

Familiar surroundings

By: Hans Olsson

Dalaran was full of people, as always. They were everywhere, running around aimlessly, or riding on their more or less magnificent mounts. Earlier that day reports had arrived about forces of the Scourge who had attacked caravans somewhere in the east. The herald had announced the news with a loud voice, without quite managing to hide his total indifference. It was the same thing every day. Scourge, gang of ogres, mysterious disappearances. No one had the energy to bother anymore, except the so-called heroes who did everything they could to gain some reputation in their leaders eyes. And for what?

Ragyr sighed and spat on the ground beside him. The purple-green stones was stained dark by his thick saliva. Adventures of that kind was not for him anymore. The time for such foolish things was since long over. He rubbed his bad knee unwittingly when he thought of the old times when he had been one of those who rode around and sought out the danger. Just to be involved and to get a chance to show his abilities. And what had it given him? The bandage around his knee was sticky as usual and when he brought up his hand to his nose it smelled horrible. It was difficult to determine whether it was the healing ointment that smelled, or if it was the wound that had opened up again and starting to ulcerate. It never seemed to heal completely.

The wound had made him bowed and thin. When he was a little troll kid he used to run around the shores of Echo Islands, shooting arrows at the crabs there, using his small wooden bow. He remembered this time with a smile on his face. The waves rolling in from the sea. No troubles running around. His body were in good shape back then. He had been slim and smooth with strong arms and legs. Now he was no more than another cripple. Like a common beggar. Times are changing fast. A broken knee and his body began to crumble.

He thought of better times when he had built technical things, and bargained with engineers to buy new plans for small mechanical wonders. In the end, his fascination with engineering had also been his downfall. No, he corrected himself. It was not his fault. It was the damn gnomes faults. Them and their unreliable inventions.

This seemed like as good a day as any other to take back a small part of what he felt he deserved. It did not matter much if it was in cash, goods or blood. And since everyone was busy trying to find out what was going on outside the city walls, they would not care a thing about what he was up to. That is the great thing with heroes, he thought, all they needed was some gossip and they had their heads full of nonsense. They would not notice him nor the shop that was in the alley across the street.

His keen eyes swept across the street one last time, then he pulled a gray straw hat over the red hair and was careful to insert the long pointy ears under the brim. Now he had at least some disguise. The less he was recognized, the better. As he straightened out his stiff limbs, the worn leather armor that covered his round-backed figure creaked loudly in unison with his limbs. He grimaced, more of the sound than the pain. His body had certainly been in better shape. Out of old habit he checked that the bow and the quiver was attached within reach on his back. He made a grunting satisfied sound when he felt the comforting, familiar weight of them. Not the best, but they would do the job. They had served him before and should do so today if it should become necessary. He sort of hoped that it should be necessary, yet at the same time it would be best if he did not have to use them. On the other hand, small weapons was probably of more use than the somewhat clumsy bow. So, just in case, he had several knives and a small but trustworthy sword with him.

When he crossed the street he felt the safe presence of Slogra beside him. He did not have to look to know that he was there. His faithful saber-toothed forest cat followed him like a shadow wherever he went. They had stayed together since childhood. He had found the cat in the wild untouched Ashenvale. It was love at first sight. Well. Maybe not at first sight. Probably not at the second either. It took many weeks before they got used to each other and he had to fight hard to win Slogras approval. But once he had won it they had been inseparable. He had several deep scars on

both his arms and a deep scar with uneven edges on his back after the cats claws, but it had been worth it. Other hunters changed their animals as often as he changed his bandage. Sold them to traveling circus performers, or just ripped them up and enjoyed the meat over a campfire. But not Ragyr. He knew the value of a true friend. Slogra was perhaps the only friend he had left. No one had any pleasure in the company of a bitter cripple nowadays.

He limped as fast as he could to cross the street. It was not that wide, but the crowd was thick and humans, elves, dwarves and other creatures were pushing and shouting everywhere he turned. Halfway across the street one of them ran into him so that he was pushed a step backwards. A wave of pain swept through him from his bad knee. He jerked around to see who it was, but it was impossible to tell. He noticed how his hands shook, and to his surprise he saw that he had pulled a dagger half way out of the protective sheath. He shook his head to clear it from the anger and frustration that lingered like a thin red film in front of his eyes.

He forced himself to regain control over his feelings. When he thought he had it under control he slid the knife into the sheath and forced himself to put one leg in front of the other. Slogra growled as he could feel Ragyr's frustration.

The alley was surrounded by large houses and the shadow felt refreshing. Almost like it absorbed some of the buzzing from the street and made it to a mere background noise. Calm and quite. Nice. A few travelers stood and chatted outside a store, but Ragyr just ignored them.

The store in the far end of the alley was his goal. His eyes narrowed as he studied the bright-lit sign: "Dupel Wrench engineering" which hung above the round door. He took a deep breath as he went through the plan. Not much of a plan really, but he had nothing to lose now. All he wanted was some justice. Get back a little of the respect he actually deserved. That was all he wanted. Really.

As he entered the store, he was blinded by hundreds of small light bulbs and lamps that hung in rickety scaffolds along the walls and in the ceiling on hooks. Straight in front of him was a desk covered with screws, bolts and tools. Behind the counter sat the shopkeeper Dupel Wrench. Ragyr immediately recognized the gnome who stared back at him with a bored look.

"What can I do for the gentleman?" Dupel said like he did not care the slightest whether Ragyr was a big spender or not.

Ragyr hesitated. He realized that he had not thought about what to say when he had got here. He thought it would come natural, maybe Dupel would know who he was immediately, apologize and that would be that. But the gnome showed no signs of recognition just yet. Ragyr cleared his throat, not from nervousness but to gain time. He removed the straw hat from his head and took a step closer to the counter.

"I'm looking for engineering plans. What sort of plans do you have, mon?"

"What kind of plans? I have recipes for explosives, blueprints for toys, weapons and mechanical pets. What interests you?"

Dupel Wrench babbled it like it was a well-rehearsed speech of his supplies and still without having the slightest interest in the tone of his voice. Ragyr smiled. It amused him that the gnome almost seemed to be almost as miserable as himself. Only in a completely different way. He took another step closer to the counter while he pretended to study the myriad of small mechanical things on the shelves along the walls.

"Do you have plans for vehicles?" Ragyr asked in a snide voice. The gnome looked up from the counter for the first time with something that could be interpreted as interest in his pale wrinkled face.

"It depends on what you are looking for, hunter."

Dupel Wrench cleared his throat, somewhat uncomfortable when he did not receive any response.

"Well, depending on how much money you are willing to spend I can offer you the very latest technology there is. How about a mechanical spider with two seats? One for you and maybe your girlfriend? Or a vehicle that climbs up vertical rock walls as if it would be flat as... as a taurens hoof? Maybe you want to build yourself a girlfriend? I can also offer such plans if that is what interests you, hunter? Together with the spider, you will be an unforgettable sight. No doubt about

it!"

The gnome chuckled to himself. It was an empty hollow laugh.

Ragyr's heart pounded in his chest. He stood in front of Dupel Wrench and leaned across the counter.

"Can you show me the plans for the vehicle that can climb rock walls?" he said with a voice that sounded more threatening than he intended it to be. He was not sure if the gnome noticed it or not.

"Absolutely", the gnome replied and turned around. He dug around in a drawer until he found a couple of blueprints which he spread out on the counter in front of him. He put a little chubby finger in the middle of the paper, pointing on several lines while he started to explain how the construction worked.

"I guess you understand how the gears drive this shaft here, and how this thing here is controlling the legs from ... Hey, what are you doing?"

While Dupel Wrench was talking Ragyr had slipped around the counter and was leaning over the gnome. He placed his palm over the gnome's neck. The already thin neck looked even smaller in his thick hands.

"You do not remember me, right mon?" Ragyr's voice was no more than a hiss. Dupel Wrench cleared his throat, clearly bothered over how the calm situation had turned hostile.

"I have thousands of customers. I cannot possibly remember all of them. Moreover, my good hunter, you trolls all look the same to me. I regret this fact, of course, but I cannot possibly keep track of all the twisted limbs, yellow tusks and staring eyes."

Ragyr thought quickly. The gnome certainly had more balls than he had anticipated, but it did not matter the slightest. It was too late to have second thoughts now. In addition, his bad knee ached in a pulsating unpleasant manner which only increased his anger.

"We met three years ago. It was a coincidence that night at the pub in Shattrath. It was raining that night. Pouring down. So we were stuck there, only with each other's company because it was so damn crowded at the pub and with the rain outside. That was when you showed me your latest invention. Mechanical stilts. It sounded like a joke. It was a joke. But you managed to persuade me to buy those expensive engineering plans. Do you remember that? "

The gnome turned up his little wrinkled face towards him. The eyes were a pair of narrow gaps, but somewhere in there was a small fire of recognition, fluttering very briefly.

"No, it does not sound familiar", he said with a resolute tone. But the gnome knew. Ragyr saw it in his eyes.

"I think you know, mon. Those stilts would have been good. If they only had worked. To wander through swamps with bottomless pits in muddy water was indeed an experience. And being able to jump up on rooftops, using the same stilts, was also useful. But you forgot to mention that the hydraulics requires lubrication."

"You can hardly accuse me of that", the gnome spat out. "I told you that you had to use oil berries of the finest quality ..." The gnome suddenly had a look on his face that he wanted to bite his tongue off when he realized his mistake and saw the wolf-like grin in Ragyr's face.

"So you remember me after all. That was what I thought, mon. Sure, you mentioned the oil berries, I remember that. But you failed to mention what immense amounts of rust the alloy generate despite the oil. The alloy that you recommended. The stilts broke and I fell to the ground. A very hard fall. Maybe I could have forgiven you, unless they also had caught fire on impact. I was lucky to just get my knee twisted and dislocated. It hurts every second of every day. And everything is your fault..."

Ragyr deliberately let the words hang in the air. He stared into the little gnome's scared eyes.

"Is it money you want? Take all the days' takings, it is more than you can spend."

Ragyr snorted.

"Do not mock me. Nothing can get my broken leg healed again. No. There is something else I want."

Dupel Wrench gulped nervously. "What?"

"An apology, is it so hard to understand?" He roared furiously into the small face with a force that surprised him. And the gnome smiled at him.

"If you are that much of a fool, that you cannot even manage a couple of stilts, you only have yourself to blame. Is that enough of an excuse for you, stinking filthy troll?"

In response Ragyr squeezed Dupel Wrenchs neck so hard that he screamed. Then he mashed the gnomes face into the counter. The first time he screamed, a shrill scream loud enough to be heard on the street outside. The second and third time the gnomes face hit the counter he just moaned pitifully. The rest of the times there was no sound but the wet thumping and the rattling sound of teeth bouncing off the counter and down on the floor.

He suddenly stopped. His hands were shaking. Blood was smeared all over his hand, almost up to the elbow. He looked down at the bloody clump that was the gnomes head that he still held in his hand. The gnomes face was so disfigured that he did not recognize it anymore. But Dupel Wrench had deserved it. The pain in his knee was excruciating. Some bad nights, when it was cold and damp in the air, Ragyr had actually contemplated suicide. He was not even sure himself why he had not done it already. Perhaps it was as simple as he was a coward. But now he had got his revenge after all. And the gnome still was breathing with a wheezing sound. He would survive this with some pain. Good. It was amazing actually how aware of your legs you are when one is constantly aching.

When he looked up he saw soldiers outside. They were still pretty far away out in the alley, but closing in fast. Too fast. How come they knew about this already? He swallowed, more nervously than he wanted to, and Slogra growled at his side.

But it made sense. Dalaran was a sanctuary. Violence was punished immediately. But the guards should not have come here so fast. How loud had Dupel Wrench screamed anyway? There was no time to reflect on such issues. He had to run away from this. He jumped over the counter, grimacing of pain when his bad knee sent spikes of pain through him as he hit the ground. He stumbled, reached the door and slammed it shut just before the soldiers got there. The guards had already arrived outside, thumping on the door. It was a matter of seconds before they had busted the door in. Maybe he could buy himself a couple of seconds if he found something to block the door with, but there was nothing of value in the small store, nor in reach from where he was standing. There was only one way out if he did not want to spend the rest of his life in a small cage on a public square somewhere, for the mob to see and spit on as they pleased. He shuddered at the thought of this cruel and possible fate.

"Are you ready for a jump?"

Slogra growled, but Ragyr knew he would follow. They were connected to each other by more than coercion. There was a love between them that was difficult to explain, yet so obvious. Man and beast, pet and master. But it was hard to say if Slogra was the pet or if he was Slogras pet. He would never leave Slogra if the situation had been reversed. It was never reversed, of course. It was always Ragyr that put them in trouble, never Slogra. Sometimes he wondered why the cat stuck with him in the first place. But he was grateful for it. Although that was something he would never admit.

He was thrown forward over and over when the soldiers on the other side of the door rammed it with their shoulders. He was glad that they did not have a log or something yet. The hinges creaked, he frowned at them but forced himself to ignore the deafening sound.

He desperately fumbled in his pockets after the device he needed. He felt small boxes with one or more buttons, tubes of various ointments, but he could not find the machine he was looking for. He began to panic. It should be here. When he had made the decision to visit Dupel Wrench he had planned for a situation like this. Well, maybe not planned, but he had been aware that he might have to leave in a hurry. If only it had not been this urgent to leave. Lousy gnome!

He found the little box with three buttons in his breast pocket. When he picked it up he almost dropped it when the guards rammed the door again and he was pushed forward.

"Are you ready?" he asked Slogra without waiting for an answer. He pushed the middle button while holding the box in front of him. A faint buzzing sound filled the room when the gears and magnets started to spin inside the box. It took no more than two seconds, then the air around him

started to swirl. A hole was suddenly there, hovering above him. At first no bigger than a dot on a paper, but it quickly grew into a blurry haze, like a vibrating mist in the middle of the room.

Ragyr did not hesitate. He put his hand on Slogras back and they jumped through the wormhole, while the door behind them exploded in a fountain of shattered wood and metal parts.

The peacekeeping soldiers of the Dalaran elite team found nothing but a beaten gnome and small worthless mechanical toys scattered over the floor when they searched the store. The gnome mumbled something about unpaid debts and revenge when they finally managed to shake him to life again.

Everything spun around in total silence. Ragyr tried to close his eyes to get rid of the images of circulating emptiness around him. He failed. He did not even want to think about how Slogra was affected by this. The whole jump through time and space did not take more than a few seconds, but it always felt like minutes. You could never really get used to the wormholes.

It ended as suddenly as it had begun. Everything just stopped without a warning and Ragyr lay panting somewhere and tried to focus his blurry vision. It was something with the scenery in front of him that did not make sense. The wormholes which took travelers to different places was pretty reliable, most of the times. The middle button would take him to a well-hidden corner of Orgrimmar. It was a secret, but common, destination for the initiated engineers who knew how to build the small gadget. It was a fact that engineers in general were highly underestimated. Both magicians and mighty warriors relied too much on their own abilities. Technology could be equally fascinating as magic or pure strength, though perhaps not as reliable. Well, depending on who you asked of course. But how reliable or not the wormhole generator were, the place in front of him sure was not Orgrimmar.

He realized that he was lying down on his back so he forced himself on his feet. He groaned while he pulled himself up. His bad knee protested like an old door and he had to bite his lip not to cry out of pain. When he glanced down at the hall beneath him he immediately went quite. Slogra stood beside him, not making a sound, but Ragyr could sense that he was as uncomfortable with the surrounding as he was. Where in the world had they ended up?

They were on a narrow shelf high above an empty hall. They were so high up he almost hit his head in the ceiling, so they must be on some form of shelf, or perhaps a beam. Down below he could see tables along the sides of the hall filled with crystal vials, something that looked like bones and various small tools. In the middle of the hall was a large round hole, or shaft, which seemed to lead down to one floor below. It was too deep to see the bottom of it. There was no matching shaft in the ceiling. He was grateful for this in a way he could not explain. No one could spot him from above. He really hoped they were safe here.

The whole place had an eerie atmosphere. The huge stones in the walls, floor and ceiling were red and black and reminded him of something he had seen several years ago. But what? He could always remember a building he had been in. But this hall he did not remember, even though it was strangely familiar. Maybe someone had rebuilt a place he had visited?

When he looked closer he saw cages with coarse rusty iron bars along the walls. He squinted to better see what was inside, but the bars were too thick. But then he saw a very slight movement in a cage and he grimaced of disgust when he realized what it was. It was a human hand sticking out in between the bars. A small gesture of helplessness and desperation. Another movement in the corner of his eye caused him to throw himself down on the shelf.

What had he been thrown into? And there was the familiar color of the stones. Some sort of battle took place here a long time ago. The architecture of the room below him looked like nothing he had ever seen before. The pillars that held up the huge roof was triangular and pointed. The air in the room suddenly felt heavy, as if the oily smoke from the lamps that hung along the walls suddenly had come to life. There was also something in the air that he recognized. Something that he could not quite place.

The next second he saw the movement again. From a huge opening, or rather a huge portal, in the wall to the left of him he saw two figures. The first he saw was a man. At least he thought it was

a man. The man was very tall and broad across the shoulders and fully covered by a black cloak. It was impossible to see his face, but Ragyr could clearly see a pair of pale hands dangle at the mans sides. When he squinted to see closer, he saw bone colored claws instead of fingers that were clenching and opening in a scary eager way. Behind him were a huge shape that towered up over the man. Ragyr had never seen a similar creature. The head reminded him of a lizard, or maybe a dragon. Its head was triangular and filled with pointy, sharp spines that reflected the light in an almost hypnotic manner. His thick scales was in stark contrast to this with their gray-green dull color. The body was nothing but muscles and tendons. The lizard was covered in a black armor in some material Ragyr did not recognize. The monster also carried a big grim scythe, almost casually, in his right hand. The blade was bent and with sharp spikes on the flat side. The handle seemed to be carved from a single piece of bone. Ragyr could see strange red letters carved in the handle. It made him shiver.

Although the lizard were among the most fearsome creatures Ragyr had ever seen it was still nothing compared to the man with the claws for hands. He was surrounded by an aura of pure terror that crept up all the way to the shelf where Ragyr was hiding. He held his breath and pulled himself as close to the wall as he could. He begged higher powers that he had not been seen. And that was when it hit him like a brick in the face. The smell. There were traces of ash in it. Ash and molten stone. Liquid magma. He must be somewhere in the Blackrock Mountain. The color of the stones, the great halls design, the thick air and the reddish light. He was in Blackwing Lair. But this place had been deserted for years!

Ragyr had been here long after the heroes had killed Nefarian. He had visited these halls, but when he was here they had since long been deserted. He remember the creepy atmosphere when he snuck around here by himself, just to see what it looked like. Someone, or something, had apparently moved back here and rebuilt the whole place. It would take years to do so, but he could see the proof below him that it had already been done. Something big, dark and evil was going on in here. The only thing he wanted now was to get away, but as long as the man and the lizard was down there he barely dared to breathe. The knowledge that Slogra was beside him filled him with the courage he needed. They would be able to get out of here. All they had to do was to wait for the wormhole generator to recharge. And until that moment he would find out as much as he could about this place and its new inhabitants. Maybe someone in Dalaran would like to have this information. To the right price of course. Ragyr was certainly not a philanthropist, and the risk he took of being here was worth money. A lot of money. Not that he had chosen to be here in the first place, but sometimes life gives you surprising opportunities.

He silently pulled himself as close to the edge as he dared and peered down on the man and the lizard. The more information he could gather, the more money he could ask for. Just as well to make the best of a bad situation. But what he saw made his heart freeze.

The man had opened one of the cages down there. The lizard stood behind him like an organic shadow of death and misery. A woman lay on the ground. Her eyes were like spotlights of fear. She twisted and turned and moaned. Ragyr turned away and shut his eyes when the first cries of pain rose in the hall when the man began to cut. But he had seen too much already. The man tore the flesh from her body. Ragyr tried to block the sounds out, but it was impossible. The man and the lizard did not make a sound while the gruesome ritual lasted. The screams from the woman was heartbreaking. He wanted to scream at them to stop. To put an end to her suffering. Pierce their throats with arrows. Anything. But he did nothing. He was too petrified. And even if he had done something he would surely be the next one whom the man would tear up like a fish. The only thing he could do was to listen and observe. So he forced himself to open his eyes and look down at the horrible scene that took place beneath him. Usually he did not care much for the humans, but it could just as well have been a troll, orc or tauren down there.

The lizard stood expressionless with the grim scythe in a loose grip in his hand, like he was holding a piece of bread. The man had his hands buried somewhere inside the womans stomach. Ragyr felt sick, but forced himself to not vomit.

The woman was lying still and above her was a thin yellow smoke floating. Ragyrs eyes

widened with disbelief. If he had not seen it for himself, he would not have believed it. The man seemed to inhale the smoke. The woman's mouth was wide with fear and pain, but the more smoke that disappeared into the man the more her mouth got slack. And suddenly it was over. The smoke dispersed. The woman's body went limp and an unnatural silence filled the room.

The man stood up and straightened his back, like he had done something you do every day. And perhaps he did. Blood dripped from his bone-colored claws down on the floor. It was the only sound that could be heard.

"How many more do we need?" the lizard suddenly asked.

"Not that many. It is getting closer now. The Master believes that we can awake The Ancient one soon."

"How soon?"

"Who knows? How much life energy have we accumulated so far?"

The lizard shrugged.

"That is your department. Magic of this sort is not my field."

"Ah, my dear Charrv. You are not without talent either. But you are right, it is not your main area. Though, it is still only the Master who knows when we can awake... it."

"I hope it is soon. These pathetic people makes my skin itch. They offer no resistance at all. Even when they can see me coming from miles away, and they have good time to prepare to defend themselves, they offer nothing. Only a few days ago I surprised a caravan south of Deadwind Pass. Twenty weak soldiers and a handful of merchants. They are no more than confused cattle. Half of them tried to form some sort of battle formation when they knew that death was in their midst. I let them. But their attempts to protect the others was so pathetic that they just made me angry", the lizard snorted in contempt and spat on the corpse of the woman on the floor.

"The Ancient one must wake up soon so that we can take over this ridiculous world. Then maybe someone can offer me resistance, even though it would be futile. I need to have a challenge!"

"Do not worry my friend. They will fear us and fight the best they can. But we must not be hasty. Until the Master has woken it up we need to continue as usual. No one can know what we are doing here. When the time comes, everyone will kneel for us. Arthas, the old fool, will kneel. C'Thun is no more than a worm used for fishing, if he was still alive. And we are here, right now, creating history. The ancient books the Master found years ago really paid off. But then again, he has been to places where no others have."

"I know. I just want the whole process to go faster", the lizard sighed.

The man in the dark cloak turned around and looked out over the hall. Ragyr curled up as much as he could and sent a wish to someone out there to turn him invisible that instant.

"We cannot stand here and talk", the man hissed with amusement. "Our guests might find out our plans. And that we cannot allow."

The lizard laughed. A cruel guttural laughter.

"True. We might as well take the rest right now."

"Before they get any illusions about freedom."

The lizard chuckled behind him. Ragyr crept closer to the wall. He tried to block out the sounds when men and women were taken from the cages one at a time. But it was impossible. If he managed to get out of this cursed tower alive the screams would haunt him forever. That was the only thing he was sure of right now.

The slaughter went on for hours, and when it finally stopped, the horrifying screams still echoed in his ears.

Ragyr was lying there, pressed against the wall, and unable to move. He had lost track of time. It could be minutes or hours that had passed. He had no idea. But the lizard and the man had left the hall down there a while ago. Sometimes he could see shapeless figures move through the hall, but it was mostly empty and quiet.

Slogra was lying beside him, stiff and silent, like he knew exactly what had happened down there. Ragyr regretted that he had brought the cat here.

He gently put his hand in his pocket, reaching for the wormhole generator. They had to try to

get out of here as soon as possible. Ragyr was afraid that the box would give away sounds that could expose them. Never before had he been concerned that minimal noises would betray him like this. The generator had probably cooled off enough for them to jump through time and space again. It must have cooled off. It must!

His hands were trembling when he dug up the small box from his pocket. Sweat dripped from his eyebrows down on the small panel. Right then he saw no one in the hall. No movement at all. But who knew how much time they had before any of the vile creatures came back?

"Are you ready?" His voice was so low that it was barely a whisper. Ragyr pressed the middle button with his trembling fingers.

This time the wormhole would take them to Orgrimmar and nowhere else. Or just any place that was not here would do. A faint hum filled the air around him when the wormhole generator started its machinery. A black dot appeared in midair in front of him. For the first time in his life he was close to start crying over the fact that the damn thing actually worked as it should. The black dot was drawn out to the familiar gray mist. A few seconds only and the wormhole would open up. Just a few seconds more... But something was wrong. The fog remained thin and the wormhole tunnel did not open up.

"Come on", he muttered. He instinctively knew what the problem was. The wormhole needed more space. The ceiling was a tiny bit too close. But they had to hurry. If they waited too long there was a high risk that the box would overheat again and if that happened they had to wait several hours before trying again. That was not an option.

"We have to get down on the floor", he told Slogra while grinding his teeth.

He looked out over the edge. It was at least thirteen feet down. If he would have had a rope there would be no problem. But he had no rope. He took a deep breath. Carefully slid his legs over the edge. Then his body. Groaned from the effort. Slid down as far as he could while clinging onto the edge with only his fingers. In his left hand he held the wormhole generator in a tight grip, his knuckles were white from clenching it so hard. Then he let go. It felt like an eternity before he hit the ground and when he did his knee exploded in a white flash of pain when it twisted to one side and he got his whole weight on top of it. He could not help it, but he screamed. His high pitch scream echoed between the stone walls. He could hear the running steps of the towers inhabitants at the same moment that he stopped screaming.

His sight were a blurry mess from tears, but there was no time to lose. From the large opening in the wall he could see a huge shape taking form. The lizard. Where was the wormhole generator? Panic rushed through him like a fire out of control. He knew he had it in his hands just a few seconds ago. He blinked away the tears in frustration. And there it was, a few feet away on the stone floor. He must have dropped it when he hit the ground.

Motivated by the burning fear he tried to get up, but the leg exploded again in pure white pain. He screamed and fell to the floor. The stones in the floor vibrated slightly as the lizard came running. It was a matter of seconds now before all was lost. The box was right in front of him. He dragged his crushed leg after him like a piece of dead wood. But he ignored the pain and crawled the last few inches across the floor. His fingers found the box and he pressed the buttons frantically. It did not matter where the wormhole took them, as long as they got away.

The black dot appeared in front of him, and then the gray mist. Suddenly, the wormhole was there. Ragyr somehow managed to get up on his knees. Slogra was at his side, ready as always, and together they took a stumbling leap towards the wormhole while the lizard roared with rage just a few feet away.

Silence and emptiness rotating around them. The seconds stretched out, almost as if he could see the timeline in front of him as a rubber band. Then everything stopped.

Blue-green stone. A fish head sprayed water at the side of him. At first he thought it was the lizard, but then he realized it was a statue. He blinked a few times to get rid of the confusion that still loomed in his head. He lay in a fountain. In the middle of Dalaran. He laughed with joy. They were in safety. He still laughed when the peacekeeping soldiers arrived and pulled him up from the

crystal clear water that had got a pink color from the blood from his broken leg. His laughter echoed between the houses when the guards pulled him away to the council that would decide his fate.

Several hours later, he was in chains and in front of the Kirin Tor council. The room felt chilly, but it was likely a result of his wet clothes. The guards had given him a chance to get some dry ones. They just put him in chains, locked him up in a cell for a few hours and then dragged him here. Before him stood twelve men in purple silk clothing. All were white-haired and had wrinkled faces.

"You are facing us today for an assault on shop keeper Dupel Wrench. A particularly brutal assault within our walls where violence is prohibited. What can you say to your defence?"

Ragyr cleared his throat and spat on the floor.

"He deserved it", he said. He could clearly see how the council mens eyes narrowed.

"You admit yourself guilty then. We will not tolerate these sort of acts within Dalaran. You should know that. An example must be made. I hereby sentence you to three days in the cage. If you survive, you will spend another month in the dungeon. Take him out of here." The old man from the Kirin Tor waved his hand in the air as if the matter was solved and done with.

"Wait", coughed Ragyr. "Are you not curious of what I was doing in the fountain?"

The old man frowned at Ragyr.

"No. But since you brought that up. You actually tainted the water. I will give you one more month in the dungeon to think about that. If you survive the cage that is. Take him out of my sight now."

"Wait", wheezed Ragyr. "You might want to hear about the evil deeds and dark rituals that take place in Blackwing Lair? I was there, mon. The wormhole took me there."

His idea of making money by selling the information he had gathered was long gone. All he wanted was to forget the whole thing and to avoid the cage.

"You are lying. Blackwing Lair has been abandoned for years. There is nothing there except ash and stones."

"I do not lie, mon. I was there... Someone has rebuilt the whole place. And they suck the life energy out of people that they kidnap. I witnessed a gruesome ritual in which a man with claws sucked the life energy out of prisoners while he tortured them to death."

The old men exchanged a few quick glances which Ragyr had a difficult time to interpret.

"Even if you speak the truth, which I doubt, it sounds so unbelievable that it falls on its own absurdity. In addition, we have no time for rumors taken out of thin air with no substance in them whatsoever. You cannot save your worthless skin with stories made up on the spot. We have so many other things to worry for. The Lich King is still alive and ravaging the country with his troops of scourge abominations. There. Is. Nothing. In. Blackwing Lair!"

"But I heard a name too", Ragyr tried, now more desperate than before. "There was some sort of lizard creature. Maybe a dragonkin. But he looked like something completely different than I have ever seen, mon. Charrv. That is what the disgusting man called him."

It was quiet in the room. Too quiet.

"Charrv. Did you say his name was Charrv?"

"Yes!" Ragyr shouted in triumph.

"It is impossible. That is a name of an ancient warrior known for his cruelty. But it is taken from fairy tales to frighten children. Take him away now, but put him in the dungeon right away. The deepest one", the old Kirin Tor council member added with a cold look on his face.

Ragyr tried to protest, but he knew it was useless. He could not quite shake off the feeling that the men from the Kirin Tor knew what he was talking about. The gaze he received when he mentioned the name of the lizard had been recognising. And now he would be rotting away in a dungeon. Life was not fair at all. But he had the wormhole generator still. For some unknown reason they had not taken that from him. Maybe they thought it was broken. Maybe they were just clumsy. Who cared? And they had not taken Slogra. The cat had been clever enough to hide while he was splashing around in the fountain. He just needed a second to distract the guards.

When they left the courtroom and the council of Kirin Tor, he was blinded by the sunshine

outside. Just to the right of the door, he saw a movement. Slogra waited there, faithful as always. His knee hurt like hell and the guards more or less carried him between them.

In that moment he realized that he did not know what would happen if he used the wormhole generator again. Would it take him and Slogra to a safe place? Was it worth the risk of avoiding the dungeon? At least the cat was free, that was all that matter to him right now. Almost all that mattered. He would not mind his own freedom though. But the fear of ending up in Blackwing Lair again, or some other horrific place, was most real. He carefully lift his hands to feel the wormhole generator in his breast pocket. It was there, ready for him and Slogra.

All he needed was one second.