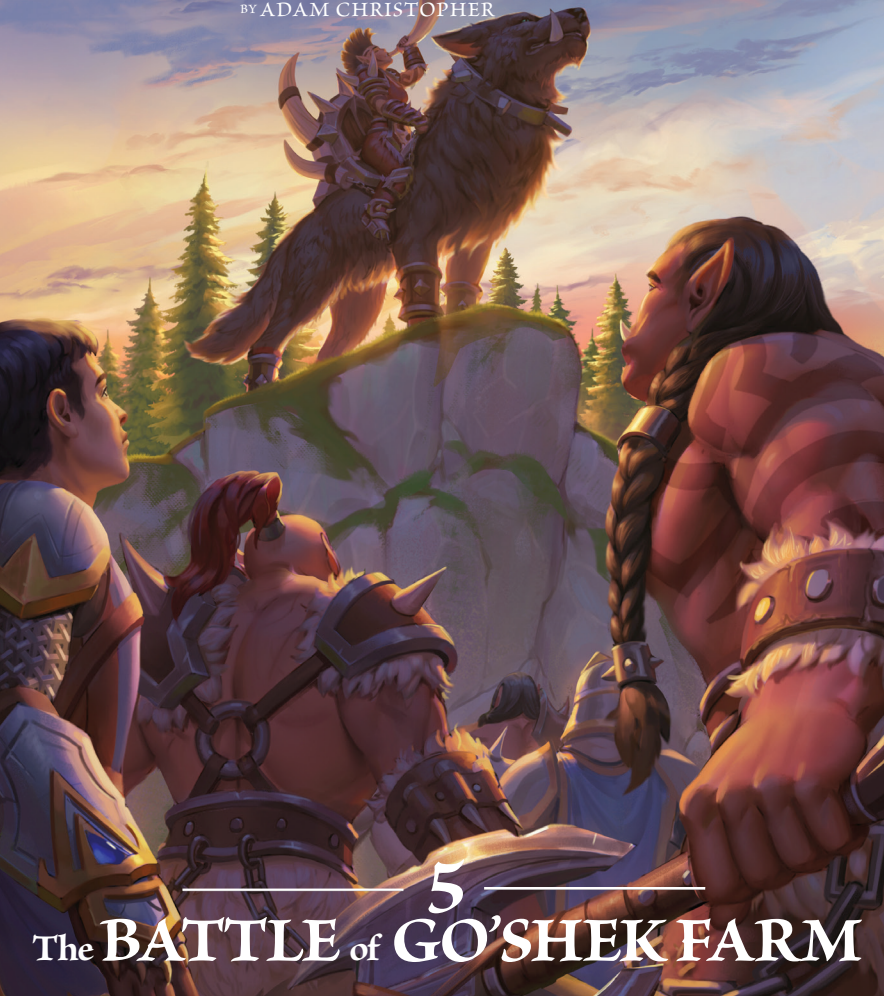




WORLD
WARCRAFT
THE WAR WITHIN

HEARTLANDS

BY ADAM CHRISTOPHER



5

The BATTLE of GO'SHEK FARM

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Geya'rah blinked the spots from her vision and pushed herself to her feet, shaking her head as she regained her senses. Tumbling down a steep hillside, she'd been fortunate enough to hit something soft—a haystack?—at the bottom. She looked around to get her bearings.

She was in a farmstead—a human one. It seemed she'd been swept some distance from Go'Shek, to Stromic holdings. The place was deserted, but Geya'rah took no chances. She skirted the rocky hillside and headed back toward the sound of fighting, aiming for a large barn that would provide good cover.

“Stop!”

She skidded to a halt as a tiny form leapt out of the structure, right in her path. It was a human—a *child*, she realized, no more than a dozen years of age, holding a sword that was longer than he was tall, and clearly far more than he could handle.

Geya'rah hissed in disgust. Was Marran so desperate she would conscript *children* to fight for her?

“You will not take our crops!” the boy yelled, lifting the unwieldy weapon as best he could. “Mother and Father worked hard all season, and the castle collected most of the harvest as tax. We'll starve! I won't let you take them!”

Geya'rah took a breath. This child was no soldier. He was protecting the farm—his home. “Little one, I will not hurt you,” she said gently. “And I am not here to steal—none of the Mag’har are.” She walked slowly toward him.

The boy stumbled and fell backward. Abandoning his weapon, he crabbed toward the barn, only to be quickly yanked backward by a pair of hands.

“You stay away from us!”

Geya'rah stopped and peered into the barn. There, huddled in the darkness, were people—many people, older men and women, children, and even babes in arms. Geya'rah took a step forward, and almost as one the humans shrieked in fear and shrank back before her.

There was not a soldier among them. These were regular people, people who had settled the Highlands to find peace and good work, following a dream or a promise or perhaps just a chance, trying to make lives for themselves and their families. And now war had come, a fight they hadn't asked for and didn't want.

All they wanted to do was *live*.

At the front stood two men. One was older than the other; both were lean from a lifetime of hard labor. They held makeshift weapons—a hoe for the older man, a bent pitchfork for the younger—that made Geya'rah cringe in pity.

The older man lifted his chin in defiance, although when he spoke, the trembling fear in his voice was plain.

“Marran's told us all about you orcs!” he said. “Bloodthirsty and cruel, you are!”

“And starving!” said the younger man. “Desperate for what we have, right? You'd put us all to the sword and take what is ours for yourself!”

Geya'rah felt the energy leave her. She knew just how big she was compared to them, how terrifying she must look, fitted for war. They were afraid of her. Desperately so. And, Geya'rah knew, it was the same for her people. Right now, in Go'Shek Farm, she knew the same scene could unfold so easily. Orc families and farmers, confronting a terrible, faceless enemy, one determined to *kill* and *take* and *conquer*.

She took a step back, but her movement made the whole group flinch.

“We came here seeking peace,” she said. “To escape war in *our* world. We did not come here to fight.”

But it was no use. The humans weren't even listening. All they saw was an enemy—big, strong, frightening. *Different.*

The 7th Legion were mighty, but even before the battle Geya'rah knew the Stromic were fewer in number. The Kor'kron, backed by the Mag'har forces, outnumbered them three to one, if not more. Marran Trollbane's relentless hatred had led her to attack despite the odds. It was going to be a massacre. After the legionnaires were finished, the farmers—these people—would be next to fight. The humans would be wiped out, and that very thought sickened Geya'rah. The children in this barn would learn hatred, something they would pass to another generation. Here was battle without honor, feeding an unending cycle of animosity. All their victory would do was cement this feeling as fact.

But maybe it was a cycle she could still break. Marran may hate her—Geya'rah *knew* she did—but Geya'rah couldn't let Marran's hatred change who she was, or who the Mag'har were.

She remembered Thrall's words—*Find where Stromgarde is hurting. Seek another way.*

Well, here it was. Stromgarde and Hammerfall had more in common than not.

“Geya'rah!”

The humans screamed as Thrall rode in on wolf-back. Geya'rah held up a hand, motioning him to stay where he was.

“We can stop this,” Geya'rah said to Thrall. “We *must* stop this.”

Thrall looked at the humans and nodded. “There are many battles to fight, but this is not one of them. You can save these people, and yours. That power is in your hands.”

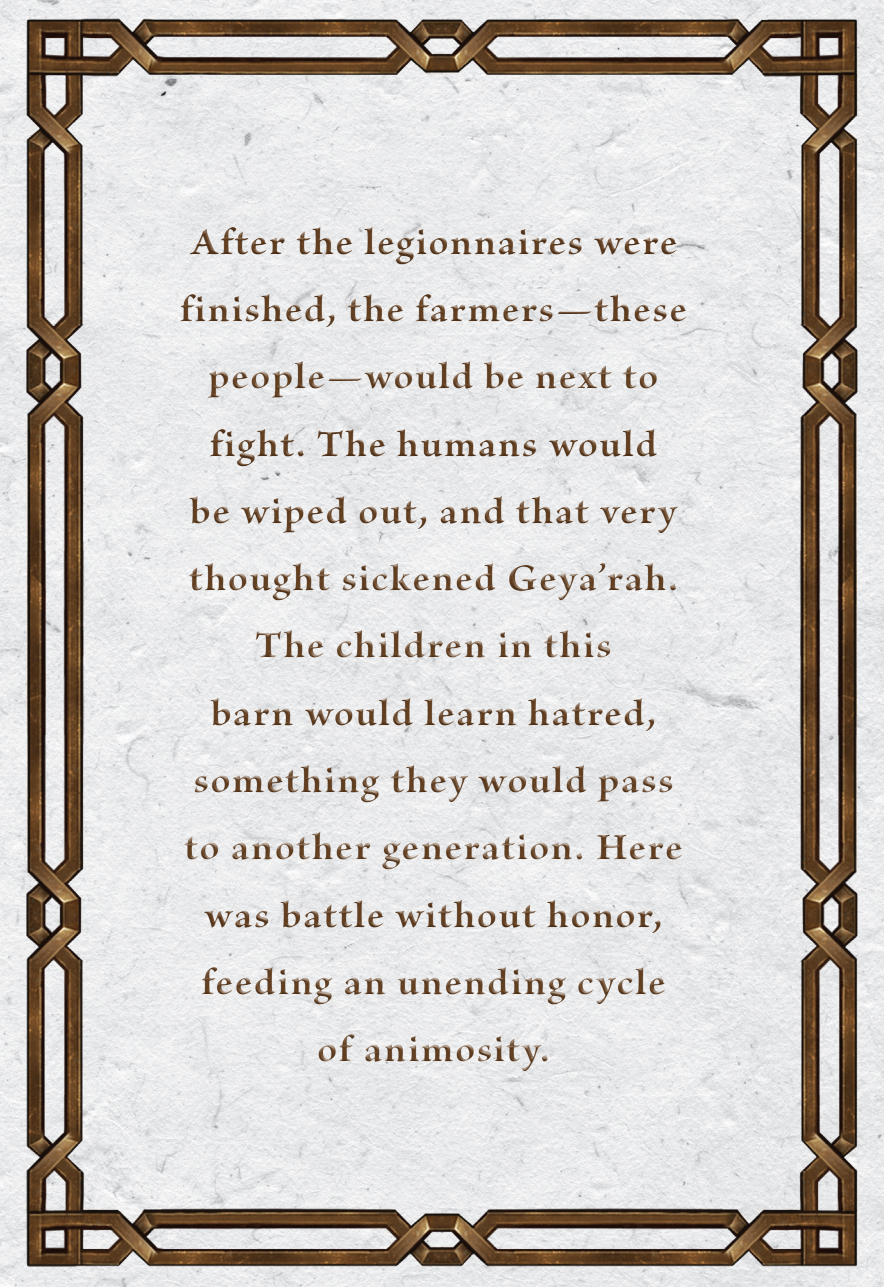
Geya'rah nodded. “I understand.” She swung herself onto Thrall's mount behind him. “But how?”

Thrall flicked the reins. “I think I know. But we must find Aggra—she and Jaina are doing what they can to stop the fighting.”

With a yell, Thrall encouraged his mount, and they headed up the hillside.



This is hopeless, thought Jaina as she raced across the battlefield. While she was doing her best to keep fighters away from each other with arcane magic, she knew she couldn't



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be everywhere at once, and she had seen enough fighting to know which side was going to win.

Marran had gambled, and she had lost. Now Jaina had to find her before it was too late.

Summoning an arcane familiar beneath her boots, Jaina allowed herself to be lifted high into the air in an attempt to spot Marran—and she quickly saw that she was very close. Marran was just ahead, urging her troops forward, clad in the wolf pelt she'd thought symbolic of her right to rule.

Jaina dismissed her servant, which dissolved beneath her. Using that momentum, she sprinted forward and landed next to Marran. Jaina summoned a portal and, tackling Marran around the waist, dived through it. The pair fell out onto a clear patch of ground, some distance away, the portal snapping shut behind them.

Marran got to her feet, but Jaina was faster, aiming her staff squarely at the regent. “Is this how the Alliance treats its own, Lord Admiral? Compliance by force?”

Jaina approached, ready to subdue the regent if necessary. “Open your eyes, Marran! For all your talk of the Alliance chasing meaningless battles, you’ve started the most meaningless one of all.” Arcane energy crackled down her staff. “You’ve lost. I won’t let you inflict further damage on your kingdom or the Alliance.”

Above them, the sky flared red, blinding in the failing night. Jaina gasped in surprise and stepped back, turning her focus from Marran as she shielded her eyes. The two women looked to the north. There, from a nearby hilltop, a column of roiling flame shot into the night sky, bright enough to light the entire landscape where the Kor’kron and the 7th Legion stood, frozen in battle, all eyes on the figure Jaina could now see illuminated by the rising sun.

Geya’rah.

Atop her mount, the Mag’har leader raised a war horn to her lips. As she blew, the sound reverberating across the battlefield, Jaina could now see two other figures with her—Aggra and Thrall.

The sound of the war horn faded, and Geya’rah spoke, her powerful voice echoing against every hill, in every hollow, the undulating landscape of the Arathi Highlands acting as the perfect natural amplifier. “There will be no battle here! There is no honor

in this slaughter! The Kor'kron and Mag'har will hold. I call upon the 7th Legion and Stromic army to do the same!"

Jaina turned to survey the battlefield from her new vantage point. The light of the rising sun stretched its tendrils almost from Hammerfall behind them to Stromgarde on the far horizon. It also illuminated the terrible cost of the fight. She could see bodies strewn across the Highlands, many fallen on both sides—Stromic, Mag'har, 7th Legion, and Kor'kron.

"Stromgarde, hear me!" Geya'rah continued. "This land is yours. But Mag'har, hear me also, for this land is *ours* too. There is room and riches enough for both our peoples to share, and much to be gained in partnership. This battle is unwarranted, but your strength is still *needed*. There is a new land waiting, and a new enemy too—not just of the orcs, or of the humans, but of all the peoples of Azeroth. We sail for Khaz Algar. I challenge the 7th Legion to have the strength to sail with us!"

There was silence across the battlefield. And then, as Jaina watched, a powerful-looking Kor'kron general stepped out of the ranks, watching from beneath the flame-lit hill. From the nearby line of the 7th Legion, a knight-commander emerged and walked up to the orcish general.

Jaina held her breath . . . and then the Kor'kron leader held out his hand. The knight-commander paused, then clasped the outstretched hand in his own.

"*This isn't over,*" Marran hissed through clenched teeth, snapping Jaina's attention away from the others. "I follow the will of the people. So long as the blood of Arathor runs in my veins—"

That was when another voice cut in.

"If you would permit me a word with my regent, Lord Admiral?"

Jaina stepped to one side as Danath Trollbane walked out onto the field, leaders of the Stromic army following close behind.

Marran's eyes thinned to slits, locking with Jaina's as her uncle approached. "I showed you mercy beneath the keep. I don't make the same mistake twice."

Jaina joined Danath's side. "Neither do I. I didn't trust the situation in Stromgarde from the moment I passed under its gates. For all I knew, that courier would deliver the letter straight to you anyway."

“Stromgarde, hear me!”

Geya’rah continued. “This land is yours. But Mag’har, hear me also, for this land is *ours* too. There is room and riches enough for both our peoples to share, and much to be gained in partnership. This battle is unwarranted, but your strength is still *needed*. There is a new land waiting, and a new enemy too—not just of the orcs, or of the humans, but of all the peoples of Azeroth.”

“So she sent a raven too,” continued Danath. “And what a very prescient decision that was.”

Marran took a step toward Jaina, but was restrained by a Stromic captain.

“Captain Brewston, timely as always.”

“My lord,” the captain inclined his head. “What are your orders?”

“Marran Trollbane is hereby relieved of her official duties. Escort her to her chambers, where she will remain under arrest until I decide what to do with her.” Danath turned to another in his party. “Captain Wren, organize search parties and bring in her supporters. I suspect there will be many still afield.”

“Take care,” said Jaina. “Marran has a spymaster—a hunter called Zatacia. She will be the most loyal of them and is an expert shot, adept with poisons.”

Wren gave a salute, then began organizing his men. Jaina looked back at the hilltop, where she saw in the dying light of Aggra’s fire the trio of orcs marching down the hillside toward them.

“Thrall!” she cried. “You are well!”

Thrall gestured to Geya’rah. “I’ve much to thank the Mag’har for,” he said, before moving to Danath. The pair clasped forearms in greeting, and Danath bowed to the group.

“Thrall, my friend,” he said. “Aggra. And Geya’rah, I am honored to meet you. I must apologize for my regent. She painted a different picture of her intentions than what culminated here. Stromgarde will offer reparations—”

“They are unnecessary,” Geya’rah cut in. “I do not wish to punish your people for Marran’s actions. Their losses here were great. I would like to quash this animosity between our peoples before it can grow further.”

“You have my eager support in that,” Danath said.

He turned to Jaina. “Kurdran and Turalyon wait for us at Stromgarde. I suggest we join them.”



Dawn broke as the party, now joined by Talgar, Eitrigg, the Kor’kron, and the 7th Legion, arrived at Stromgarde.

Kurdran Wildhammer and Turalyon were waiting in the square outside the main keep. Turalyon shook Jaina's hand.

"Lord Admiral, the Sons of Lothar will answer your call."

Kurdran coughed. "Little dramatic, Turalyon? We've not gone by that name in . . . What? Two decades? More?"

The paladin grinned. "Maybe it's time we reclaim it." He turned to Jaina. "Once Danath gave me his report on the summit at Boralus, I realized the gravity of the situation. You'll have to forgive my absence at your council."

"Of course," Jaina said. "But tell me, what of the Radiant Song? How does Stormwind fare?"

Turalyon pursed his lips. "The troubles still weigh on my mind, but I've left Genn to rule—he'll keep a tight rein on things in my absence."

"We bring good news as well," said Danath. "The Kul Tiran fleet will dock here within the week."

"Excellent," said Geya'rah. "Time enough to prepare." She turned to indicate her orcs companions. "My general, Talgar," she said as the warrior inclined his head, "and my advisor, Eitrigg."

Eitrigg stood tall while Danath and Turalyon exchanged an uncomfortable glance. It was Danath who broke the silence, clearing his throat as he bowed stiffly to the Blackrock chieftain.

"It is good to see you again," he said. He looked up at his friend. "Isn't it, Turalyon?"

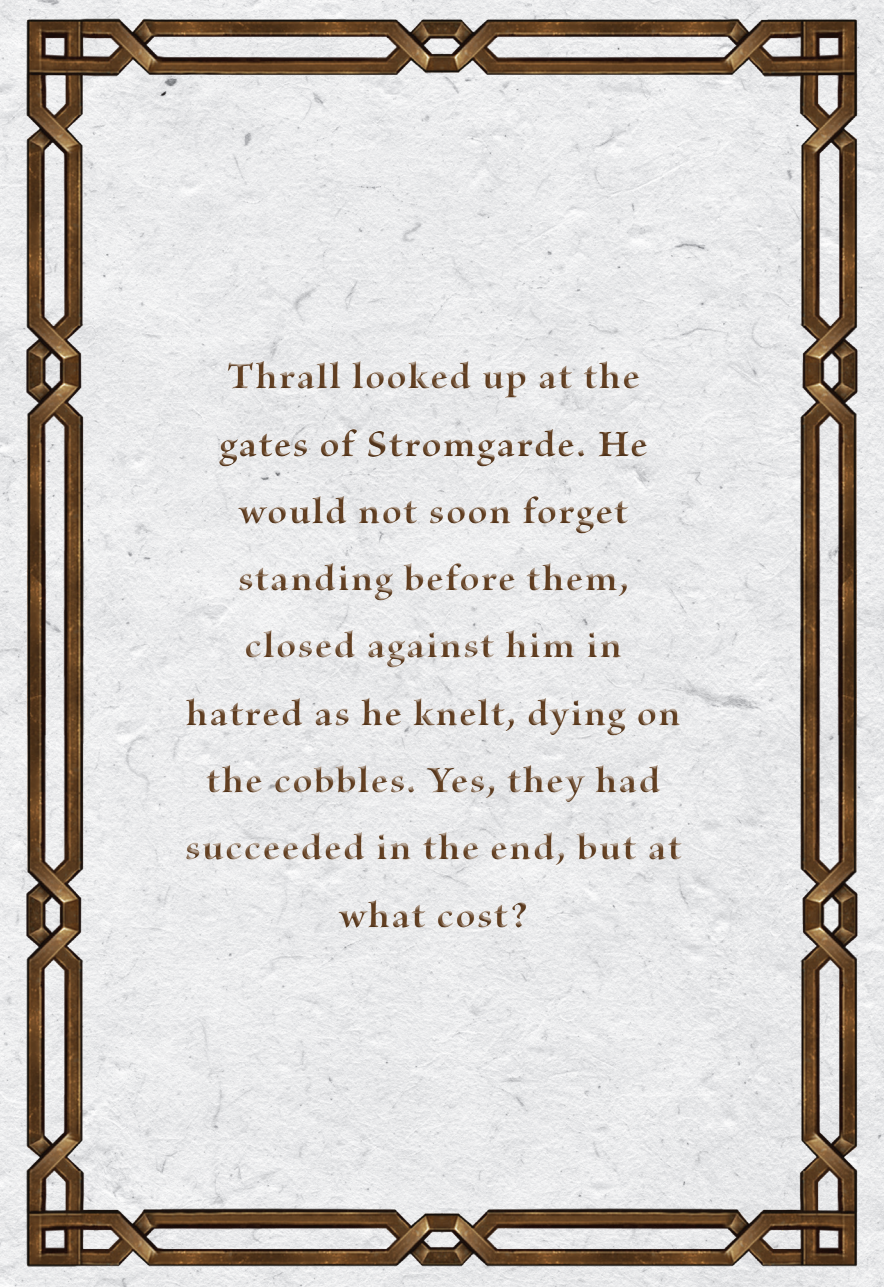
"Quite," said Turalyon, his expression tight. He and Eitrigg held each other's gazes for a moment, before Eitrigg turned to Jaina.

"Are we sure we want *these two* for champions?" Eitrigg smiled sharply. "Having faced both of them in the Fourth War, I can't say I was impressed. Surely the Alliance can offer someone a bit . . . younger?"

Kurdran snorted a laugh before Jaina stepped between the trio.

"We should . . . hasten to make our plans," she said, turning a diplomatic smile on Eitrigg.

"An excellent suggestion," said Danath, letting out a long-held breath. "Please, if you will all follow me."



Thrall looked up at the gates of Stromgarde. He would not soon forget standing before them, closed against him in hatred as he knelt, dying on the cobbles. Yes, they had succeeded in the end, but at what cost?

The group headed toward Stromgarde Keep, Thrall and Aggra at the rear. Now that the current crisis had been contained, the weight of their mission once again took precedence.

Aggra took Thrall's hand in hers. "It would seem you have your strike force."

Thrall nodded. "We must not fail," he said. "The fate of the world depends on it."

"And we won't," said Aggra. "We have won this battle. We will win the next. What is it that troubles you?"

Thrall looked up at the gates of Stromgarde. He would not soon forget standing before them, closed against him in hatred as he knelt, dying on the cobbles. Yes, they had succeeded in the end, but at what cost? As they turned their attention to Xal'athath and her machinations, what seeds of hatred grew their roots ever deeper in the Arathi soil? What bitter crop remained for Geya'rah and the Mag'har to later reap?

And this . . . bothered him. Marran was under arrest, yes, but she had supporters—including her spymaster who, according to Jaina, had shot *both* of them and remained at large. A dangerous loose end to leave, but Thrall had to trust that Danath's loyalists would be successful in their hunt. That they could stamp out what had started fomenting here.

These old hatreds, thought Thrall. With every victory, they still remain. Perhaps they can one day be solved.

Perhaps.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Adam Christopher is the New York Times bestselling author of Star Wars: Shadow of the Sith and Stranger Things: Darkness on the Edge of Town. He has also written official tie-in novels for the hit CBS television show Elementary and the award winning Dishonored video game franchise. Co-creator of the 21st century incarnation of Archie Comics superhero The Shield, Adam has written for Greg Rucka and Michael Lark's Lazarus series from Image Comics and Big Finish's Doctor Who universe. A contributor to the internationally bestselling Star Wars: From a Certain Point of View anniversary anthology series, Adam has also written for the all-ages Star Wars Adventures comic from IDW. Adam's original novels include Made to Kill and The Burning Dark, among many others, and his debut novel Empire State was both a SciFi Now and Financial Times Book of the Year.