

BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT

Heart of War

Sarah Pine

You disappoint me, Garrosh.

Try as he might, the memory of those words just would not die. It did not matter how many times he heard the proud shouts of "Welcome, Overlord!" as he passed through Agmar's Hammer, or how long he stood in the ruins before the Wrath Gate and stared into the enchanted flames that still burned there. Even the strike of his blades against the beasts or Scourge that dared oppose him only provided temporary respite. All the hot, sharp splatter of blood against his face could not drown out that voice. The moment he returned to the road, he heard each word spoken in his head with every fall of his great wolf's paws against the snow.

Perhaps it was the warchief's continued presence at his flank that caused the words to linger. Thrall had decided to accompany Garrosh back to Warsong Hold from Dalaran. He said he wanted to see their holdings in Northrend. Garrosh felt as if he were being chaperoned, but it was also an opportunity. The Horde's inroads into Northrend were far from trivial. Surely Thrall could see that. Surely he would appreciate all that had been accomplished on this front.

Garrosh spat off the back of his wolf, Malak, and into the sedges. Lake Kum'uya lay behind them, still as a mirror in the gray morning sky. They would reach Warsong Hold by mid-afternoon, dusk if they were slow. Privately he had to admit that he was eager to see the look in Thrall's eyes when they arrived.

Unfortunately they could not admire the hold properly as they approached. In a moment Garrosh knew that the nerubians had, yet again, broken into Mightstone Quarry. He grimaced. No matter how effectively they blockaded Azjol-Nerub, the insects always managed to find a way back west. Their eerie shrieks were unmistakable, carrying far in all directions in the tundra's frozen wind.

"Forward! Attack!" Garrosh ordered the Kor'kron riders who accompanied them, forgetting that he was not in fact the commander of the group. He had kicked Malak into a full run and left them all behind before he remembered that decorum dictated he defer to Thrall. Well, decorum didn't win battles. Action did.

More sounds from the fight became audible as he approached—shouts from the battleguards, the dull boom of artillery, and the distinctive splintering crack that metal weapons made against nerubian chitin. Garrosh readied his axes, his heartbeat quickening with anticipation. He sailed over the edge of the quarry, Malak never missing a beat. They skidded down the wall, leaped over outcrops and scaffolding, and with a cry Garrosh threw himself into combat.

The nerubian before him never saw him coming. Garrosh's first blow cut deep into its thorax, and the second cleaved its entire anterior end from its body. The Warsong guard it had been battling looked up, startled, his axe readied above his shoulder. Garrosh grinned.

"Hellscream!" the warrior yelled, saluting. He turned to the others around him. "Overlord Hellscream has returned!"

Garrosh raised an axe in response. "Beat them back!" he roared to his soldiers. "Remind these vermin what it means to assault the Horde! Lok-tar ogar!"

Garrosh's rally injected renewed fervor into the defenders, and they surged forward, a chorus of "Lok-tar ogar!" on their lips in response. An enormous beetle-like monster dominated the quarry floor, and Garrosh kicked on his wolf to engage it. Orcish wolves were trained for battle every bit as much as their riders, and Malak bit deeply into the nerubian's tarsus, unbalancing it as Garrosh vaulted down. Advantageous as mounted combat could be, he always felt better with both his feet on the ground.

The nerubian hissed and thrust its forelimbs at his neck. Garrosh parried the blow and with a sweep of his axe sent their severed ends arcing to the ground. The insect staggered backward, and Garrosh practically danced after it, swinging his axes with chilling grace. The blood sang in his veins; the fervor of battle burned in his chest. It would never occur to him to consider the irony that he felt most alive when meting out death.

Garrosh hacked at the monster's thorax while Malak harried its legs, keeping it from gaining firm footing. As he readied another blow, a brilliant flash followed by a sharp "crack" and the stinging scent of seared chitin momentarily disoriented him and announced Warchief Thrall's full entrance into the battle. The nerubian was beaten and had no place to go. Garrosh felt a rush of certainty as he lifted an axe and delivered the final blow, splitting the great insect's head in two.

With that Garrosh knew the battle was won. All that remained was for the Warsong forces to dispatch the remaining nerubian ranks still skirmishing throughout the quarry. Seeing the guards' struggle, Thrall raised the Doomhammer in front of him, murmuring something Garrosh could not hear. At the warchief's command the wind suddenly whipped into a howling fury and the air crackled, making the hairs stand up on the back of Garrosh's neck. Thrall roared and called down a blinding lightning bolt into the last resisting group as the soldiers dived out of the way. The explosion rained bits of singed carapace upon the rocks.

Garrosh called Malak back to him and draped his arm across her ruff, surveying the troops, pleased at their success. The fight had been quick, but satisfying. It was unfortunate that the Horde had built its fortress atop such a well-traversed portion of the ancient nerubian kingdom, but the attacks came more and more infrequently, and he was confident that eventually they would cease altogether. His soldiers grew more efficient with each opportunity to defend, and the lines had held. The lines would continue to hold.

He made his way up the ramp to the front of Warsong Hold, where Overlord Razgor waited, thick ichor still dripping from his sword.

"About time you showed up," he said, wiping sweat from his face. Garrosh laughed.

"Wouldn't miss the chance to slaughter some overgrown insects," he answered. Razgor grinned.

"Warchief Thrall has accompanied me from Dalaran," Garrosh continued, "to inspect our holdings in Northrend." As he spoke, Thrall climbed onto the path behind Garrosh.

Razgor's eyes widened, and he nodded. He turned to face the crowd of soldiers around them.

"Welcome the return of Overlord Hellscream!" he announced. The soldiers cheered and brandished their weapons. "And welcome," he continued, louder, "our warchief! Thrall, son of Durotan!" The assemblage turned almost simultaneously and saluted, every eye resting humbly upon Thrall. Razgor stepped forward and saluted as well.

"We are honored by your presence at Warsong Hold, Warchief," he said. Thrall's eyes swept up the fortress's tall stone walls, across the iron ramparts, and down upon the quarry pit where they had just fought, and finally came to rest upon Garrosh, who stared back.

"It reminds me of Orgrimmar," Thrall said. "Impressive."

"It is even more so inside," Garrosh responded. "We will show you."

"I'm sure I won't be disappointed," Thrall answered. Garrosh ground his teeth at the words.

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Orgrimmar. The first time he had seen it, the sight nearly stopped him dead in his tracks. They had not long since left Razorwind Canyon behind, emerging from between its tall sandstone walls into Durotar's unforgiving sun. Before them the red plain stretched endlessly and the horizon vanished into shimmers of heat that distorted the distance. This was a far cry from the rolling green hills of Nagrand.

"There! Can you see it?" Thrall halted his mount and pointed toward the northern horizon. Garrosh pulled up next to him and squinted. Behind them their entourage slowed and milled about.

In the distance he saw a tall gate, a wall of sharpened wood pylons, towers roofed in red.... No, his eyes played tricks. He started in surprise. Orgrimmar could not possibly be that large. He glanced over to see Thrall watching him intently, the barest of smiles on his face. Clearly he waited eagerly for Garrosh's reaction. Garrosh felt his cheeks burn. Garadar might not be particularly imposing, but he was the chieftain. He was his father's son.

"Impressive," he grunted. "If it's as big as it looks."

Thrall laughed. "Just wait," he said, grinning.

The gates were not simply tall. They were *enormous*. The guards saluted elaborately as they passed, recognizing the warchief. Garrosh focused his eyes dead ahead and squared his shoulders. Suddenly his throat felt dry. It was the dust, of course.

Thrall had filled his head with imagery of the city during their weeks of travel. Garrosh had believed he knew reasonably well what to expect. He was wrong. Nothing, not all the talk in the world, could have prepared him for what he saw. Buildings rose in front of him two and three stories tall, their fronts disappearing into winding alleys shaded by trees

and overhanging rock. If an orc settlement half as large had ever existed on Draenor, it had long since been razed or abandoned. Orgrimmar, however, hummed with life. In the square were dozens upon dozens of orcs. More orcs than he had seen in years, more than he had even known still lived. It was a sight for which he could never have prepared himself.

When Garrosh was barely a child, the clans had consolidated to form the Horde and spent months in a fervor preparing for what would become known as the First War. Years later, after the Second War, the Alliance had in turn invaded the orcs' homeland, and Garrosh had longed to join the Horde's ranks and fight alongside his father. But his chance came and went, and instead he had remained confined to quarantine in Garadar on account of the red pox, barely able to walk, burning with both the fever of his illness and the shame of his weakness. His own father had gone to Azeroth without so much as a backward glance, never to return to Garadar or his son. And he, Garrosh Hellscream, heir to the Warsong clan, had not had the strength to aid his people. The Horde had rejected him. He may have been *Mag'har*—uncorrupted—but he was also unwanted.

The Horde had ultimately fallen. The humans had destroyed the Dark Portal and imprisoned the conquered orcs, and the immense wars had ended. The *Mag'har* were utterly alone. Some of the Horde orcs had remained, to be sure, but they had avoided Garadar, wary and disdainful of its sickened residents. The epidemic had run its course, but superstition and bitterness died hard. The orcs had become a dwindling people, fragmented and ever fighting on the edges for survival. Eventually it had become clear that the Horde was truly ravaged, and its enemies had pushed until hope had faded to ashes and survival had seemed an impossible folly.

Here in Orgrimmar the Horde not only survived; it thrived. The square was crammed full of orcs. Merchants barked their wares, hounding their potential customers with discounts. Children darted between the stalls, enacting mock battles against an unseen foe. Grunts patrolled the streets. Garrosh could barely believe the scene before him.

Next to him, Thrall chuckled. Garrosh glanced over.

"It's a sight," Thrall said.

Garrosh nodded, but did not speak.

"You'll see it all, Garrosh," Thrall continued. He grinned broadly. "Welcome to Orgrimmar!"

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In Warsong Hold they walked the ramparts, climbed to the tops of the towers, and toured the forges and tannery. When they returned to the great hall, Thrall spent what seemed like ages examining the enormous tactical map of Northrend draped across the floor. Painstakingly etched and stitched into leather hides, it detailed all of the known holdings and fronts in Northrend, friend and foe alike. Garrosh noted especially how hard Thrall stared at the northern peninsula of the Storm Peaks, where Ulduar lay. Garrosh's mind drifted suddenly back to their brief meeting with the Kirin Tor in Dalaran. *You disappoint.* He clenched his fists until his knuckles burned.

"Where," Thrall said suddenly, "is the front in Icecrown?" He studied the map; there was only one mark there in chalk.

"On the ground in the southeast," Garrosh answered, "held by the Argent Crusade." He pointed to another portion of the map, just north of the Crusade's holdings. "*Orgrim's Hammer* was dispatched here. We will mount our attack on Icecrown's ramparts from the air." He eyed Thrall. "Our scouts tell us the Alliance plans the same."

Before Thrall could respond, another voice rang through the hall.

"The assault has already begun." Thrall and Garrosh turned to regard the speaker.

High Overlord Varok Saurfang held up a sealed scroll in his hand as he strode toward where they stood.

"This missive just arrived this afternoon," he continued. "It bears Korm Blackscar's personal seal."

"Throm-ka, Varok," Thrall said.

"Throm-ka, Warchief," he answered.

"We came from Dalaran, by way of Agmar's Hammer," Thrall told him. He paused a moment. "We paid homage at the Wrath Gate."

Varok remained silent.

"I am sorry about Dranosh," Thrall said.

"My son died an honorable death, defending his people," Varok replied, a bit too swiftly. "His spirit shall be avenged when we defeat the Lich King."

Thrall nodded.

"Here is Blackscar's report," Varok continued, returning their attention to the scroll. "Let's see what news there is from the front."

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Garrosh loved Orgrimmar. He loved to walk its streets; he loved to visit the markets; he loved the stables and the training rings and the smithies and the shops. Most of all he loved the banners that waved in the wind from atop the posts scattered around the city: the red-and-black banners of the Horde. Standing beneath those flags, he knew where he belonged. He served the Horde, as had his father before him.

Nevertheless, he was quite alone, despite being surrounded by his people. Everywhere he went, people *stared*. The news had spread quickly that the son of Grom Hellscream lived and had come to Orgrimmar, and at first he had assumed that to be the reason for it. But one day he overheard a young child speaking loudly to his mother.

"Look over there! He looks so strange!"

"Shush! Be quiet!"

"But his skin! It's not green like ours! What orcs don't have green skin?"

Garrosh turned toward the child who had spoken. He still stared, wide-eyed, sucking on one finger in the corner of his mouth. Garrosh stared right back, and he briefly caught the mother's eye. She looked away and grabbed her son's arm, quickly hurrying off. Slowly Garrosh slid his gaze around the walkway, silently daring anyone who had overheard—the

street was quite crowded—to say another word. *No, my skin is not green; it is brown*, said his eyes. *I am one of the Mag'har*. When he was satisfied that he had adequately intimidated any onlookers, he turned and slowly continued on his way. He had only gone a short distance before a light hand on his arm stopped him.

Garrosh whirled around, surprised.

"Forgive me, young one, but I might explain."

The speaker was an elderly orc, his hair long since faded to silver but still braided into a knot. The multitude of scars upon his face and arms made clear that he was an experienced warrior indeed. Garrosh glared at him.

"What do you have to say, old one?"

"That child spoke the truth, but he doesn't understand it." The old orc shook his head.

Garrosh shrugged off his grasp. "I am not interested in your explanation," he said, once again turning to leave.

"I fought with your father, Hellscream," the warrior said. Garrosh stilled. "I followed him from the sacking of Shattrath to the forests of Ashenvale. I drank the blood of Mannoroth alongside him, and I felt the curse lift after his sacrifice.

"You cannot know what it means for those like me to see you. Once the curse was gone we were free to remember what we had abandoned, and what we had destroyed. We thought there was nothing left of what our people had once been. Seeing you..." He broke off and looked Garrosh up and down. "Knowing that our past is not entirely lost... that there is hope for our future.

"Grom was a great warrior. I followed him to the end of Draenor and beyond. Now I am no longer one for the battlefield. But if I were, I would follow you too."

Garrosh could not possibly have been more at a loss. He stared at the old warrior, unable to speak. He knew that Thrall had been a close companion of his father's, and Thrall had indeed spoken much of Grom. But Thrall had not known Grom for extraordinarily long, and there was much that Garrosh longed to hear, though he was far too proud to admit it. He wanted to know the tales—the good ones. He had grown up with enough of the bad.

"You will do your people proud, Hellscream," the old orc said. At last he turned and walked away, leaving Garrosh alone in the street with a number of roiling thoughts that only served to irritate him. He could not now remember what he had set out to do. With a snort he picked a direction and began to walk. It was better than standing still.

His feet carried him to the easternmost part of the city, the Valley of Honor, and to the wide pool where the spring water collected. He sat on a rock at the water's edge and watched the falls tumble out of the rock face and splash into the small lake below. The constant flow and the cliff's shade cooled the air and provided a welcome respite from the desert heat. The spray felt good against his skin.

His skin. He looked down at the backs of his hands and saw their rich brown color against the stained red of the rock. He frowned. Did the orcs of Thrall's Horde truly not remember where they came from? Was there really such meaning in his appearance?

A nearby splash made him look up. A young female orc was pulling in a fishing net. He absently watched her work. Her skin, of course, was green. She turned to wade closer to shore, and his two eyes met her one. A patch covered the place where her right eye would have been. To his surprise, she scowled at him ferociously.

"It's fun, isn't it," she called, her voice dripping contempt as her net dripped water, "to sit there and watch me grapple with some fish? I hope you enjoy it."

Garrosh snorted at her. "I don't care what you do. Fish or not as you see fit. Buy it at the markets if you dislike the work."

"Buy it?" She threw back her head and laughed. "Are you going to pay for it? Easy for you to say, Hellscream! Yes, I know who you are."

He laughed back at her. "Of course, you do. I'm the only Mag'har in Orgrimmar. If you didn't know, you'd have to be missing your other eye."

"Arrogant as your father was." She began to gather her net and stuff it into a burlap sack. "You are a fool, as was he."

At her words the blood boiled in Garrosh's veins. He leaped down from the rock where he had been sitting and strode up to her. "My father sacrificed his life for you and the rest of Thrall's people. It is thanks to him that you are free of the blood-curse!"

"It is thanks to him there was a curse in the first place!" she retorted. "And I am none of the warchief's people! I am a daughter of the Horde, as were my parents before me, but my duty extends no further!"

Garrosh raged at her words. "You say you have no duty? You say you are not of the warchief's people? As you stand in this city? Where we can be free to live in our own space without the fear of annihilation? Where we have everything we need?"

"Ha!" she snarled. "Let me ask you this, Hellscream: have you really *seen* this city? Yes, the marketplace overflows. But where does it come from? Where are the farms in Durotar?"

Garrosh narrowed his eyes. He knew there were a few on the outskirts of Orgrimmar, but they raised mostly swine and certainly brought no harvest of grain or fruit.

"Exactly!" she continued. "There are none. All we have is hauled in from miles away." She glared at the bag where she stored her net. "Or what we can wrest from the desert. As for safety!" She laughed. "The Alliance encroaches farther into our land daily. If you can call this red rock 'land' anyway! To the north is Ashenvale Forest, full of everything we could ever need, but did we settle there? No! Instead we live in a desert! So tell me, Hellscream, why would the good warchief, who loves his people so, condemn us to this wasteland when just up the river there is far more bounty? He is either corrupt or incompetent, or both, and you seem to fit right in!"

That was the last straw.

"Treason!" Garrosh roared. He took a step toward her menacingly. "You dare insult the warchief? Shut your mouth, traitor, or I will shut it for you!"

"Go ahead and—" she began, clenching her hands into fists, bracing against the anticipated blow.

"No! Krenna!" a new voice yelled. Garrosh looked over: another orc was running toward them.

"Krenna, you hold your tongue!" she continued, stepping in between the two of them.

The one with the eye patch—Krenna—glared at the person who addressed her, then snorted and stood down.

"I'll be on my way, then, Gorgonna." She heaved her bag over her shoulder and left without another word to either of them. Garrosh made to follow her, but Gorgonna immediately turned and grabbed his arm.

"Please stop," she said. "I am sorry about my sister. She does not mean what she says!"

"She better not," Garrosh growled. Gorgonna sighed, releasing her grasp.

"She and I spent our childhoods in the internment camps after the Second War. She is grateful that the warchief liberated us, but..." She hesitated, then added quietly, "She thinks he does not do enough."

"And you?" Garrosh demanded. Gorgonna looked down the path that Krenna had gone and did not immediately speak.

"Our parents fought in the wars," she said slowly. "They drank the blood of Mannoroth like your father did, and they were parties to its curse. They committed terrible acts in the name of the Horde. They attacked and murdered the innocent."

Garrosh bristled. His father was no murderer. "They did what they believed necessary! Do you defile the name of your own blood?"

"I honor my parents' memory—make no mistake!" she cried. "But what they believed was wrong. What *all* the orcs believed was wrong. We must suffer for it. The warchief understands this, as do I. My sister does not."

"That is ridiculous. You never even fought in the wars! You said you were children in the internment camps! Isn't that enough punishment? Why should you suffer any more?"

"I bear the mark all the same," she said, holding up her hands—green, as were her sister's, as were all the orcs in Orgrimmar, save him. "I reap what all of them have sown. Is there not some payment owed?"

"And who would set the price?" Garrosh demanded. Her attitude angered him. Did she have no pride at all? "Who could possibly have the right to make that call?"

"I will pay what the warchief asks," she answered.

"Thrall would never be that unreasonable. We don't owe anybody anything."

Gorgonna stared at him a moment, then unexpectedly she laughed just as bitterly as her sister had. "Of course not," she said. "*You* don't owe anybody a thing, Mag'har. But *we* are not *you*."

* * *

"This is an outrage," Thrall said. He paced the hall restlessly. "I cannot believe the sky-reaver would condone such a thing."

Varok sat at the table, the pages of Blackscar's report strewn in front of him. Across the room, Garrosh picked up a few wooden tokens painted blue for the Alliance, a few painted red for the Horde, and a few painted with skulls for the Scourge. He dropped all of them onto the map of Icecrown, south of Mord'rethar, the Death Gate of Icecrown Citadel. With a stick of charcoal he drew a large X onto the cured hide. The report had given this region a name: the Broken Front.

The Alliance had attempted to conquer Mord'rethar, but a Horde patrol had seen the regiment and successfully prevented its assault...by attacking from the rear. Pinched between the Scourge at their front and the Horde at their back, the Alliance forces had perished—but so had the Horde's. The Scourge too had suffered losses, but the gate remained under the Lich King's control.

Blackscar's forces had deliberately waited until the Alliance soldiers were engaged, then slaughtered them. Thrall's face contorted as he read the sky-reaver's words: *Though it cost them their lives, their selfless bravery prevented the Alliance from capturing a strategic point. Such courage is worthy of true soldiers of the Horde!*

"'Selfless bravery.' 'Courage' worthy of the Horde." Thrall nearly spat the words. "And the Scourge still holds the Death Gate. Is that what he wants? Is this what passes for glory among us?"

Garrosh remained uncharacteristically silent, instead looking hard at the wooden chips upon the map. He could almost feel Varok's eyes boring into his back, and Thrall's would also soon fall upon him. It was good the Alliance did not hold Mord'rethar; of that Garrosh was certain. Still he continued to stare at the little wooden markers, and late into the night, long after the other commanders had retired to sleep, Garrosh reread Blackscar's letter.

Such courage is worthy of true soldiers of the Horde!

He summoned a courier. "Send for Sky-Reaver Korm Blackscar of *Orgrim's Hammer*," he said, handing over a scroll. "He is to return to Warsong Hold immediately. Tell him Overlord Hellscream wants to see him."

* * *

Garrosh thought that what Gorgonna had said by the lake was absurd. His own father had been the first to drink the blood of Mannoroth, he knew that—by the ancestors, how he knew it; no one would ever let him forget it—but Grom had in turn slain Mannoroth and ended the curse for them all at the cost of his own life. His debt was paid in blood. What more could anyone want?

It was Krenna's words that truly nagged him.

They nagged him when the night elves ambushed lumber caravans from Ashenvale.

They nagged him when soldiers from Tiragarde Keep robbed Razor Hill.

They nagged him when the dwarves of Bael Modan and the humans of Northwatch Hold refused to leave the Horde territory that they had usurped.

None of these things was happening for the first time.

Certainly there had been retaliation, and many of the outposts had rightfully acted in their own defense. Garrosh longed to travel and lend them his support. He would gladly fight to secure them. He would gladly teach the Alliance to leave them alone, to let them take what they needed to survive. Unlike Garadar, Orgrimmar had the might and the numbers to defend itself.

Well, it would have. If only orc forces were not tangled up at Tarren Mill, aiding the Forsaken—an aptly named people, in Garrosh's opinion. What Thrall had ever seen in them, Garrosh could not possibly comprehend.

Still more orcs had been sent to Quel'Thalas. Garrosh's own interactions with the elves in Orgrimmar had left him wondering distinctly why the Horde should bother with them at all. Their respect seemed thin.

And the *trolls*. Garrosh could barely stand to think of it. Recruit after recruit had been sent to aid them in reclaiming their land to the south, and somehow all attempts had still failed. Apparently this had been going on for *years*. What kind of people could not even take down a single witch doctor? Was it really going to take a full-scale invasion—yet more diversion of Horde troops—to reclaim a few measly islands?

The more Garrosh thought about it all, the more his rage smoldered. With each passing day, what Krenna had said clawed at his conscience. Garrosh's impatience grew.

Then the rumors had started. From Ratchet, they had heard, by way of Booty Bay, that something was amiss with the grain shipments. People had begun to whisper. The few Forsaken who made Orgrimmar their home had cautioned its leaders: *It is happening again.*

They were not wrong.

These were times like none he had ever seen. Friends turned into foes; life, into death that yet was not. There could be no hesitation, no mercy, no quarter. This was the plague. This was sorcery of a wickedness that only one such as Gul'dan could have conceived of, yet Gul'dan had long been dead. It was another who orchestrated these atrocities, Garrosh had learned: a former prince from the Alliance. One who had been too gullible, too weak, and too stupid to prevent his own manipulation into evil. Now he rained death upon them.

Garrosh's axes had risen and fallen over, and over, and over again in defense of Orgrimmar. He would protect his people.

Then, abruptly, the threat had seemed to cease. The plague's spread had ended. The last of the infected had been dispatched. But this was not the end, Garrosh knew. Far from it. The only recourse against such a brazen enemy was war, brutal and ruthless. He ached for it. He would lead their armies to deliver the Horde's justice. He needed only to wait for Thrall's command.

From across the world the reports pour in. The plague has ravaged us, and the flying citadels send their armies to desecrate our lands. Still you wait, Warchief. You call for counsel when you should call for war. Even these...allies...you have allowed into our Horde have gathered here, and the only announcement you have for any of us is to hold. We are holding, Thrall. You are hesitating.

"*Mak'Gora!*"

The challenge had been issued out of sheer frustration and rage. Thrall would not act. He wanted to scout; he wanted to consult with the *Alliance*—with a woman of the very people who had spawned the traitorous prince in the first place. Garrosh would not let that happen.

"You challenge me, boy?" Thrall answered in a voice deathly calm. "I don't have time for this...." He turned away.

"So you refuse? Is the son of Durotan a coward?"

That caught Thrall's attention. He whirled around, and it pleased Garrosh to see the fury in his eyes.

"Inside!" Thrall roared, pointing toward the Ring of Valor. Garrosh could have sung. *I will make you act.*

* * *

In retrospect Garrosh knew that he was very lucky the duel had been interrupted, though he would rather have died than admit it. It was no matter. Thrall had come to his senses and finally issued the command to march upon Northrend, a call that Garrosh had taken to with fervor.

Now he stood in the front hall of the citadel he had built, set upon the land he had conquered, awaiting the arrival of Korm Blackscar. Thrall had remained in Northrend. Garrosh was certain he desired to witness how Garrosh handled the sky-reaver.

Shall you be disappointed once again, Warchief?

Blackscar lumbered in through the doorway, looking around in surprise at his audience. Despite the warchief's presence, he addressed Garrosh. "You requested I return to Warsong Hold, Overlord," he said. "I've honored that request."

Garrosh held up the missive on the Broken Front. "Here you detail how one of your patrols prevented the Alliance from taking a strategic point against the Scourge."

Blackscar broke into a wide grin. "That was a piece of work on their part! Is it not glorious?"

Garrosh looked at the report, then back to Blackscar. "No."

Blackscar's eyebrows shot up in surprise.

"An ambush on open troops waiting to fight is one thing. To attack a regiment already engaged in battle with another from behind? What would you do next?" Garrosh demanded. "Would you sneak into their camp and poison their water? Would you enslave one of their commanders with magic and force him to murder his troops while they sleep? Would you rain disease upon your enemies, like the Forsaken? Would you fight the way they do?"

Blackscar stuttered, at a loss for words.

"There is no combat but *honorable* combat, Blackscar." Garrosh held up the report in front of his face and crumpled it in his hand. "*This?* This is coward's work! I will not have cowards among my ranks!"

"Overlord," Blackscar stammered, "if I have brought shame to our cause, I will leave my post."

"Do you admit to being a coward? Again: *I will not have cowards among my ranks.* Prove that you are not one, Blackscar. Go back to *Orgrim's Hammer* and lead your soldiers in a manner worthy of the Horde. Should you fail, it is not your resignation I will seek, but your head upon a pike. Now get out of my sight."

Garrosh did not wait to see Blackscar leave. He strode out of the hall and up the stairs to the top of one of the hold's bulwarks. Up and down he walked, brows furrowed. He examined the status of the defenses and noted to himself what would need fixing, and who was responsible for letting it lapse.

He turned to walk the wall's length again, and he started when Thrall was in his path. "Yes, Warchief?"

Thrall eyed him thoughtfully. Garrosh did not like the look on his face.

"I think you handled Blackscar well," Thrall said. "His soldiers' actions at the Broken Front were unconscionable, but he is still a strong commander. Our advance into Icecrown would suffer for his loss. You made the right choice."

Garrosh pushed past him. "He will only get one more chance. I will not have tricksters and deceivers amongst my ranks," he answered.

"Indeed," Thrall called after him wryly. "I recall something someone said to me at the top of the Violet Tower not too many weeks ago. 'A true warchief would never partner with cowards.'"

Garrosh stopped dead in his tracks and slowly turned around. Hearing Thrall quote Garrosh's own words unsettled him. "I am not the warchief," he answered after a moment.

Thrall chuckled. "I know. True words, still. Fitting for an overlord every bit as much." Thrall looked about, taking in the hold, the gray sea to the west, and the vast tundra plain that stretched all around them. "This is no small accomplishment, Garrosh. Our holdings are secure, and the front in Icecrown presses forward. You fight alongside your soldiers with courage, and they respect you. You should be proud."

Garrosh narrowed his eyes.

"I do not regret my choice of commander for this offensive," Thrall said.

Garrosh blinked in surprise, unsure of what to say. This reaction was unexpected. He shifted from one foot to the other, uncomfortable with the feeling of Thrall's praise, but not disliking it. "I serve the Horde," Garrosh finally said. "I will do what's best for it."

"That I don't doubt," Thrall answered. "And you do well, I am proud to say."

Garrosh shifted again and looked past Thrall's shoulder toward the wall behind him. The crimson Horde banner draping its face stirred in a light breeze.

"However," Thrall continued, "I believe your attitude toward the Alliance is wrong. We cannot win this war without them."

Garrosh snapped his eyes back to Thrall's. "My duty is to the Horde," he responded, "and the Horde alone."

"Perhaps, Garrosh," Thrall said, "but bloodshed is not the only way to fulfill that duty."

"Bah!"

Garrosh turned and leaned both hands against the parapet. Behind him he could hear Thrall's footsteps receding back down the stairs. Garrosh looked toward the overcast sky. Thrall did not understand that the Alliance would never leave them be. It would push at the edges—like the orcs' enemies in Garadar—until the Horde broke. The only counter was to fight, to drive the humans out first. The orcs' security came above all else. There would be no negotiation until the Alliance understood that. Garrosh would not stop. His people would never dwindle, not again. The Horde would never fall.