluice down any nearby buildings!"

"Yes, Warchief!" One of them kept pace with Thrall while the other ran ahead to carry out his warchief's orders. Thrall had barely left the shadow of the hold when the reins of a wyvern were pressed into his hand. He leaped atop the great beast and directed him straight up.

Thrall clung as the creature rose nearly vertically, giving him a good view of where the fire raged out of control. It was not far. He had ordered many of the bonfires that burned night and day in Orgrimmar to be extinguished because of the extreme drought that was parching the land. Now he realized he should have allowed none of them.

Several buildings had caught fire. Thrall grimaced at the stench of burning flesh, reassured that it likely came from a place called the Chophouse; it was the stench of burning animal meat that he smelled. Even so, three buildings were already going up, vast sheets of flame illuminating the night.

By the light of the conflagration Thrall could see forms scurrying about. The shaman, as he had ordered, were converging on the site of the active blazes, while others were

soaking surrounding buildings to ensure that they did not catch.

He guided the beast in the direction of the fire, patting his neck proudly. The wyvern had to be smelling the smoke, sensing the danger, yet he obeyed Thrall trustingly, never shying as Thrall guided him closer and closer to the source. The smoke was thick and black, and the heat was so fierce, he wondered for a moment if it might burn his clothing right off him or scorch the courageous wyvern. But he was a shaman, and he could tame this blaze if anyone could.

He landed, leaped off, and released the beast to the air. The wyvern flew away immediately, happy to put distance between himself and the danger now that he had served his rider well. Figures turned toward Thrall as he approached, parting to make way for their warchief. The other shaman did not move, though, standing still, eyes closed, arms lifted, communing with the fire as Thrall was about to do.

He emulated them, calming himself and reaching out to this individual elemental flame.

*Brother Flame . . . you can do great harm and great good to those whose lives you choose to touch. But you have taken for your fuel the dwellings of others. Your smoke sears our eyes and lungs. I ask you, return to the places where we hold you with gratitude. Harm no more of our people.*

The fire answered. This elemental was but one of many who were angry and erratic, fierce and uncontrolled.

*No, we do not wish to return to the confinement of the bonfires or braziers or small family hearths. We like being free; we want to race across this place and consume all in our path.*

Thrall felt a flutter of worry. Never before had such a direct request of his, one from the heart and filled with concern for the safety of others, been so flatly refused.

He asked again, putting more of his own will into the query, emphasizing the damage that the element was doing to people who had ever welcomed it into their city.

Reluctantly, sullenly, like a sulky child, the blaze began to die down. Thrall sensed his fellow shaman lending their aid, their concentration, their pleas as well, and was grateful if unnerved by the incident.

The fire did consume seven buildings and a great deal of personal property before it finally subsided. Fortunately, no lives were directly lost, although Thrall knew that several were affected by the smoke. He would—

"No," he whispered. A spark, dancing defiantly, was wafting on the wind, heading for another building, to wreak more havoc. Thrall reached out to the spark, sensed in its erratic intent its refusal to respect Thrall's entreaty.

His eyes were open now, watching the path of the tiny flame. *If you continue your path, little spark, you will cause great harm.*

*I must burn! I must live!*

*There are places where your glow and heat are welcome. Find them. Do not destroy the dwellings or take the lives of my people!*

For a second the spark seemed to wink out of existence, but then it blazed back with renewed vigor.

Thrall knew what he had to do. He lifted his hand. *Forgive me, Brother Flame. But I must protect my people from the harm you would cause them. I have requested, I have begged, now I warn.*

The spark seemed to spasm, and yet it continued on its lethal course.

Thrall, grim-faced, clenched his hand hard.

The spark flared defiantly, then dwindled, finally settling down to nothing more than the faintest of glowing embers. For now, it would no longer do anyone harm.

The threat had ended, but Thrall was reeling. This was not the way of the shaman with

the elements. It was a relationship of mutual respect, not of threats and control and, in the end, near destruction. Oh, the Spirit of Fire could never be extinguished. He was far greater than anything any shaman, or even group of shaman, could ever attempt to do to him. He was eternal, as all the spirits of the elements were. But this part of him, this elemental manifestation, had been defiant, uncooperative. And it had not been alone. It was part of a disturbing trend of elements that were sullen and rebellious rather than cooperative. And in the end, Thrall had had to completely dominate it. Other shaman were now calling rain to soak the city in case there was another aberrant spark that persisted in its course of devastation.

Thrall stood in the rain, letting it soak him, pour off his massive green shoulders, and drip down his arms.

What in the name of the ancestors was happening?

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"Well, of course we can do it," said Gazlowe. "I mean, we're goblins, of course we can *do* it, you know what I'm saying? We did it in the first place, after all. So yes, Warchief, we can rebuild those parts of Orgrimmar that were damaged. Don't you worry about that."

Two Kor'kron stood a few paces away, massive axes strapped to their backs, powerful arms folded, watching the scene and silently guarding their warchief. Thrall was talking with the goblin who, along with several others, had helped construct Orgrimmar several years ago. He was clever, intelligent, more scrupulous and less annoying than most of his brethren, but even so, he was a goblin, so Thrall was waiting for the other boot to drop.

"Well, that's good. And how much are we looking at?"

The goblin reached into the small sack he had brought with him and pulled out an abacus. His long, clever, green fingers flew across it as he murmured to himself, ". . . carry the one . . . factor in the cost of supplies at a postwar rate . . . and of course labor's gone up . . ."

He retrieved a piece of charcoal and a sheet of parchment and scribbled down a number that made the orc's robust green skin turn sickly. "That much?" Thrall asked, disbelieving.

Gazlowe looked uncomfortable. "Look . . . tell you what . . . you've been awfully good to us, and you've been more than scrupulous in your business affairs. How about . . ."

He wrote a second figure down. It was less than the first figure, but only marginally. Thrall handed the paper over to Eitrigg, who whistled softly.

"We will need more supplies," was all Thrall said. He rose and left without another word. The Kor'kron fell into silent step behind him. Gazlowe looked after Thrall.

"I am guessing that's a yes. That's a yes, isn't it?" he asked Eitrigg. The elderly orc nodded, his eyes narrowing as, from out of the open door, he watched Thrall's shape grow smaller and smaller as he left Grommash Hold.