

BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT

Baine Bloodhoof: As Our Fathers Before Us

Stevie Nix

A rickety old cart trundled down the path toward the Great Gate, where a small patrol waited to guard it on its way to the distant zeppelin tower. There, the water it carried would be distributed to the orc settlements around Durotar, the land hit hardest by the recent drought. The young kodo pulling the cart moved with the languid pace of a well-traveled routine, cresting the hill before disappearing from sight.

An aggravated goblin watched as the cart vanished. His own cart should have been right behind that caravan, but he was still stuck at the water well because the breeze had died, rendering the wind-powered pump useless. "Hurry up with that, will ya? We need to catch up if we're going to get a patrol escort this trip." The goblin tapped his toe in irritation while his ire was directed at the young orc wrestling with the crank.

"Relax, Izwix," said a nearby orc warrior as he lay in the grass. "What're a few little Alliance lackeys going to do? They make any move, they get an axe upside the head." He grabbed a twig off a nearby bush and picked his teeth.

"The Alliance is a menace, Grotz!" the goblin snapped. "And I would rather have an escort and not have to rely on your limited skills... or his," he said, pointing to the assassin crouching in the bushes.

"Don't you worry about me, Izwix," said Dras, suddenly appearing from his hiding spot. "Anyone comes near me, they get a pig sticker in the back. Let the Alliance curs come."

Izwix sighed. "What did I do to get stuck with these two... eh?" The bushes around the well shivered as he cocked his head. "What was that?"

Everyone turned his head toward the sound; Grotz grabbed his axe and stood up. The sound stopped. He took a cautious step forward as a rippling wave began at one end of the hedgerow and traveled the full length to the other side. Each bush began to shake violently. Izwix moved away warily, inching toward the kodo lashed to the water cart. Dras flipped his knives nervously as the rustle of the leaves intensified.

Dozens of boar-like beasts, armed with spears and an assortment of other weapons, covered in patchwork armor, exploded outward and swarmed the group. One or two fell to Grotz's axe before he was overwhelmed, and Izwix turned to flee. Dras dove for cover, running headlong into the lead attacker. The quilboar swung wildly at the orc, finally managing to make contact with the side of his head.

The other caravan members dropped one after another, the grass quickly staining red all around the well. Izwix had managed to unhook the kodo, hop on its back, and spur it forward before a spear sailed through the air and knocked him from his perch. The kodo continued lumbering onward as the quilboar ransacked the cart and disappeared where they had come from, back toward Brambleblade Ravine.

Sometime before this attack, Baine Bloodhoof, high chieftain of the tauren tribes, had found himself in his lodge in Thunder Bluff with Garrosh Hellscream and Archdruid Hamuul Runetotem. This was no casual encounter: Baine had willingly chosen not to pursue vengeance against Garrosh for the death of Cairne Bloodhoof in favor of a united

Horde leadership. Baine knew that the Horde needed a strong guiding figure if it was to survive, and Garrosh could give his people inspiration. The meeting, however, was not going well. Garrosh, once cautious due to his role in the murder of Baine's father, was again full of bluster and bravado, arriving in Mulgore with an inordinate number of demands.

Impassioned voices rose and fell in the confined space. Hamuul, though normally reserved and quiet, was beginning to raise his voice in response to the obstinate and brash young orc before him. Garrosh's management of the Horde left much to be desired in the eyes of the tauren, and Hamuul still could not believe that Cairne Bloodhoof, greatest of the tauren leaders, had fallen to this whelp. As Baine's advisor, Hamuul had opened the negotiations for water supplies to be transported to Orgrimmar. So far, the talks had not gone well.

Baine watched this stoically, hand gripping his mace, before politely raising his other hand to interject. After a moment, the two others quieted down and looked to Baine.

"Garrosh, you say you need water, but what of the Southfury River, and the resulting watershed? Can that not provide all the water you could need?"

A scoff escaped Garrosh's lips. "Normally, yes, but it has become tainted. It can still water the crops, but we cannot drink it, and that is causing strain on our city and anywhere else the orcs may make a home in these lands."

Looking Garrosh straight in the eye, Hamuul said simply, "And just what is tainting it?"

Garrosh gritted his teeth. "The goblin projects in Azshara seem to produce... side effects. This taint created by their digging has run into the ground and is carried south by the river, where we suffer the consequences."

Baine met eyes with Hamuul for a moment. "Why not just order the goblins to stop? Give the land time to heal and then resume later on? With some planning and foresight, the goblins can have their projects on a limited basis while the earth is not harmed unduly."

Garrosh rapped his knuckles on the table. "Nonsense! Their actions are vital to the war effort and I will not undermine the security of the Horde. Mulgore still has water aplenty, and it is that water which will supply Orgrimmar and the outlying settlements."

Hamuul said quietly, "I happen to agree with Baine, and you know he's right. The goblins need to back off or translate their building elsewhere for the land to heal and the river to recover."

"And what makes your opinion more valid than any other of the thousands I hear day to day?" Garrosh's eyes narrowed slightly. "And I am not asking. I am telling."

The argument arose once again. Hamuul and Garrosh continued to shout until Baine grew exasperated and yelled, "Enough! This bickering gets us nowhere!"

Both stopped mid-sentence, surprised by the outburst, and stared at Baine, who said in a more controlled tone, "Garrosh, you get your water. But, I want an official tauren representative to act as advisor on future goblin projects."

Garrosh fixed cold eyes on Baine. "You're damned right I get my water. I have an obligation to the Horde to keep everyone safe and sound. I will not stand by and have my leadership and motives questioned." With that, he stormed out of the tent, shouting over his shoulder, "My envoy will be sent along shortly to set up shipment schedules!"

Hamuul watched the retreating figure and said, "If only he could but *listen* to a voice other than his own..."

Baine smiled sadly and placed his massive hand on Hamuul's shoulder. "Give him time, Hamuul. Those like Garrosh, their time is fleeting. He will see reason, or hang himself in the end. Those are the only futures awaiting him. Either way, patience is our greatest ally."

Hamuul shook his head as if to clear it. "We existed in a time before the coming of the orcs, if you'll remember. Your father may have owed a debt to Thrall for all he did for our people, but this is a new Horde. I have heard whispers of other tauren. Some are wondering if this Horde is really something we should be a part of anymore." He snorted. "The Horde has done much and we owe much to it, but you must admit that their sentiments are not completely without merit."

Baine pulled a map from the shelf and began looking for all known water wells in Mulgore. "As you say, my father may have owed a debt to Thrall, but he believed in the Horde he helped shape. Though my father may be gone, and despite these changes we face, *I* still believe in the Horde."

Within a short time, water caravans traveling their way from various wells around Mulgore to Orgrimmar had become the norm. From there, the water was distributed, and the citizens of Durotar once again had fresh water in their homes. The occasional report would trickle in concerning attempted raids by bandits, but overall, the water shipment had given very little cause for concern.

The first attack to happen in Mulgore was a shock to Baine. Not only had it been in his land, but it was also a brutal slaughter. The investigation into the incident found no clues as to the attackers or their motives. Nothing had been looted from the bodies, and the caravan cart had been smashed, though nothing of interest was in it. The cart was only to carry a water bladder, after all. From the blood stains in the grass, a few bodies had been dragged away, but all other members of the caravan had been accounted for.

Baine was at a loss. He had first feared an attack of retribution by the exiled Grimtotem, but his Longwalker scouts could turn up nothing that pointed to their involvement. He was poring over these reports one day when an orc messenger approached and cleared his throat. Baine looked up and motioned for the orc to come inside. "To what do I owe this visit?"

"Message from the warchief." The messenger unrolled the letter and began reading, "Unto High Chieftain Baine Bloodhoof of the tauren, Warchief of the Horde Garrosh Hellscream sends the following: Water shipments continue on schedule and that pleases

me. However, take note that the most recent shipments are tainted with an unknown agent. I expect this to be fixed, and soon."

Baine thought a moment, brow furrowed in concern. "Those shipments were from the well at Winterhoof. Tell Garrosh I will see to it personally." With that, the messenger ran off and, leaving one of his braves to oversee Thunder Bluff, Baine prepared for the walk to southern Mulgore.

Baine solemnly observed the bodies around the well. It was a scene of complete slaughter. Three caravans had been smashed beyond repair, and anything not nailed down had been stolen, including the full water bladders they had been transporting. The carts' kodos were missing and eight caravan guards lay in a circle around the six workers they had been attempting to defend. The guards had been better prepared this time, and at least a dozen quilboar bodies were scattered haphazardly around the area.

"These are quilboar, but better armed. See the armor on that one? It is a patchwork of various Horde designs. I've never seen quilboar so well-organized before." Baine grew thoughtful. "One obstacle to our peace in Mulgore was always the stubborn quilboar threat. My father could never open a dialogue with them. But, if they are under new leadership, perhaps we can negotiate with them this time."

Baine turned toward the nearest Longwalker. "Send word to Camp Narache that they must attempt contact with the quilboar in Brambleblade Ravine. We cannot answer slaughter for slaughter and I will *not* have an escalating war in my own land.

"I shall be staying in my old quarters at Bloodhoof Village for a few days. Update me as soon as you can." Baine then turned to his messenger. "Send word to Garrosh that we have found the culprit, and the situation will be dealt with."

Garrosh replied a few hours later, exactly as Baine had expected. The warchief insisted that troops march in to recover the land and expel the offenders. He ended his message with, *And if you are unable to succeed in this, rest assured I will.*

Baine snorted. "This will not do. I had hoped he would see the necessity of avoiding yet another conflict. So be it. Tell Garrosh that we appreciate his support, but there is no need for a military operation at this time, as we wish to see how the negotiations fare. I pray to the Earth Mother they will be fruitful."

The next day, the Longwalker approached Baine in his old quarters. "I have an update on the quilboar situation, High Chieftain."

Baine looked hopeful. "Any good news to report, perhaps?"

"We have tried communicating with them in every way possible, but our envoys are attacked on sight. After every attempt, they return covered in blood not their own." The scout saw the disappointment in Baine's eyes. He added quickly, "But casualties were kept to a minimum. They only fought as necessary while retreating."

Baine sighed. "Very well. Suspend attempts at negotiations for now. I need to find out the source of their aggression if we are to solve this problem without undue bloodshed."

One of Baine's advisors spoke up. "With all due respect, High Chieftain, I'm sure a small force could sneak in undetected and assassinate their leader. Throwing them into disarray would make it easier for us to eradicate them."

"Absolutely not. I *know* that somehow a peace can be reached. We will not fall victim to the lure of militaristic action. That is Garrosh's way, not mine."

He turned his attention back to the Longwalker waiting patiently. "Go, give them my message, and add that no one is to move into quilboar territory without my express permission. I will find an answer to this new threat." The scout ran off and Baine readied for the return trip to his father's home.

Baine turned to face his advisors once more before leaving the tent. "The world has been sundered; the Alliance harasses our borders; and the Horde is attempting to devour itself from the inside. I would like to try for a solution other than bloodshed."

The same advisor spoke up. "I am willing to agree, but these quilboar are belligerent brutes who have hounded our people for years. Such a peace would only last for so long."

Baine nodded lightly. "Perhaps. A peace could be fleeting, but is another conflict, in our own home no less, what we really need right now?" With that, he set out for Thunder Bluff.

Late one night, not too long after the latest attack, several tauren of Camp Narache gathered around the fire. Quilboar attacks had increased, and more and more water seemed to be drained from their lands to be sent to others.

The eldest spoke first. "This is not the way our lands were meant to be used. Baine so far has capitulated to every demand by the blowhard Garrosh, no matter how petty. How much longer can we sit here and watch him slowly give over everything we are to the orcs?"

Another, younger, tauren added, "We cannot be the only ones who feel this way. Have any of us talked with any of the other tribes?"

The first speaker sighed. "I have, and you know how stubborn the Steelrage and Stonehoof can be. They don't fully see how Baine's actions have affected Mulgore since his father's passing."

"Baine may not be his father, but I'm sure whatever he does is best for us. He would never have anything but the interests of our people in mind."

"Maybe so, but that does not mean that living here is any less dangerous. We Farwanderers are not a tribe used to remaining static; why don't we move on? Remember years ago, following the herds? We have a land to call home now, but at the cost of such freedom." He sighed and gestured at his comrades. "You remember: a different patch of sky every month? Why must we stay chained to a single land when we've always been free?"

"And where exactly should we go?"

The older tauren shrugged and stirred the fire. "I didn't say it was a *perfect* plan..."

Baine had tasked his Longwalkers with keeping watch on the quilboar's movements and these latest hyper-aggressive attacks. The quilboar had always been belligerent creatures, and now they were only increasing their hostility. Despite his robust network of scouts, attacks still slipped through, and no answers were forthcoming. He had not spoken with Hamuul in some time and hoped the old archdruid had found some clues.

Baine managed to find Hamuul at the base of Thunder Bluff, examining the wildlife. Not wanting to disturb his advisor, Baine said quietly, "I would seek your counsel, Hamuul."

Hamuul stood up with a smile. "Certainly, young Baine. I will offer what assistance I can; you know that."

"As you know, I recently spoke with the scouts about the quilboar's latest aggression. They were still baffled and could offer no answers. I know you have been communing with the Earth Mother more often as of late. Have you discovered anything that might shed light on this mystery?"

Hamuul grabbed a handful of grass, sniffed it, then let the wind carry it away. He watched as it landed and shook his head. "Sadly, not yet. Communing with the land takes time, Baine, especially with it in such turmoil. I shall continue my meditations. Consulting a shaman or two wouldn't hurt either..."

Baine shook his clouded head as he watched a muttering Hamuul head off. Too much had happened in his father's absence. He was not sure how he would resolve this, but he was determined to find a way. There had been too much strife in recent years, and a peaceful solution to this problem would be a breath of fresh air.

As he returned to the lifts, Baine met a group of tauren with packs and supplies. "Farwanderers! Are you preparing for a journey?"

They bowed their heads in unison, and the leader of the group said, "We are deeply sorry, High Chieftain, but we can no longer remain in Mulgore."

Baine closed his eyes for a moment. When he opened them again, what good humor he might have had was gone. "I would encourage you to stay, Greyhoof. I would be lying if I said these are not difficult times, but it is now more than ever that we need to remain united."

The elder tauren nodded. "Your words are true, but there is little we can do here. Remember the old ways? There are as yet lands that have not seen the taint of war. Life can be peaceful, free, if we roam once more."

"But the old ways no longer apply as they did. Nomads belong to a much larger world, a world that has been reduced by war and expansion. By remaining static, we have a *home*, and it is by remaining united as a people that we can protect it as it deserves to be protected."

Greyhoof shifted uncomfortably. "Unfortunately, Mulgore, as so many other lands, has simply become an extension of Garrosh's will. We merely wish to move to a land beyond his arrogance. We appreciate your taking up the mantle of leader after your father's passing, but these changes are too much."

Squaring his jaw, Baine said flatly, "Garrosh is the leader of the Horde and, arrogant or not, we have sworn loyalty to that same Horde. It is more than its leaders; it is an enduring and unifying concept that Thrall and my father helped shape. Given the chance, these problems will be overcome and the Horde will be saved from both its external enemies and internal strife. This, I promise."

"As you say, High Chieftain." Baine nodded curtly and set out for the lift to return to Thunder Bluff. Greyhoof Farwanderer said to his group, "Let us return to Camp Narache and make ready for the journey. It should take some time in preparation before we can leave."

Several days later, Hamuul returned to Baine with a large and imposing orc in tow. The orc bowed deeply and said, "I am Swart of Razor Hill, High Chieftain. I am honored to finally meet you."

Baine nodded in response and said, "As am I. I have heard Hamuul speak of you, and any friend of his is most certainly welcome in Thunder Bluff. To what do I owe this visit?"

Hamuul said, "We come bearing good news. You asked for a peaceful end to our conflict with the quilboar. It was not easy, but we think we have encountered a solution."

Baine smiled. "Ah, this is wonderful news indeed. My father was always too hard-pressed with other matters to devote much attention to them, though he suspected they could be reasoned with. Please, go on."

Hamuul continued, "We have been in deep meditation for some time now and we believe we have finally discovered the source of the disturbance. Swart?"

Swart cleared his throat. "The quilboar have specialized individuals called Water Seekers who, due to the current turmoil of the earth, have apparently lost the ability to find water. Desperate for fresh water, they are pushing outward more aggressively, but retreating back to the safety of their brambles at night. We feel the solution is simple: find them a local source of water. Somehow." He glanced at Hamuul.

Hamuul smiled. "And that is where I come in..."

Baine and Hamuul waited in Garrosh's antechamber, tails swishing irritably. Garrosh hurried for no one, leader or otherwise. When he finally arrived, Baine uncustomarily spoke straight to the point. "Warchief, we have information that is critical to the future of our water shipments. We felt it necessary to discuss this information with you."

"The attacks have grown more brazen in recent weeks, but we believe we have found the source of the problem, as well as the tainted water shipments you have received. The quilboar are a menace who have hounded our people for years, but never wanted for

more than room to expand, something they could easily do underground. It seems that with the recent upset of the earth, they need water, too."

A young tauren messenger came running into the chamber, interrupting Baine. "High Chieftain! My apologies, but I was sent to deliver the message that another attack has been discovered. The crew was killed, and the water and equipment have been stolen!"

Baine nodded. "Thank you for the report. Return to Thunder Bluff and let Ruk Warstomper know I'll be along shortly to deal with the situation."

As the messenger left, Garrosh began to pace the room. "This marks the third incident in the last week alone. We know who is responsible, yet no punishments have been meted out, and these quilboar even now mock you by attacking your border. My confidence is withering."

Baine held up his hand. "Garrosh, what you do not understand is that this is a matter of the tauren lands, and as such, our people will handle it. *I* will handle it. Even now we are seeking the guidance of the Earth Mother."

His hands flew in the air as Garrosh shouted, "The Earth Mother! The Earth Mother! All I ever hear is this same litany. What is this Earth Mother, after all?"

"She is the creator of our people and the guiding voice of wisdom of the earth..."

"Yet you use the Earth Mother as a crutch." Garrosh interjected. "You stall and discuss and take no action yourselves! These quilboar want to show force, and the Horde will show them force in return..."

Baine took a breath and continued calmly, "Garrosh, I kindly ask you to respect our ways and our methods. This problem will be solved soon and it will be done without undue bloodshed. There is more here than meets the eye. These attacks reek of desperation, and solving their problems can solve ours, as well."

With Garrosh glaring at him, Baine finished. "I can understand the desire to push them back, but the quilboar are wiler than you imagine. An outright attack will have consequences, and my people will suffer for them."

"The minute they attacked our source of fresh water, it became a Horde problem. We all suffer as one, and your delays cost us daily. I will not stand idly by and watch you make a mockery of the strength and will of the Horde. This aggression will be checked, and soon." With that, Garrosh marched out of the room and disappeared from view.

Hamuul watched Garrosh leave and snorted. "Wouldn't even listen. Typical. And just what does he think he can do about it?"

Baine hoisted Fearbreaker, the mace's silver head with intersecting bands of gold and runes glowing brightly. He nodded curtly and set out for the waiting zeppelin. "I fear that Garrosh may be severely underestimating the enemy he faces. When we return to Thunder Bluff, ready the Sunwalkers. He may yet need our assistance, whether he wants it or not."

That night, as Thunder Bluff rested, Baine paced fitfully in his lodge. His insistence on a peaceful solution had led to more caravan attacks, including a full-scale assault on his land that could endanger the warchief's life. As Hamuul entered the room, Baine looked up from his reverie and said sadly, "I have my doubts, Hamuul, if this is the right course. Perhaps the Farwanderers are correct, after all. The Horde was not like this when my father was high chieftain." He paused. "I have wondered before if I could lead our people. Now I wonder if I *should*."

Hamuul responded with a slight rumble in his voice. "Now is not the time for self-doubt, young Baine. You are doing every bit as good a job as your father. I know beyond a doubt that he would approve of the wisdom you have shown and the passion you have to see this done right." He waved his hand. "Let those who cannot see that be off, and find their own way."

Baine smiled slightly. "I remember not too long ago you expressed much the same opinion as they."

Hamuul stiffened perceptibly. "I spoke hastily and out of frustration. I happily admit that I was wrong. We will get through this, and you will see that you are a leader, even if you do not believe it at present."

At that same moment, Garrosh was preparing the Kor'kron for the invasion of Brambleblade Ravine. Fifteen stood rigidly before him, eyes unwavering yet sparkling with the malicious excitement of the upcoming battle.

"These tauren can talk the tail off of a kodo, but will they take action when their very land is threatened by invasion?!" Garrosh raved. "We need to show them what true warriors can accomplish. Our target is the quilboar dens in southern Mulgore. The attack will commence shortly before dawn. See that you're ready."

His warriors saluted and ran off to prepare. Garrosh returned to his seat with Gorehowl resting across his lap. He would lead them all to victory, and his father's axe would sing in the glory of battle once again. Garrosh bared his teeth in a sharp grin.

The Kor'kron were elite; they were lethal; and they had the element of surprise. The darkened zeppelins slid silently through the air in the early pre-dawn hours, coming to rest near the quilboar-occupied land. Garrosh in the lead, the warriors rappelled down ropes to land nearly on the heads of the quilboar patrols. Blades flashed in a flurry of attacks, and ten quilboar lay still. Only one minor squeal escaped the lips of one enemy, and the guards near the entrance to the burrow moved to investigate. They, too, were quick to fall to a flurry of axes and swords that exploded into the stunned crowd. As the zeppelins moved off to a safe distance, the Kor'kron moved down the tunnels, and any resistance they met was dispatched quickly and efficiently.

The battle was short but intense, and the quilboar defended their home territory with a ferocity that surprised even Garrosh. Used to fighting in cramped tunnels, they made

use of even their tusks if need be and attacked with a mindless zeal. They were not afraid to die in defense of their home. Garrosh smiled to himself as the quilboar before him fell one after another. He would teach them fear today.

A few minutes later the group reached the main chamber, Garrosh triumphantly in the lead with Gorehowl raised before him, ready to strike. He nodded proudly. The floor lay littered with bodies, and no sounds could be heard over the labored breathing of the warriors. They poked around, looking for signs, deciding on which of the myriad of tunnels to follow. After a few minutes, scuffling was heard to their rear, and they turned slowly, expecting to pick off the few stragglers left.

More than a few stragglers, the tunnels behind them were choked with the beasts. These new arrivals paused for a moment, noting the dozens of their brethren covering the floor. Garrosh shouted to them, "Today you shall all pay. Today you shall witness the wrath of the Horde!"

At Garrosh's signal, the Kor'kron launched a hail of axes into the gathering, and dozens of squeals erupted and echoed around the cavern. But the quilboar did not yet move to attack. Another flight of axes met its mark, but still not one beast moved forward. "What is this?!" yelled Garrosh. "Have you all surrendered so easily? I shall not grant you mercy, but cut you down where you stand!"

As one, the members of the crowd before him raised their arms and squealed loudly. The cavern behind the Kor'kron erupted, and as the orcs whirled around they saw a flood of hundreds of the beasts appearing from tunnels in the floor and holes in the roof, moving fast.

"Swing to the left flank; press forward!" shouted Garrosh. "Do not let them cut us off from the surface!" The warriors launched themselves at the quilboar, keeping the exit to their rear. Gorehowl was a blur, singing through the air to make contact with the lead attackers. They fell with a crunch, and more beasts poured over their fallen brethren.

"Forward!" came the command, and his warriors pushed harder against the deafening squeals and grunts as the quilboar pushed back without hesitation. Flashes of color illuminated the contorted faces of his Kor'kron as the quilboar shaman cast spells into their midst. Thunderous roars exploded and echoed throughout the cavern each time they made contact. Garrosh noticed with a sinking feeling that every flash showed one fewer warrior in his party. As they fell, the torches his fighters carried dropped to the floor and were quickly snuffed. With renewed vigor, Garrosh roared and fought more furiously still. He was a Hellscream, and a Hellscream did not fall to pathetic beasts. He would lead them out of this.

He swung Gorehowl around, faster and faster, and the air was filled with the unearthly song of the axe's motion. The howl reverberated down the tunnels and was answered in return by the screech of still more beasts. Quilboar flew in all directions or were sliced apart beneath his axe as Garrosh pressed on, but their numbers were endless. There was no relenting; there was no retreating; and Garrosh was pushed farther and

farther into the cave until even the light from the surface could not reach. He was now alone, darkness closing in, and surrounded by the endless stream of quilboar, all squealing horrendously. They began to pluck at his armor, scratching and biting exposed flesh, pressing him farther still down the tunnel.

There was nothing left now but to retreat in the direction they were pushing, ever downward. He could feel their hot breath and squeals of excitement. He turned, groping for a way back to the surface, but all he found was a short side tunnel that ended abruptly. Finally, his back against the wall of the tunnel, Gorehowl became lodged in a crack in the side and would not pull free.

With a hoarse roar, Garrosh launched himself at the rushing tide of bristles and swords. He wrested a spear away from one attacker to bury it in the head of another. As he did so, the torch the beast was holding, the final source of light, dropped and was snuffed out. All became dark. On and on they came, and though he was alone, lost in the darkness, Garrosh would never stop until they all lay dead. His arms began to ache and his breathing grew ragged, but still he pressed on, using whatever weapon his hands made contact with. For each beast that fell, another rushed in to take his place.

Slowly, he began to get overwhelmed, and more and more of the quilboar attacks found purchase. Dimly, he could see a light permeating the darkness, but his concern was with the fight at hand. As the light grew brighter, many of his attackers paused, and he could hear a faint commotion from the main tunnel. Suddenly, impossibly bright light was streaming down in various radiant beams, and its source was growing closer by the second. The quilboar around him screamed in anger and charged back the way they had come. Blinded though he was, Garrosh could see beasts flying left and right as though they were nothing more than paper dolls.

The light grew brighter still and approached the bend where he was making his final stand. From around the corner he could see Baine, flanked by Hamuul Runetotem and a handful of Sunwalkers. Baine shouted down the tunnel, "Stand fast, brothers! You need not fear the darkness!" as Fearbreaker glowed bright in his hand, brighter than the radiant Light from the Sunwalkers themselves. Baine wondered dimly if Anduin Wrynn would approve of his gift being used in such a manner as beast after beast fell before the dwarven mace until, en masse, the quilboar retreated farther down their burrows into the safety of the darkness.

Baine rushed to the warchief's side. "Garrosh, grab your weapon and let's go. We need to move out of here before they flank us." He pulled Garrosh to his feet and helped him remove his weapon from where it was lodged in the wall. "Make haste."

Quickly they made their way toward the surface, and save for the bodies littering the floor, the way was clear and free of obstacles. Baine was counting his good fortune, hoping they had routed the quilboar completely as they passed through a rather large cavern. Upon reaching the other side, Hamuul called for a halt. He knelt and began to mutter, looking for the proper guidance for the correct path to the outside. As he stood and

motioned toward the route, the walls of the cavern erupted. The group whirled to face the new onslaught, but stopped suddenly at the sight of the attackers.

Garrosh shouted above the din, "What *are* those?!"

Baine took a cautious step backward. "I wish I knew, Warchief..."

Quilboar, far larger than normal and exceptionally pale, began to surround the gathered fighters. As they moved, unnaturally high-pitched sounds escaped their mouths, piercing the fighters' ears. Their bodies were ashen white and covered in sickly dark-green spiny quills, with large bulging eyes protruding from their heads. They stood a full head taller than any other quilboar ever seen by the tauren or any other race, and the intelligent malice in their eyes showed they were far more capable than their brethren who so recently had fallen before the onslaught of Baine, Hamuul, and the Sunwalkers.

Baine called for his Sunwalkers to halt as each side faced down the other. There was nowhere to go but backward. The air grew heavy and redolent of a cloying, earthy odor as more and more of the ashen beasts filled in every space of the cavern. But no attack came. It was as if they were sizing up these invaders, formulating a plan as to their next move.

Garrosh hefted his axe and yelled, "Ghostly beasts! Let us end this now!"

Baine shouted over Garrosh, "Warchief, we need to get to open ground! All is lost if we remain down here!" Hamuul made a gesture, and small vines sprouted from the earth, winding a path up through the maze of tunnels to the exit. "Follow quickly!" Baine ordered.

Dragging a roaring Garrosh in tow, Baine, Hamuul, and the Sunwalkers fairly ran to the surface, reaching the top as Hamuul's spell came to an end. Now they had room to maneuver. While Garrosh focused on the tunnel's exit, Baine grabbed the goblin flare gun from Garrosh's belt and fired it into the air. The zeppelins began moving in for extraction, but not quickly enough. The unnatural beasts poured to the surface, blinking hard in the early morning light.

Baine stepped toward them as they emerged, and they balked, aware of the fact they were out of their element. He turned toward Hamuul as the archdruid made a gesture and shouted to the crowd gathered before him, "There was a better solution, one which you all ignored. Behold the blessings of the Earth Mother!" With that, Hamuul stepped forward and, with a shout, thrust his staff into the ground.

Water erupted from a massive fountain in front of him, enveloping most of the albino quilboar and, with a roll of thunder, sweeping them back down the tunnel. Those who remained were knocked to the ground by the explosion, along with a chagrined Garrosh. The tauren remained steadfast and unmoving, anchored to the earth they so revered.

A new river poured from the spot where Hamuul had thrust his staff, trailing over the rocks to flow down the tunnel and deep into the earth. As the quilboar rose once again, Baine took another step toward them. "The land is bountiful to those who would respect it. There is water enough for all. You will find this river has charted its own course, moving

through these tunnels toward an underground lake. Take this gift, and bother us no longer."

The quilboar slowly returned to the tunnel as the light fully crested the hills surrounding Mulgore. Dawn was significant to all tauren, as it symbolized rebirth, but today added a fresh new respect for the Earth Mother and her many gifts. They picked their way among the bodies of the quilboar who had fallen in the initial attack and made for Camp Narache. Garrosh moved in silence, too angry to speak. Baine realized that such a reaction did not surprise him as he studied Garrosh's stiff movement.

The first zeppelin finally pulled into place and stopped as the rope ladder descended to ground level. Baine looked up at the airship, then back to his Sunwalkers gathered around. His gaze fell on Garrosh for a few moments before he nodded at the airship and said, "Go lead the Horde. Should we require your assistance again in Mulgore, we will let you know." With that, he turned his back to the still silent warchief and began the trek back to Thunder Bluff, his Sunwalkers in close step behind him.

Night began to fall on Mulgore, casting long shadows over the land. Fires dotted the mesas and plains alike as all tauren settled in for the evening. Tonight they would sleep soundly, knowing their land was safe once again. Outside of Baine's lodge, Greyhoof Farwanderer and a few of his tribe hesitated. Finally, he said, "Steel your spirits. We must do this."

With his tribe members close behind, he entered the main room, where Baine was attempting to relax, and asked quietly, "High Chieftain, might we have just a moment of your time?"

Baine stood up with a weary smile. "By all means. What might I do for you?"

The elder tauren hung his head and said, "Despite your encouragement, our hearts were still troubled. We spent time preparing to leave, and in the early hours of the morning, we set out. We witnessed your triumph over the quilboar, and it was truly inspirational. You have a leader's strength and rely on wisdom we were too blind to see. We are ashamed to admit we felt the need to leave this land, and we humbly wish to apologize, High Chieftain."

Baine dismissed this with a wave of his hand. "We live in a turbulent and uncertain time. Your troubled hearts are easy to forgive. These quilboar will harass us no more in Mulgore, but that does not mean we are free of troubles. We are beset on all sides by problems both from within and without, but it is only together that we will overcome them."

Baine moved to the front of the lodge and looked outside for a long while. He watched as Thunder Bluff prepared for the evening, scattered fires burning in the distance. He could vaguely see the silhouette of Camp Narache, where young tauren braves now resumed their training. They would be needed in the coming trials, trials that would as yet test the faith and stolidity of all his people.

Baine nodded and turned his attention back to the small group before him. "Our people have walked this land for many, many years, and in that time have learned much about the world. Our allies will need to look to us for wisdom and guidance. My father once made a promise to the Horde, to repay a debt we owed them for their service to our race. I, for one, intend to deliver on that promise."