



WE RIDE FORTH

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“Mograine.”

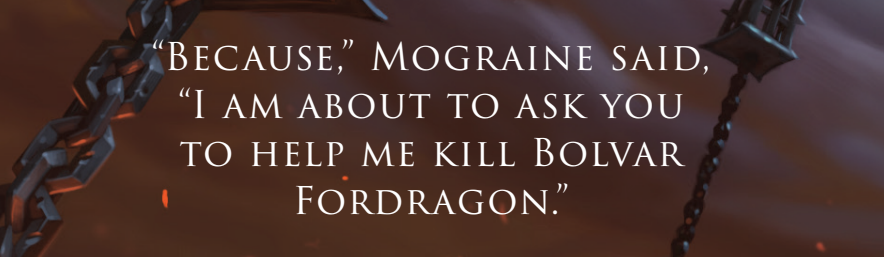
Sunset. Violet on the horizon. The chill of night settling in, mingling with the wisps of icy fog writhing around the necropolis.

“Mograine.”

The cold didn’t touch him. Cold could only bother the living.

“Highlord Mograine, what happened?”

Through the fog surrounding the floating fortress of Acherus, Darion Mograine could see the Broken Isles stretching out before him. The soothing lights of Suramar. The dead silhouette of the Tomb of Sargeras, its fel glow extinguished.



“BECAUSE,” MOGRAINE SAID,
“I AM ABOUT TO ASK YOU
TO HELP ME KILL BOLVAR
FORDRAGON.”

The distant peak of Highmountain, snowcaps gleaming orange from the last rays of the sun. Still. Quiet. As it had been since the Legion’s defeat.

“Mograine, are you still with us?”

A blade pressed firmly into the back of his neck. A flick of a wrist, and his troubles would end. Darion Mograine turned his head and met the gaze of the woman holding the sword. “For the moment,” he answered.

“How can I be sure?” asked Sally Whitemane, her glowing eyes unblinking beneath her snow-white hair. An orc and a human were beside her. They made no move to intervene. Wise of them.

“Because,” Mograine said, “I am about to ask you to help me kill Bolvar Fordragon.”

The Presence in Mograine’s mind didn’t so much as twitch. That surprised him. But the reactions of the other three interested him more.

Thoras Trollbane grimaced and looked at the ground. Nazgrim muttered an orcish curse and spat on the floor. Whitemane just smiled and lowered her weapon. “Excellent. I wanted nothing more in life than to kill the Lich King,” she said.

“Droll as ever, Whitemane,” said Trollbane.

Mograine looked away. His gaze fell on the islands, and he granted himself one last look at a peaceful land. One last moment of serenity. Then he turned back, shutting it out of his mind, hardening the remnants of his soul against it.

Serenity would not serve him now.

“We need to speak. We Four Horsemen, alone,” Mograine said. He turned to the orc. “Nazgrim, if you please.”

The orc turned toward the crew of Acherus, growling like an Orgrimmar training sergeant. “Clear out. Clear out, *now*. If you make me tell you again, I’ll—”

The undead minions obediently began to shuffle away as Nazgrim herded them out. Those who still had the spark of wit had grown accustomed to the orc’s unique style of command. The rest—the ones who were raised into undeath without their minds intact, the ones who would simply be a Scourge upon Azeroth without the Four Horsemen’s influence—obeyed without question, whether the commands were shouted, spoken, or simply impressed into their will.

Mograine let Nazgrim have his fun. There was a command table not far from the window. He unsheathed his blade—emblazoned with runes he would have found blasphemous in life—and set it down.

The others joined him at the table. So did Nazgrim, after a couple of minutes. The orc’s glowing eyes glittered with amusement. Undeath stripped certain parts away from every soul, but Nazgrim always seemed grateful he had kept his love of command. Understandable, for one who had died a general.

Silence settled upon the room. Though no being was close enough to the four to eavesdrop, it probably didn’t make them any safer. If Bolvar wanted to hear every word through his Presence in their minds, Mograine doubted they could stop him.

Blast it, Bolvar, why wouldn’t you explain yourself?

Mograine stared down at his blade, gathering his thoughts. “Did you sense anything from the Lich King today?” he asked. From the Presence, he meant. “Commands, idle emotions, anything?”

The other three exchanged glances. Trollbane answered first. “Nothing. Maybe a flicker of anger, and then nothing.”

Nazgrim and Whitemane agreed. Mograine closed his eyes. “What do you feel from him now?”

“Nothing,” said Whitemane.

“Try again,” Mograine said. “Try to feel *anything* from the Lich King. Seek out his mind.”

She gave him a curious glance, then closed her eyes. The others followed suit. A few moments passed as they concentrated. “Still nothing,” said Nazgrim.

“The same for all of you?” asked Mograine. The other two inclined their heads in affirmation. Yes. “Then I will tell you the truth. Bolvar did not answer any of my questions when I confronted him. I still have no idea why he’s isolated us. I still have no idea what he’s planning. I demanded answers from him, or at least a promise that he would continue to hold the power of the Helm at bay. He refused. So I”—Mograine hesitated—“I attacked him. *Rather, I tried* to. He took control of my will and forced me to return here. And he all but challenged us to face him together. He’s not the Bolvar we pledged to serve.”

Whitemane wasn’t smiling anymore. None of them were. Nazgrim narrowed his eyes. “He dominated your mind and then let you go?”

“Yes,” Mograine said.

“Why not destroy you right there?”

“I don’t know,” Mograine said honestly.

Nazgrim muttered something Mograine couldn’t catch.

Trollbane tapped one of his gauntleted fingers on the table. The metallic sound echoed through the hall. “Is it a trap?”

“I don’t know,” Mograine said.

“This is very strange, Mograine,” said Trollbane. “Bolvar knows we’re suspicious of him, and he knows we’re not easily intimidated. Now he’s confirmed our greatest fear: that he’ll snatch control of our minds if we cross him. He’s no fool. This feels deliberate.”

A sneer flashed across Whitemane’s face. “It’s a threat. ‘You’ll obey me, willingly or not.’”

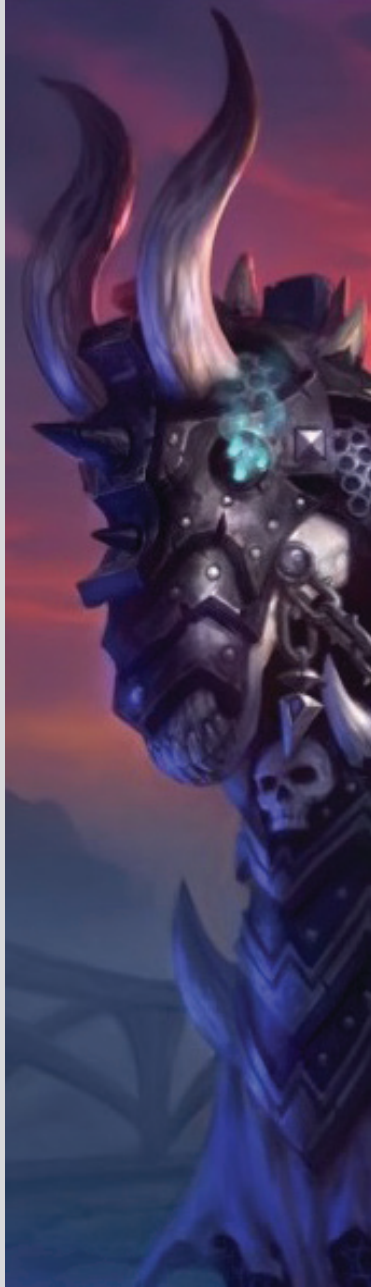
“Perhaps,” Mograine said. “Or perhaps not.”

Nazgrim grumbled another curse. Mograine knew this would be hard

for them to accept. They were the Four Horsemen, the most trusted lieutenants of the man holding back the tide of undeath. But none of the others had known Bolvar Fordragon as long as Mograine had. None of them had seen Bolvar's prison of ice until they had been raised into undeath. None of them had searched for years, in this world and another, for a way to relieve Bolvar of his terrible duty. None of them had witnessed the stalwart and implacable spirit of Bolvar Fordragon eroding beneath the impossible might of the Helm's corruption, wearing him down until Mograine could hear only the numb, toneless rasp of pain in his voice.

But almost as soon as the others were raised as the Four Horsemen, they'd shared Mograine's concern: that Bolvar's decision to use the power of the Lich King to fight the Legion—even if he had wielded only a fraction of the Helm's true potential—might have opened a door that could never be closed.

“You were all stationed as Bolvar's Horsemen because of



your uncommon sense of duty and loyalty, yet I will ask you to commit the greatest sin of all: the sin of treachery. I ask you to kill Bolvar Fordragon, not because we understand what he's doing but because we do not. I promised myself I would not allow him to become the monster he replaced, so I must act, even if I cannot succeed." Mograine gestured toward the table, and to the blade upon it. "Bolvar proved to me today that I cannot resist his control. If you will join me, keep my sword. I cannot be trusted with it."

Their verdict came without hesitation. "Take up your sword, Mograine," said Trollbane. "We need you for the battle ahead."

Nazgrim growled in agreement. "We knew this day might come. We'll ride with you."

Mograine looked at Whitemane. "And you?"

She just smiled.

Then it was settled. *I wish I could do this alone.* Death had robbed Mograine—had robbed them all—of the vibrant kaleidoscope of mortal emotions. They could not know love, joy, or anger like the living did. But Mograine had fought with these three Horsemen against the greatest threat Azeroth had ever faced. Through the crucible of combat, he had come to know and admire their stalwart spirits and their implacable hearts. By fate, duty, and perhaps simple chance, they had become the Four Horsemen of the Lich King.

They had suffered together, fought together, won together. It was a bond only soldiers could know.

And he was leading them to their ends. There was no question. Four people bound to the Lich King could never topple him.

But the others knew that too. And they had not hesitated to join him. Not for an instant.

A passage from his father's libram rose to his mind: *My brothers, my sisters, join me now in battle, join me now in victory, and we shall ride forth to the Light's embrace together.* Mograine wished he could spare them this

hopeless mission. Because of their bond, he knew he would not. No matter what happened.

“Then rally the crew. Get Acherus underway,” said Mograine. “We ride to Northrend. We ride to Icecrown. We ride forth one last time.”

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The Alliance had invaded Dazar'alor. They had killed the king of the Zandalari and retreated. The bodies of countless warriors, Alliance and Horde alike, lay in their streets.

“Bring me the corpses of those who died with honor,” commanded the Lich King.

So they had. Very carefully.

It was Horde territory, so Nazgrim had taken the lead, collecting stories of fallen heroes and selecting candidates. They had done everything possible to stay hidden from the loa of graves who resided there, for he would have been most displeased to learn they were poaching from his land. Nazgrim was not sure they had succeeded.

Then they had gone to Kul Tiras. Then Darkshore. Every major battlefield they could find. Some of the fallen had died confronting the dark horrors that emerged from the deep, while others fell fighting for their homelands. Some were collected by bribing the gravediggers and undertakers who were supposed to bury them, and the rest they had simply stolen from unguarded graves.

It was grim, disquieting work. Nazgrim eventually confronted Bolvar about it. “Better to let the dead rest among their homelands and the spirits of their ancestors,” the orc snarled.

The Lich King had not been swayed. “I claim them so others cannot.”

Others? Nazgrim had asked Mograine about that. Mograine hadn't known for certain. “Bolvar has his eye on Sylvanas Windrunner,” the highlord speculated. “He distrusts her intentions.”

The idea of opposing Windrunner hadn't bothered Nazgrim much.

“NAZGRIM HAD TOLD THE OTHER HORSEMEN. THEY WERE JUST AS WORRIED AS HE. WHY WAS BOLVAR SECRETLY ASSEMBLING THE SCOURGE IN ICECROWN WHILE SENDING AWAY ANY UNDEAD WHO MIGHT QUESTION HIM ABOUT IT?”

Sylvanas had helped kill him, after all. And she had never been his warchief.

The corpses had been brought to Icecrown, where they were carefully interred in the frigid storerooms beneath the citadel, where the cold would not let them decay.

It wasn't until Windrunner had abdicated her command of the Horde that the Lich King began to raise them into undeath. One lifeless corpse after another began to twitch, shudder, and finally rise into their new existence of pain, torment, and power.

The Lich King had greeted these new death knights with a simple charge: “Death's power grows. Rise, and become my champions.”

Nazgrim had expected to spend years training them to wield their new power, but almost all of them were sent back to their old homelands, forced to find their own way in a world that would fear and despise them. Nazgrim couldn't imagine sending fresh recruits to war without trying to teach them how to survive. One day, he overheard Mograine challenging Bolvar about it.

“Even Arthas trained his new slaves,” Mograine said.

“I am not Arthas,” Bolvar said. “They are not slaves.”

“Precisely,” Mograine said. “We are cursed. We suffer every day. And the only comfort we can find is to inflict death and pain on the living. Without Arthas's strict control, most would have run wild. Some of these souls will not last long out there, and they may hurt innocents before they fall.”

Bolvar's answer was cold. “A necessary risk.”

But as the weeks passed, something else began to bother Nazgrim. It seemed that the Scourge was being drawn toward Icecrown Citadel. Even though death knights were being sent away, the ranks of the Scourge at Icecrown were increasing. Nazgrim first noticed a few stray undead hiding themselves by digging into snowdrifts and covering themselves up with fresh powder. Soon Nazgrim was gripping every pile of snow he saw—sometimes revealing nothing, other times revealing a pack of undead staring up at him.

These were the mindless undead. They would do this only if ordered to. When Nazgrim asked Bolvar about it, he was told, “It is not your concern.” Nazgrim had told the other Horsemen. They were just as worried as he. Why was Bolvar secretly assembling the Scourge in Icecrown while sending away any undead who might question him about it?



Acherus was underway. The Broken Isles were already far behind, leaving nothing in view but the stars, the clouds, and the faintly moonlit sea.

It had been the first time in years the flying fortress had moved. Nazgrim, barking orders to the undead crew on the upper floors, wondered what the *shal'dorei* in Suramar were thinking, watching them fly away. He wondered if the scouts of Highmountain were sending reports to Orgrimmar at this very moment, telling them the Ebon Blade was on the move. He wondered what the Horde would do about it.

If they're smart, they'll double their defenses and prepare for an invasion, Nazgrim mused. If Acherus was bolting back to Icecrown, it could only mean trouble. Thrall, or the Horde Council, or whoever was in charge now, had to know that.

Nazgrim had made it a point during the war against the Legion to avoid rumors and news about what was happening in the Horde. Not because he wasn't curious; he feared he would be too curious. He had died defending a tyrant of a warchief. When he had been raised as a death knight, he had heard what happened next. The Iron Horde. The Legion's return. All

consequences of Hellscream's pride. Consequences of Nazgrim's loyalty.

He had died fulfilling his oath. He had died for the Horde. Yet the consequences still itched at his mind. So he had tried not to think about them.

During the Fourth War, as Nazgrim had scouted Horde lands in search of suitable . . . *recruits*, he couldn't help but learn about the Horde's troubles. He'd watched his people overthrow *another* monster, and he was forbidden to help. It was strange to realize he'd wanted to, even if only slightly.

Nazgrim's eyes fell upon a runeforge, silent and still. Not blazing with corrupted violet fire, as it should have been on the eve of battle. Three Scourge minions stood motionless, their heads down.

Nazgrim prepared his old voice. His general's voice.

"*Get to work*," he roared. "Should my blade break in battle, am I supposed to wait for hours while you stoke the fires and get the forge warmed up? If I see you sleeping on the job again—"

Nazgrim's voice trailed off. The three minions were already working, commanded by his will more than his words. Purple flames started to flicker in the runeforge's furnace. He was wasting his breath. *There's no joy in barking orders at someone who can't disobey you*, he thought.

He turned away. There were other tasks at hand.

When Nazgrim descended to the lower floors of Acherus, he found Thoras Trollbane waiting for him. "Well met, my lord," the orc said in a singsong, bending his knees in a mocking parody of that strange human gesture called *curtsying*.

"*Zug-zug*, general," the human replied with a weary sigh, as if participating in their long-running joke out of obligation. "Mograine asked me to find you. He said none of us four should be alone until battle begins."

"Why?"

"In case Bolvar tries to stop us. We might need each other's help then."

In case the Presence of the Lich King squashed their conscious minds

flat and turned them into puppets, he meant. Nazgrim grunted. The only way to avoid that might be to kill each other before they lost their self-control. He had fought and slain plenty of Scourge in Northrend, and he would never forget the blank looks in their gazes before they fell. *I'd rather die again than become a slave like them.* “Do you think he will?”

“He hasn't yet,” Trollbane said calmly. “Maybe he won't. Or maybe we're just not close enough to Icecrown yet. If he does, and you can still swing your axe, take my head, would you?”

“Stab me in the chest first, and you have a deal.” Nazgrim gripped the human's forearm and squeezed. Trollbane squeezed back. It was a gesture of friendship that was common with the soldiers of Stromgarde, apparently. The old human king and the orc general had indeed become friends, though it had taken some time to overcome grudges from their old lives. Nazgrim had spent a long time in human-run internment camps; Trollbane had openly called for every orc in those camps to be executed.

But Trollbane had been willing to admit he'd been wrong. Nazgrim imagined it was one of the traits that had made him so beloved by his people when he ruled.

They walked together through the Ebon Hold, inspecting the plentiful crew members that had countless tasks to keep the fortress afloat and moving. Finally, Nazgrim asked the question that had been rattling the inside of his mind all night.

“If we have to kill Bolvar, who's going to wear the Helm in his place?”

“I don't know,” said Trollbane. “That's not a crown I'm interested in.”

“What if you're the last one of us standing?”

Trollbane shook his head. “Unlikely.”

“Still. What would you do?”

Trollbane stopped walking and gave Nazgrim a hard stare. “Whatever I must to protect Azeroth. Focus on victory first, orc. I doubt most of us will survive.”

Nazgrim offered a small shrug. “I think Bolvar could have killed

Mograine at Icecrown. But he didn't," he allowed. "Maybe some part of him *wants* us to come and end him. Maybe he'll let us."

"Perhaps." Trollbane's stare didn't leave Nazgrim's eyes. "But didn't the last Lich King deliberately lure the best fighters in the world to his throne? A trap they *barely* escaped?"

A pit of uncertainty suddenly formed in Nazgrim's soul. He hadn't considered that. *Is that why Bolvar let Mograine return? To draw all four of us to the Frozen Throne, where his power is strongest, and snatch all four of our wills at once?*

No, he decided after a moment. "That's not Bolvar's intention," Nazgrim said.

"You seem certain."

"I am," Nazgrim said. "I saw his battle plans in Northrend. He's smart enough not to use the same strategy twice. Especially one that failed the first time."

Trollbane considered that and nodded. "Well said. But all that means is that we're not prepared for whatever he's devising."

And that was the truth. Nazgrim's uncertainty crystallized into dread, the closest thing to fear he could know in undeath. The moment Mograine had made his declaration, Nazgrim had known that all four of them would likely be destroyed by the Lich King. That was fine. He had died in battle before. *There are worse things*, he thought. Oblivion was preferable to slavery.

It was the unknown that twisted his guts into knots. Two determined armies had assaulted the last Lich King and nearly lost. What hope did four fighters possibly have? Mograine had just confirmed they were vulnerable to the Helm's influence. If they failed, would the armies of the Horde and Alliance, torn to shreds by their last war, have the numbers to finish the job?

Unknowns. Uncertainties. Nazgrim still had the mad feeling that Bolvar was not their enemy, and that worried him. Perhaps his judgment was critically flawed. But he would not suggest turning back. This confrontation would answer all his questions, one way or another.

“Will you hesitate in killing him?” Nazgrim asked.

“I swore to defend Azeroth, not Bolvar,” Trollbane said simply.

The orc continued his patrol. Trollbane fell in step next to him.

When they reached one of the outer balconies of Acherus, they saw clouds blanketing the sky to the northwest. Icecrown was in that direction, far over the horizon. Nazgrim could feel it. He could have pointed it out blindfolded, steady and unchanging, stretching out like an unseen lighthouse. Nazgrim hadn't felt the Presence so much as twitch since Mograine had returned. It was as if the Lich King had completely cut them off.

Yet it was still there. Waiting.

“He must know we're coming,” Nazgrim mused.

“Agreed.”

“You talked with him more than I did,” the orc said. “Is Bolvar truly lost? Or is there a chance we can save him?”

Trollbane said nothing for a while. Nazgrim let him gather his thoughts without comment. Finally, Trollbane spoke softly. “He's a leader with a most terrible duty. I believe he simply intends to bear it himself until it crushes him.”



Thoras Trollbane had stood alone before the Frozen Throne. Above him, at the peak of Icecrown Citadel, the glow of two fiery eyes radiated from within the Helm of Domination and the blue ice that surrounded it.

The Lich King's voice, deep as the uncharted depths, spoke through the Presence in Trollbane's mind. It was the first time in weeks he had done so.

“Begone, Trollbane. I do not need your counsel this day.”

“Perhaps,” Trollbane said aloud. He ascended the steps anyway. “I would speak with you nevertheless.”

With each step upward Trollbane could feel Bolvar's irritation growing. It pulsed through his Presence like an open wound. Tread carefully, it meant.

Trollbane hadn't known Bolvar Fordragon in life. As king of Stromgarde,

he'd heard of the Fordragon boy who was impressing his paladin mentors with his determination and noble spirit. Perhaps they had attended some courtly function together, but they had never spoken. All he knew of Bolvar was what he had experienced since he was raised into undeath: Bolvar was a dedicated man, unflinching and stalwart. When he was a paladin, he must have been among their best. As the Jailer of the Damned, it meant he didn't want to discuss his tribulations. He stubbornly insisted on shouldering his burden alone.

Trollbane stopped a few steps before the peak. He didn't want to stand at the top of the stairs, looming over Bolvar's throne. The chrysalis of ice shrouded Bolvar's eyes and the flame-wrought orange scars upon his body, but they both gave the throne a faint, unearthly glow. Trollbane wondered if the ice on his skin soothed the dragonfire in his veins. Perhaps it made it worse.

"Bolvar," said Trollbane, "we are not your servants. It is time you stopped treating us as such."

A flash of orange light beneath the ice was matched by a pulse of annoyance through Bolvar's Presence. "So. Mograine sent you."

"No. But Mograine has made no secret of your disengagement."

Cold. Without hesitation. "I have nothing to say to him. Or to you."

"You trusted us enough to raise us. To make us your Horsemen," said Trollbane. "We need to trust you too. You're keeping secrets from us."

Rising anger. "And what should I confide in you?" asked Bolvar.

Trollbane opened his hands and gestured calmly. "You're assembling an army here. We all see you're moving chess pieces into position, but we cannot discern your objective. Tell us your plans, and we will aid you."

"You would die. That would not aid me at all." Bolvar spoke with the contempt of a father frustrated with his child. It had been a long, long time since Trollbane had experienced that.

"If you send soldiers into battle unprepared, yes, they will likely die," Trollbane agreed. "And we are certainly unprepared. What has changed? What force now compels you to keep us at bay?"

“Sylvanas Windrunner.”

Thoras Trollbane hesitated. Windrunner? The Lich King had kept an interest in her since the Fourth War started, telling his Four Horsemen to report any rumor of her whereabouts but absolutely forbidding them to hunt her down themselves. But Bolvar had also told the Horsemen she had never shown anything but contempt toward the Helm. “What of her?”

“Her war has upended the balance between life and death. Death feasts, and the power of the Helm boils,” Bolvar said. “The Legion turned our world into a charnel house, yet I felt nothing of the sort then.”

Trollbane still wasn't certain what had disturbed Bolvar. “Whatever Sylvanas tried to do, she failed.”

Trollbane felt Bolvar's anger flaring white-hot, but he had the strange sense that Bolvar was angry at himself most of all. “Do you see any sign that she believes she's failed?”



The overcast sky hid the sunrise, but the gloom of dawn revealed the cliffs and the crumbling ruins of the Dragonblight coast, just barely coming into view. It would be hours yet before Icecrown Citadel would come into sight.

Sally Whitemane carefully studied Darion Mograine out of the corner of her eye. He had busied himself with the work of command all night, issuing curt orders to the crew of Acherus in preparation for a siege. Now he was staring down at a map of Northrend, eyes unmoving. Probably lost in thought.

That won't do, Whitemane decided. If Mograine was distracting himself from the terrible task before him, he might be vulnerable to Fordragon's control. “When the last Lich King made you his puppet, what did it feel like?” she asked.

Mograine looked up at her. “Pray you don't find out.”

“I'm not trying to bring up terrible memories,” she lied, “but Fordragon must know we're coming. If he tries to rip our wills from us, we should be

prepared to resist. How did you escape Arthas's control at Light's Hope? How did you stay free?"

The highlord narrowed his eyes. "I was on holy ground when I was set free. Righteous anger kept me whole until Arthas was dead."

"So. The Light, and anger. Will either of those help us now?" asked Whitemane, putting an edge on her voice. She wanted to provoke the latter from him, if she could. From the moment she had been raised into undeath, she had been filled with loathing. A life dedicated to eradicating the undead, only to become one of them, was a particularly cruel irony. Yet she had agreed to her duty. She had used her dark power to defend Azeroth, no matter her personal distaste. She would not let her suffering amount to nothing, no matter how conflicted Mograine felt.

"I would not call for the Light's aid today, *death knight*, except as a last resort," Mograine said coldly. "If you are truly lucky, the Light will answer by burning your corrupted flesh to cinders. Trust me: it is not a pleasant way to die."

Whitemane knew he was speaking from experience with that too. "I have doubts about you, Highlord," she said. "When the time comes to kill Bolvar, you might falter."

Mograine looked back down at the table. "Killing him will be so easy for you, then?"

Whitemane showed teeth as she let her smile return. "Did you think my desire to kill the Lich King was said in jest?"

"No." After another moment of staring at the map of Northrend, he finally pushed it away. "I have no anger toward Bolvar. Only regrets. But I will carry out my duty. I promised him I would," he said.

Suddenly, Mograine's eyes widened. "What—?" he began.

Whitemane felt it an instant later.

The Presence in her mind, the connection between her and the Lich King, was no longer dormant.

For a moment, it felt like it had caught fire. *No*. It wasn't heat that

Whitemane felt. It was the searing cold of frostbite, slowly enveloping the Lich King's Presence.

It's happening. "Highlord, is that—?"

"Yes," Mograine said. "This is what Arthas felt like. The Helm's power. Bolvar isn't holding it back any longer."

"He's fallen?" Whitemane asked.

"Yes," Mograine said. Whitemane heard him speak in a soft, mournful tone, "Bolvar, I don't understand . . ." *By the Light, I can feel it too,* Whitemane thought. Bolvar had embraced the corrupting curse of undeath in its rawest form, a hungry and eager river of decay seeking to consume the very essence of life itself.

If Whitemane had any doubts left, they had vanished. *The Lich King must die at once.* She could feel the faintest sense of his power seeping through his Presence, like drops of water beading on a cold glass, running down the inside of her mind and splashing onto her broken soul. A few days of that, even if Bolvar tried to shield them from it—even if he *wanted* to—and the Four Horsemen might be as lost as he was.

She was relieved to see Mograine's expression harden. *There he is,* Whitemane thought, *the highlord, finally ready for battle.*

He glanced out into Northrend and then banged his fist on his breastplate. "We have no choice now," he said. "There is no turning back. If Bolvar remains the Lich King when the sun falls, there may be no stopping him."

Mograine raised his voice, letting his words echo throughout Acherus. "For Azeroth! For the living! And for each other: we ride to kill Bolvar."



One day earlier, Darion Mograine had approached the Frozen Throne with his blade drawn and his soul heavy.

"Bolvar," Mograine announced. "We must talk. Now."

There was no answer. A frigid gust whipped across the peak of the

citadel, blasting ice across Mograine's armor. He took the first step up toward Bolvar. He couldn't tell if the Lich King was looking at him. The ice surrounding Bolvar lacked its usual clarity.

"Bolvar, I made you a promise." Mograine took another step upward. "Do you remember?"

Still nothing. Still Bolvar didn't look at him. Mograine felt a swell of grief rise into his throat. Of all the emotions to carry over into undeath, I was given sorrow, Mograine thought mournfully. He continued to climb.

"I swore I would not let you become like Arthas." Another step. Say something, Bolvar, Mograine thought. Do not make me do this.

Mograine took another step and almost slipped. Tiny rivulets of water were running down the stairs past his boots.

Mograine didn't understand. Where was that coming from?

Mograine stormed up the last few stairs, his boots splashing in water with each step. Just before the Frozen Throne, he stopped. Eyes wide.

The ice surrounding the Lich King was melting. It already seemed about a third gone.

"Bolvar," Mograine whispered. "What are you doing?"

Finally, those two orange eyes met his. "It was foolish to come alone, Mograine."

Yes. It was. Mograine had come with the hope that Bolvar would respond to an ultimatum, not that he would find the Lich King preparing to leave his throne.

I waited too long to confront him, Mograine thought. Worse, he might have forced Bolvar's hand.

"We need to know you haven't given in to the Helm's temptation," said Mograine. "You've held fast as the Jailer of the Damned for years."

"Have I?" Bolvar was calm. Too calm. "By keeping the Helm's power at bay, I made myself blind to its purpose."

Purpose? "Whatever that is, we can help you stop it. But you cannot give in to the Helm's power for any reason, Bolvar. You know the consequences."

"The armies of the dead marching over the barren world they destroyed.

“YOU WOULD DIE. ALL FOUR OF YOU WOULD.”

Life's place on Azeroth, lost.

“Yes,” Mograine whispered.

“And who will stop that, Highlord?”

“I've fought one Lich King,” Mograine said. “I have strength yet for another.”

The Presence flashed with grim humor. “If you were to kill me and take my place tonight, Mograine, you'd find your reign short-lived.”

What did that mean? “Now you mock me? I don't want your Helm or your throne. I'd tear down this whole blasted citadel and every creature in it if it wouldn't condemn so many.” Mograine swept his arm, gesturing to the entire view of the fortifications around Icecrown. “I can help you. All four of us can. No matter what the burden.”

“You would die. All four of you would.”

“Then we die!” Mograine bellowed. “Do you think any of us fear dying again? We will ride forth against any enemy who threatens Azeroth. And if we fall, we will make them pay for it a hundredfold.”

“Yes, I hope you will,” the Lich King said.

A crack appeared in the ice above the Lich King's head. A small ravine split open across his face, tracing a jagged line across Bolvar's neck. A large chunk of ice crumbled to the ground near Mograine's feet, smashing into tiny crystals that blew away in the wind.

Mograine tensed. There was now a gap in the ice that exposed Bolvar's neck. One true strike of my sword, he thought.

But something was wrong. It was like Bolvar was daring him to do it. Mograine closed his eyes for a moment. Gathered his thoughts.

And decided to swing his blade.

But before his muscles twitched, the Presence reacted. Suddenly, Mograine couldn't move. Bolvar's will was stopping him.

Mograin thrashed wildly inside his mind, trying to shake off Bolvar as he had once slipped Arthas's leash. And it worked. Something gave way. It was as if Bolvar couldn't quite secure his grip on Mograin's soul.

Mograin swung his blade at Bolvar's neck without hesitation.

The Presence squeezed. The sword dropped from Mograin's hands.

Despair crashed down onto Mograin as his weapon bounced off the ice and water just in front of the Lich King's throne. The Presence firmly held on to his being, lashing it to Bolvar's will with bonds stronger than steel.

I have failed.

"Pick up your blade, Mograin. You will have need of it." Now the Presence had absolute control over him. Mograin was trapped inside the prison of the Helm's making, unable to move or speak on his own, as his arms casually picked up his blade and sheathed it. "Now walk."

Mograin's feet obeyed. The Presence forced him to turn away from the Frozen Throne and march back down the steps. Bolvar summoned—no, Mograin summoned, in accordance with Bolvar's unspoken will—a death gate to Acherus. "I could send you back as my instrument. The other three are waiting for you there, yes? How many could you cut down before they finally destroyed you?"

A glimmer of hope. Do it. Send me back, Mograin thought.

Bolvar noticed. "I see. They're waiting for you there. And Whitemane suspects you won't come back as yourself. They would be ready for that. Good."

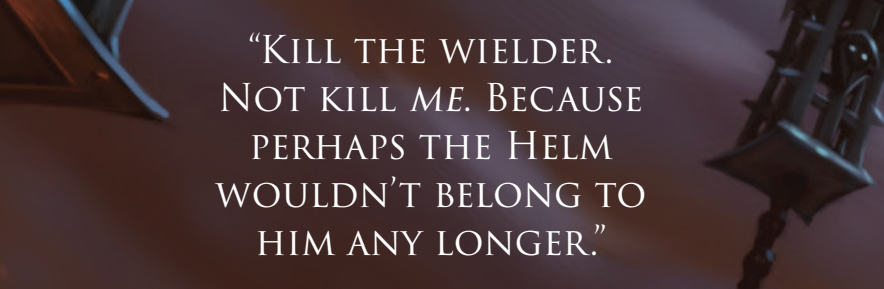
The death gate activated. A plume of dark violet mist formed into a pyramid, just taller than Mograin.

The Presence forced Mograin to walk toward it.

"Do not return alone, Mograin," Bolvar said. "Only together will the four of you have a chance to kill the wielder of the Helm. Farewell."

Mograin stepped through the gate to Acherus. And the mist disappeared behind him.

So, too, did Bolvar's control. The Presence was dormant again. Silent.



“KILL THE WIELDER.
NOT KILL ME. BECAUSE
PERHAPS THE HELM
WOULDN’T BELONG TO
HIM ANY LONGER.”

Lurking in his soul like a viper waiting for the right moment to strike.

Mograine fell to his knees, his head in his hands. He was free, but he felt more lost than ever.

.....

It was almost time.

Earlier, they had agreed on a plan of attack. If Bolvar did not immediately surrender and remove the Helm, Acherus would bombard his ranks, clearing the way for the Four Horsemen’s direct assault on the Lich King himself. What happened after that would depend on how many of them could resist the Lich King’s control. If *any* of them could.

But then the Presence had changed. They were close enough to feel more of Bolvar’s influence. They were still perhaps an hour away from Icecrown Citadel, too far away to see the Frozen Throne with their own eyes, but the overcast skies had cleared enough to see its menacing silhouette.

And now they could see something in their minds.

Mograine had noticed it first. A strange scene flashed through his head: one of Bolvar’s Scourge falling to the ground, a black-wreathed arrow embedded in its body. A few minutes later, it was dozens of Scourge strewn before the Frozen Throne. Then dozens more.

There was a battle underway at Icecrown. They could see it through the Presence. No—Bolvar was *showing* them. The Four Horsemen stood silent in Acherus, watching the distant spire. As the minutes passed, the images became clearer.

Whitemane suddenly gasped. “That’s Windrunner. Bolvar’s fighting *Sylvanas Windrunner*.”

Once she said it, Mograine could see it. The glowing eyes. The fresh scar across her face. It was Sylvanas. She had come for the Helm.

And suddenly, right then, Mograine understood.

“*Only together will the four of you have a chance to kill the wielder of the Helm*,” Bolvar had said.

“Kill the wielder. Not kill me. Because perhaps the Helm wouldn’t belong to him any longer.”

He knew she would come, Mograine realized. Bolvar had guessed Windrunner would challenge him for the Helm. And he had planned to use the Helm to stop her, because Sylvanas would never claim the power of the Lich King only to keep it dormant.

But Bolvar would have known there would be consequences. There was only one outcome to using the Helm: a dead world. It didn’t matter whether he could withstand the corruption for a month, a week, or a minute after he accepted its power. It would end the same way. Azeroth would fall.

Unless four knights who swore to defend Azeroth could stop him while he was still weak from the battle with Windrunner. Even if Windrunner won, she would be a novice to the Helm’s power. She would be vulnerable, if only for a short while.

Bolvar had provoked Mograine and the rest of the Four Horsemen into coming to kill him at the exact moment his reign might end. And he had kept them isolated—*all* of those new death knights isolated—from his control as much as he could. So no matter who won, the Horsemen would have a chance.

Trollbane locked eyes with Mograine. “Does this change anything for us?” he asked.

Mograine turned to the others. “No. This changes nothing. Our duty remains the same.” Then he looked out toward Icecrown again. “Bolvar knew this day was coming. Either he would win, or there would be a new

Lich King.”

“Queen,” Whitemane said.

“Indeed.” *Bolvar, I wish you trusted me enough to tell me.* But no. Mograine would have insisted on being there to fight Sylvanas with him. So would the others. Judging by the corpses before the Frozen Throne, all four would have died. “He wanted us here, now, to finish off the victor when the battle’s done. After Sylvanas had cut through the Scourge for us. Before she has a chance to learn how to dominate our wills.”

Nazgrim considered that for a moment. “One of us will need to take his place.”

Silence reigned for a long while after that. Whitemane’s eyes flicked between each of the Horsemen, as if trying to see if any among them would be eager for that duty.

A distant noise, almost a thunderclap, brought their attention back to Icecrown. The Presence trembled. Bolvar’s icy, corrupted determination was now shot through with desperation.

Mograine saw in his mind’s eye, with absolute clarity, Sylvanas extending her arm toward Bolvar’s head.

And then, pain. Pain for all of them. As sharp as a knife’s blade stabbing into their skulls. Mograine shouted and hurled his own helm across the Hall of Command, pressing his palms deep into his temples as though he were trying to squeeze the pain out, only distantly aware that the others were shouting too.

A few moments later, the pain ended so suddenly that Mograine fell to his knees with relief, still gripping his head. It was a while before any of them could speak.

“Where’s the Presence?” Nazgrim asked in a strained voice.

Mograine didn’t understand. Didn’t answer. Just enjoyed the absence of pain. It felt *wonderful*.

“Where’s Bolvar?” the orc asked again. “I can’t feel him.”

He was right. Bolvar’s Presence was gone. *No, not gone. Empty,*

Mograine realized. The conduit of control was still there. But it was . . . unoccupied. Just as he had once felt after Arthas's defeat.

"Sylvanas has taken the Helm," Mograine said. He locked eyes with the others. "She is our target now."

Whitemane snorted. "Understood."

"What about Bolvar?" Nazgrim rumbled.

Trollbane looked toward Mograine. "I do not believe he is the Lich King anymore. We'll save him if we can," Trollbane said.

"Agreed," Mograine said.

He looked past Trollbane, toward the undead crew of Acherus. Most had gone still. Those with minds were looking around, dazed; those without minds were looking at nothing, and beginning to twitch.

There must always be a Lich King.

Soon, most of Acherus's crew—and the rest of the Scourge in Northrend—would revert to mindless, frantic violence. And if Sylvanas put on the Helm, she would sense Acherus's approach. She would sense the Four Horsemen's intentions. Mograine had no doubt that she would try to bend them to her will to stop them. *Even if she does not succeed, we will have to fight through the rest of her Scourge.*

He gestured deep into the flying fortress. "We may be far enough away from Icecrown to keep control of Acherus's crew. Get them ready. This will be our only chance—"

And then he stopped, his mouth still working soundlessly. The Presence in his head was *changing*. It wasn't painful this time. Not really. Mograine had never felt anything like it, ever. Not even when Arthas fell.

If the Presence was a conduit of control and power, it felt like the conduit was crumbling. Being split apart. Mograine didn't understand. But it felt . . . *liberating*. Like his mind had been bound, and the chains were slipping away, one by one. Like he hadn't even been aware of how firmly he had been held under its control.

Nazgrim suddenly shouted. "What is she doing?"

Mograine looked toward Icecrown just in time to see the sky shatter. A shockwave hit Acherus, and Mograine almost lost his footing. Nazgrim grabbed his arm, steadying him, as the floating fortress rocked back and forth in the air.

“Steady!” Mograine shouted. “Keep Acherus steady!”

A few of the crew responded to his commands. Even so, it felt like the fortress might fall out of the sky. Then it leveled out. If they could have breathed a sigh of relief, they would have.

“Hold our position!” Nazgrim barked. With trained eyes, he scanned the horizon, accessing every detail.

Mograine stared at Icecrown. The blue sky above it was *gone*. Broken into pieces. He was staring into a dark realm, choked thick with black mist, lit only by an angry orange-and-amber glow that flashed like lightning bolts. And plunging down from the fog was another structure, hanging directly over Icecrown Citadel.

And staring at it, Mograine realized that the Presence was truly gone. The Helm was destroyed. And with its destruction . . .

“The veil between life and death,” Mograine breathed. “She has broken it.”

Bolvar had made a terrible mistake, Mograine realized. He must have assumed that Sylvanas was coming to wield the Helm, not to destroy it. But how could he have known? How could he have known destroying it would do *that*?

Mograine heard a blade whistling through the air behind him and then the sound of something heavy hitting the floor.

“Highlord, draw your weapon,” Trollbane called out.

Mograine did, still staring at the sky. Something bumped into him and he turned, raising an eyebrow. It was one of the crew of Acherus, clawing at his armor, trying to kill him.

He absently cut it down. He noticed several bodies lying around him already.

The Scourge has no Lich King, Mograine finally understood. Light

willing, it never shall again.

That snapped him back into action. Only a few of the crew in the Hall had gone wild so quickly, and the Four Horsemen made short work of them.

Mograine surveyed the rest of the Hall of Command and began issuing orders. There was clarity in chaos, Mograine had learned long ago. Seeing problems meant they could be dealt with.

One catastrophe at a time.

“I don’t know what Sylvanas is planning next. But Bolvar might. We need him,” Mograine said. “Whitemane. Nazgrim. We’re still an hour away from Icecrown. When we get there, you two will find Bolvar. If he lives, bring him back.”

They nodded. Mograine nodded at Trollbane. “Until then, we secure Acherus. We’ll dominate those who can still be controlled and put down the rest. We need to save as many as we can for . . . whatever comes next.”

“Understood,” said Trollbane. Together they strode deeper into the fortress. Soon their weapons sang in the cold Northrend air.



Whitemane kept her eyes on the Frozen Throne as she and Nazgrim swooped toward it. The shattered sky above her, she ignored. That was a problem for later. She looked carefully for any sign that Sylvanas was still here, but it appeared the Banshee Queen was already gone.

The orc arrived first, leaping out onto the ruined remnants of the Frozen Throne. Whitemane landed an instant later, bolting past Nazgrim, nimbly avoiding the corpses of the fallen Scourge. She spotted Bolvar near the center of the platform, knocked down onto his side.

He was staring upward at the sky, shock and horror written across his face. Whitemane understood completely. She knelt beside him, her hand cupping him behind his neck. “Is she gone?” she asked.

Bolvar seemed barely able to form words. Whitemane suspected it wasn’t because of his wounds but just the sheer, incomprehensible scale of

the disaster he had failed to prevent.

“Yes. Sylvanas is gone.” Regret and guilt swelled in his voice. “I didn’t know. I didn’t even *dream*—”

Now Nazgrim was kneeling at his side. “We’re going back to Acherus,” he said. “There is much to be done.” Together, he and Whitemane helped Bolvar stand up.

Bolvar’s hand gripped the armor on her shoulder. “Do you know what she’s done?”

“No. Tell us when we’re safe,” Nazgrim said. “Then you can tell us what to do next.”

Bolvar looked at them both with confusion. “I’m not the Lich King any longer,” he said.

“A pity.” Whitemane threw Bolvar’s arm over her shoulder, supporting his weight. “I came all this way to kill the Lich King. Rude of you to step down just as I arrive.”

“You don’t have to follow my orders,” Bolvar said.

“Obviously.” Whitemane curled her lips.

Nazgrim was smiling too. “You tried to arrange your own death to secure victory. *Lok-tar ogar*, mmm? Guide our blades and we’ll obey.”

Bolvar closed his eyes a moment. When he opened them, Whitemane saw determination. *Excellent*, she thought.

He gestured toward the shattered remnants of the Helm of Domination. “Gather those, then. Carefully. They will be needed,” he said.

Whitemane took Bolvar’s full weight as Nazgrim collected the pieces. “Then what, Highlord?”

Bolvar looked up at the sky once again. “We’ll need allies, as many as we can find. And then we’ll charge into the dark heart of Death itself.”

“Good,” she said. “I was worried this might be easy.”



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