



# THE VOICES WITHIN



# THE CALLING

CHRISTIE GOLDEN

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CHRISTIE GOLDEN

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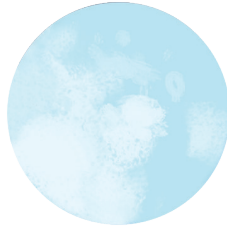
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**W**ind caressed the newcomer's bearded face as he permitted his eyes, so hungry for green openness and soft lands, to feast.

Stormsong Valley was the ancient home of the tidesages, mages whose mastery of water and wind had protected ships and sailors for generations. Yet the beauty of this little hamlet near the sparkling sea was not that of majestic monuments to powerful magic. Here, it was obvious one was in the breadbox of Kul Tiras, where a salt-spray wind whispered over barley and wheat and the only magic was that of water and windmills, creaking from morn till night, transmuting elements to energy in service of the feeding and care of ordinary folk.

The pleasant sound of the mills sang a promise of new beginnings.

And the crash of the waves below, near the cave where his belongings lay bundled and buried, spoke of an ending.

Anduin Wrynn's recent wandering had not taken him to peaceful places. He understood that he was trying to scour himself, to purge his mind and soul, to burn away his sins in places where the landscape reflected his own suffering.

*My friends . . . the ones I almost killed. They believe my hands are clean. But they don't feel clean.*

Years after that confession, they still didn't.

Hands that had once warmed with the Holy Light. Healed body and spirit. Protected a kingdom, a world.

He flexed them now; he and his hands were anxious to keep busy.

As a boy, Anduin had yearned to travel Azeroth, seizing what chances he could—manufacturing them sometimes—in search of adventure. Now, he sought to escape, not explore. Adrift, alone, he turned his hand to whatever would earn him that day's meal and a place to sleep, even if sleep was a capricious comfort. Slumber sent night terrors from which Anduin would awaken screaming as often as not, rather than gifting him true rest, or even simple oblivion.

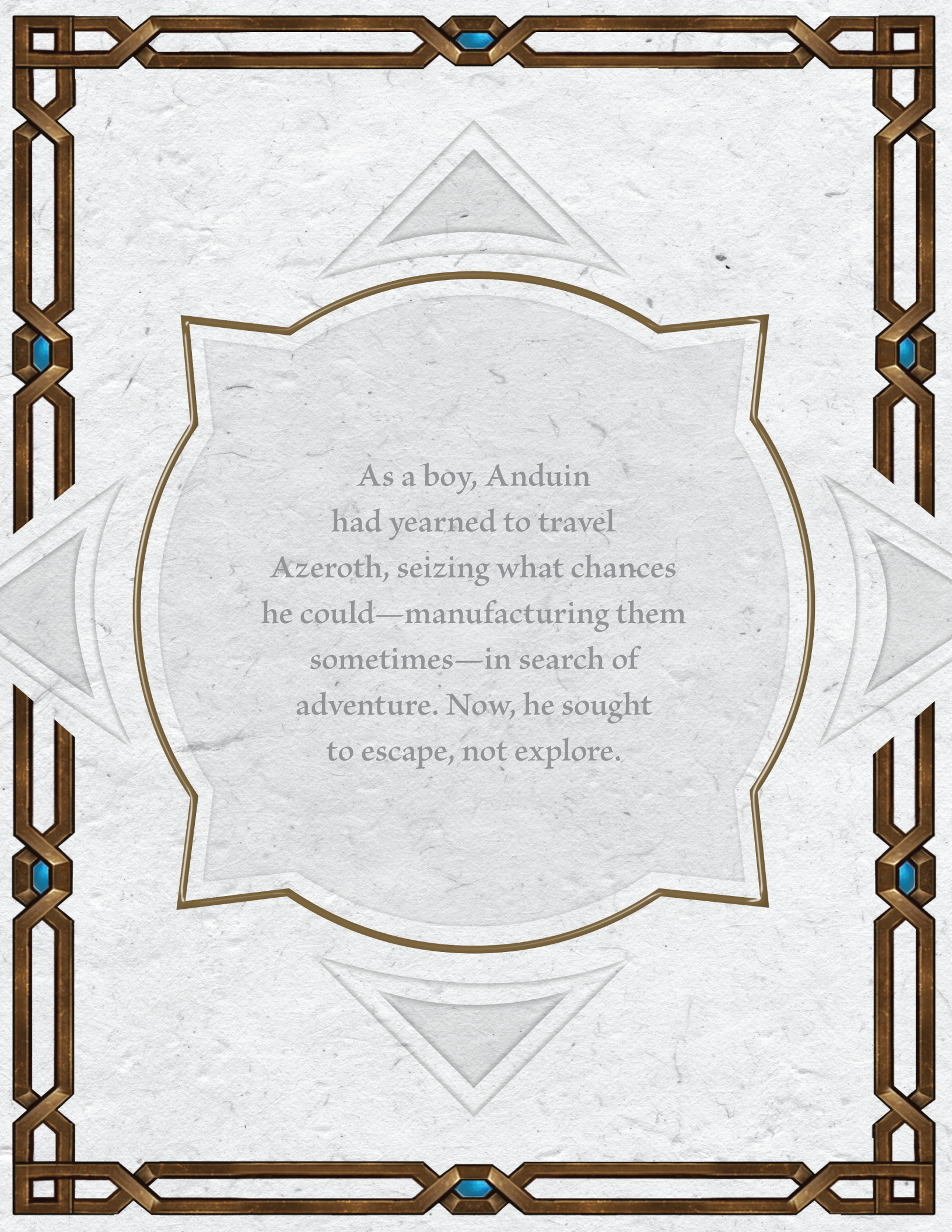
In a way, his waking mind was a better friend. There were many places Anduin knew his feet had trod, but he had only fragments of memories of them. Sometimes his mind restored them to him, in the form of moments where he seemed to relive the very thing he did not wish to remember, the recollection more horrifying than the original wound.

Changing his environment helped, as did learning something new. Keeping his hands busy, playing a game of hide-and-seek with personal demons much worse than true ones. Then on to the next place, and the next.

Anduin had kept to himself on the voyage to Kul Tiras, as he always did. He stayed in his cabin, venturing topside only when the walls of the cabin closed in and the air stank of his own fear and sour sweat. He silently observed the sailors making knots, then fashioned his own—a skill he would take from the trip. Once the ship had docked, Anduin slipped into a dark corner of a tavern and ordered a bowl of stew.

He was not among those who sought solace at the bottom of a tankard. He acknowledged there was some temptation in the thought of drinking deeply enough to drown the dreams of his body moving against his wishes, of watching his hands curl around the hilt of his father's corrupted blade. But he knew the only thing worse than living with those memories would be losing control.

Anduin ate the meal without tasting it, listening to news, gossip, and who needed what done where, and he learned that Stormsong Valley was flourishing so well that there was a lack of strong backs willing to help with harvests, tend the land, or grind the grain.



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had yearned to travel  
Azeroth, seizing what chances  
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to escape, not explore.

The long walk from Boralus to the valley had calmed him, each step bearing him from the bustle of the harbor into silence, stillness, and the steady rhythm of the sea.

“That’s my favorite view,” came a voice from behind.

Anduin whirled, reaching for the sword that was not there, the sword that was safely hidden in a cave below his feet. The sword that hung over head and heart. Seeing his startlement, the approaching figure, a man of middle years, held up a hand and smiled reassuringly. He had bright blue eyes, and what little hair he had left was nearly all gray.

“My apologies. Seems even with this leg, I can still move quietly.” He gestured, and Anduin could see by the way the man hobbled, leaning on a staff for aid, that the leg had once been badly broken and had not mended fully.

*I could help*, he thought, then remembered that time was over.

The man continued. “I proposed to my wife here. Saw my last sunset before I left for the Fourth War, and the first when I made it home. When you’ve seen what I’ve seen . . .” He sighed and fell silent. Anduin was glad the stranger did not finish his sentence. “Well, the heart longs for quiet. Simple beauty. Things that grow and change, and things that don’t. I’m Rodrik Feldon, by the by.”

“Jerek.” Anduin had used the alias before, starting in simpler times as a youth running from responsibility. He was running from much darker things now. “I’m looking for work.”

“I’m looking for help. What’s your calling, Jerek?” The casual question was unexpected, and for a moment, Anduin couldn’t breathe.

A calling.

He thought of the priesthood and of Aerin Stonehand, the young Ironforge warrior assigned to train him in the art of the sword. She had promised to “dwarf-temper” him, but instead realized the prince was not suited to cause pain. To harm. Aerin believed that Anduin might thrive in service to the Light. So had Magni Bronzebeard.

Anduin had believed it too, once. He’d always felt drawn to the peace it offered. The stillness.

*My whole life, I've wanted peace, he thought. And my whole life, I've never had it.*

Fields by the ocean. Open sky, open land. Hard physical labor. Maybe this place, this job, would help.

Light knew, nothing else had.

Anduin realized his mind had wandered and Rodrik was waiting for his answer. "I'm a jack-of-all-trades," he said. Off Rodrik's bemused gaze, he added, "I learn fast, my back's strong, and I'll work hard."

Rodrik took in Anduin's tattered cloak and mud-spattered boots, his unkempt beard and dirty hair. "You look like you've come a long way, son. Where have you traveled from?"

Anduin bristled, alert. "Does it matter?"

Rodrik fixed him with a long, appraising gaze. "You seem a bit on edge," he remarked. "And hungry. Here. This might help." He reached into his pack and procured a loaf of bread.

Anduin took it. The loaf was still warm, and the smell made his stomach rumble. Rodrik nodded toward the windmills dotting the landscape. Their arms turned and creaked, but there was a lone water mill some distance away. A channel diverted the river's stream toward a huge wheel. Bags of wheat and barley were piled high beside it, waiting to be milled, and chickens pecked industriously at stray grains. A short walk away was a small, cheerful-looking cottage, where a horse, a goat, and her kid cropped in the nearby grass.

"The water mill's mine. You'll have plenty of bread and goat's milk. Eggs too, if you keep the fox away. I'll work you hard, which you say you want, and pay you fairly. You'll need training, of course, but if you're a quick learner, it won't take long. After that, I'll be by once or twice a week with supplies."

Rodrik went over Anduin's list of responsibilities: checking the millstones, grinding the grains to flour, maintaining the machinery, taking orders—

"Wait," Anduin interrupted. His throat tightened; he hadn't thought this through. "The farmers will bring the grain *here*? How many? How often?"

He could hear his voice rising with agitation and feel his palms starting to sweat. He had sought isolation, but this sounded like it would provide exactly the opposite. Anduin felt himself shutting down, as if, one by one, doors inside him were closing. This place, pleasant as it seemed, didn't have the answer after all.

"Oh, I used to be interrupted all the time, but I moved my family into town after the war. My wife runs a bakery now. I do all the boring work, and I'll handle the orders. I turned over the hard part to the young and strong." Rodrik chuckled ruefully. "It was a good idea in theory, but I can't keep anyone for long. It gets too lonely, or so I hear—"

"I'll take it."



As Rodrik had warned, there was training—quite a lot of it. The older man taught him how to “listen” to the mill to know when something was off and how to repair the intricate machinery. How to test the grind of the flour by the miller’s “rule of thumb”—its feel between thumb and forefinger—and how to inspect the grindstones themselves. How to milk the goat, saddle the horse, and make a snare to catch the fox if it bothered the chickens.

Anduin paid keen attention. The sooner Rodrik deemed his new hand ready, the sooner Anduin would have his privacy. He was silent except to ask or answer questions, but Rodrik didn't seem to mind. He chatted amiably, mostly about his family: his wife, Vera, who not only managed the bakery but was also the baker herself; their son, Ben, a decade younger than Anduin; and their daughter, Cynda.

"She's still a child yet, but smarter'n most adults I know. Gets that from her mother." And her father smiled, his eyes full of pride.

Anduin stayed silent. His own family had been nothing like Rodrik's. His mother had died shortly after he was born, lost to violence; his father had been hurting, distant, and for many years, gone. When Rodrik spoke of his service in the Fourth War, Anduin withdrew even further.



“There weren’t an awful lot of professional soldiers in Kul Tiras right before the war began,” Rodrik said as Anduin sifted various grinds of flour through his fingers. “The majority were drafted, and most from around here weren’t all that familiar with the weapons of war. We’re farmers, millers, beekeepers. You should have seen me the first time I held a sword!” He chuckled, then grew serious, his eyes somber. “I learned how to use it pretty well, though.”

Anduin’s breath caught and his heart hammered.

*Bodies, wrapped in white, laid out on the weathered boards of the harbor. A pitiful few soldiers in armor waiting to board . . . and Genn’s words: “That’s the last of the soldiers. We’ll be calling up farmers next.”*

“Jerek?”


“S-sorry,” Anduin stammered, staring at his hand, clenched tightly around a fistful of flour. He let it fall and, muttering an excuse, strode quickly out of the millhouse, his lungs suddenly tight and hungry for air.



Once his training was complete, Anduin’s days were filled with the simplicity of hoisting sacks and pouring grain into the hopper, bagging flour, maintaining the equipment, and tending the animals. Through every hour ran the rhythmic, soothing splash of the waterwheel.

The only thing on Rodrik’s list that Anduin had neglected to accomplish was the snare for the fox. Thus far, it had left the chickens alone, and Anduin disliked the idea of killing the creature at all, let alone for something it *might* do. He was also aware that he couldn’t keep an eye on the birds all the time, and foxes were sometimes active during daylight hours.

At first, Anduin had only heard its sharp yips and barks at twilight. Then, on the nights he stayed out to stargaze, Anduin often caught sight of a shadowy shape just beyond the ring of firelight and a pair of glowing eyes analyzing him with no hint of fear. One night, on impulse, Anduin sliced off a piece of meat from the roasting stick.



*Bodies, wrapped in white,  
laid out on the weathered boards  
of the harbor. A pitiful few soldiers  
in armor waiting to board . . . and  
Genn's words: "That's the last of  
the soldiers. We'll be calling  
up farmers next."*

“Hey. Fox,” he said, and tossed it to the creature. It danced out of the way, confused, but quickly realized its error. It gulped down the morsel, then darted off.

It returned the following night, though, sitting gracefully with its forepaws together and its bushy tail curled around them, as if it were properly introducing itself to him.

“I shouldn’t feed you, fox,” Anduin said. Its ears flicked as it listened. Strange, to hear his own voice. He had said as few words to Rodrik as possible and stayed silent otherwise.

A pink tongue crept out to lick a smudgy black muzzle.

*I really shouldn’t feed you,* Anduin thought, but he did, and wondered why.

His nightmares had eased, ever so slightly, with this regimen of physical labor, solitude, and simple tasks, but they had not disappeared. Nor had shame, or the gulf of regret and remorse. Often, he felt an invisible weight as heavy as the millstone, and equally capable of crushing him. No, it was best to just take things day by day, hour by hour. Task by task.

Keeping his hands busy.

Anduin looked forward to the nights when he was too tired to dream. The content of the dreams varied, but the one constant thread was violence. *His* violence. Anduin was as helpless in these dreams as he’d been when he’d performed the brutal acts. Sometimes the dreams took the form of flashbacks, paralyzing him in a dreadful state between past and present.

The dreams were terrifying when they devastated him and racked him with guilt.

They were worse when they didn’t.



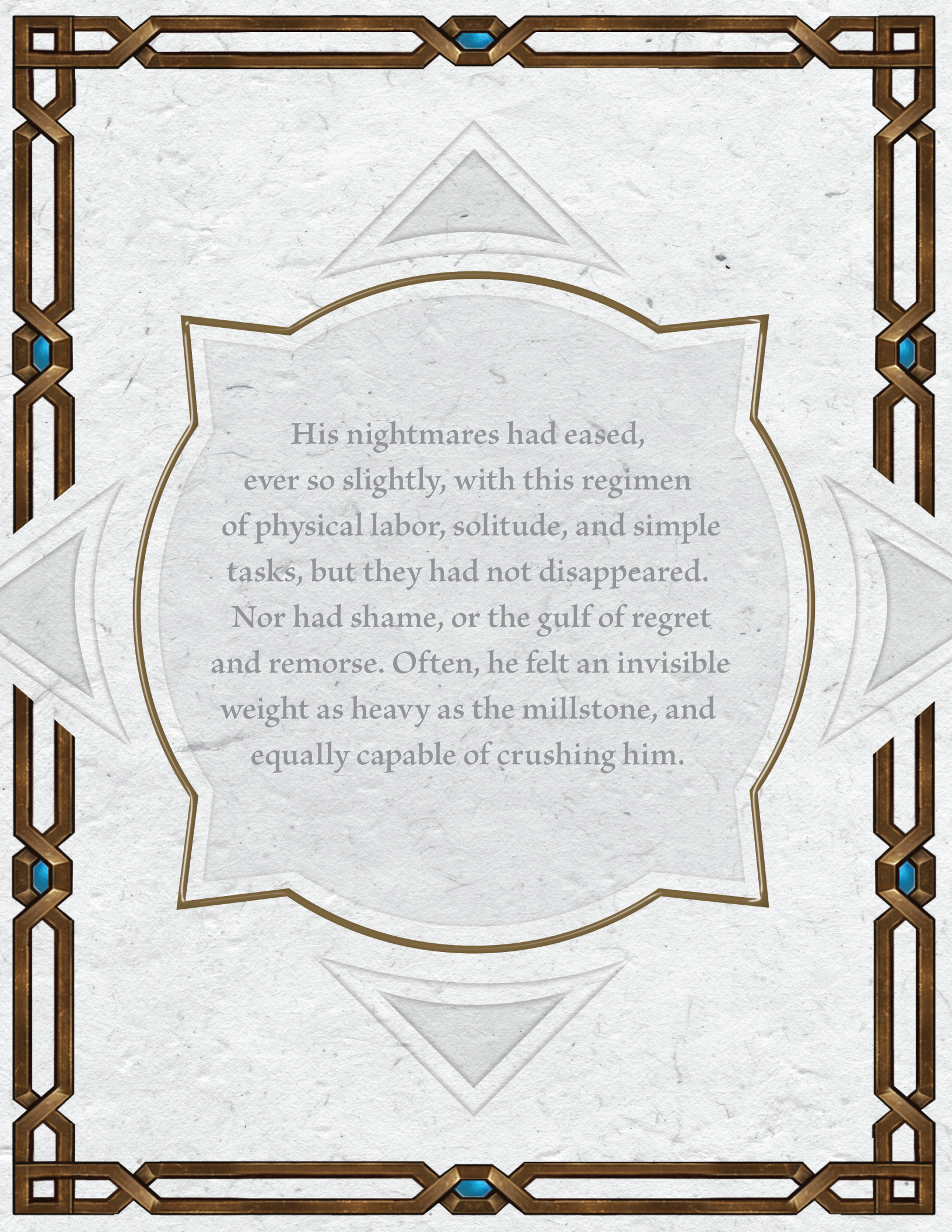
*Thunk.*

The axe bit deep into the wood, splitting it cleanly as Anduin’s body moved in a practiced rhythm. Strike. Reset. Strike. Reset. New log.

*Thunk.*

Strike.

*Small forms, gossamer wings, so fragile, the wide eyes, wider in terror—*

The page features a gold-colored border with a repeating geometric pattern of interlocking lines and small blue gemstones at the corners. In the center, there is a large, light-colored, irregularly shaped frame containing text. The text is written in a serif font and is centered within the frame. The background of the page is a light, textured paper.

His nightmares had eased,  
ever so slightly, with this regimen  
of physical labor, solitude, and simple  
tasks, but they had not disappeared.  
Nor had shame, or the gulf of regret  
and remorse. Often, he felt an invisible  
weight as heavy as the millstone, and  
equally capable of crushing him.

Reset.

*Think.*

*The sword, so like the one in his father's fist, but twisted, blasphemed, glowing not red, not golden, but blue—pretty, almost, wasn't it? Plunging in, the serrated blade piercing, then sawing as it was withdrawn, the wide eyes blank, and the scream, musical, abominable, the scream—*

Anduin staggered back, his throat raw, his mouth open and gasping for breath. The log at his feet was not simply split, but reduced to tiny slivers of kindling. His hand still gripped the handle, aching, the knuckles white, and he threw the axe as if it had burned him. It landed harmlessly in the dirt, but Anduin had not even looked before he had thrown it.

His legs felt weak, and he sank down, placing both trembling hands on the good, rich soil. He couldn't be trusted. He didn't even know when he was going to lose control.

The thoughts, like predators sensing weakness, pressed into his mind. *What if I call the Light and it doesn't answer?* He'd felt no brush, no hint of it. Even the ache in his Light-minded bones had vanished, and with it any hope of guidance.

*Which of us—the Jailer, the soul within the shard, me—felt that awful thrill of exhilaration?*

*What if I take a life and I feel pleasure?*

Anduin dug his fingers deeper into the loam, grounding himself in all ways, and took a few slow, deep breaths. These waking nightmares were rarer than the dreaming ones, fortunately; at night, there was less of a chance he'd hurt anyone. He'd been very lucky just now. He could have damaged a building, the livestock, or worse. Rodrik hadn't come by today. What if he had decided to show at that exact dizzying moment, had stolen upon Anduin in that quiet way of his?

Anduin got to his feet, drank deeply from the waterskin, and wiped his face, then glanced at the road and grimaced. As if on cue, Rodrik was approaching with Anduin's twice-weekly supplies. There was nothing unusual in that, but the sky was already turning lavender.

Anduin rinsed his hands and face and braced himself, hoping he didn't look too distraught. He'd do what he could to make this quick.

“You’re later than usual,” he said as he began to unload the wagon. “Won’t you be late for dinner?”

“Not tonight.” Rodrik shot him an impish smile, then carefully climbed out of the vehicle. “I hope you’re hungry. We, my young friend, are about to dine on Vera Feldon’s world-famous spring vegetable stew and berry pie.”

“No, no, that’s all right, I don’t need—”

Rodrik limped up to Anduin. “Everything came out of the oven less than an hour ago. You’re not going to make me go home and tell Vera I didn’t feed you, are you?”

There was, of course, no answer other than acquiescence. As Anduin put away the supplies, Rodrik started to light the fire in the little cottage.

“No,” Anduin said. He didn’t want to be in a small space right now. “Let’s eat outside.”

There was a brief pause, then Rodrik nodded, heading out to the fire pit instead. As Anduin emerged from the millhouse, Rodrik called out to him. “You’re going to need to set that snare.”

“It’s all right,” Anduin said. “He’s fine.” As if to confirm it, the fox yipped and trotted over to him. He wouldn’t let himself be petted yet, but ever since Anduin began feeding him in the mornings, the fox had taken to following him around during the day. “He catches rats in the millhouse and leaves the chickens alone.”

“So far,” Rodrik muttered. “Does he have a name?”

“No.”

Names had significance. They implied affection, connection. Anduin would not give one to the fox.

The miller placed a small cauldron over the fire and unwrapped the bread and cheese. And, as Anduin had expected, began to talk. First about the bread—it was different, with herbs. Vera was experimenting as the Harvest Festival was coming up in a couple of weeks.

Normal chitchat from Rodrik, yes, but Anduin realized there was something . . . *off* about him tonight. His amiable manner seemed forced. Both men were silent as they ate, but as Anduin ladled another serving, Rodrik asked a question that was both innocent and agonizing.

“Were you . . . in the war?”

Anduin froze and swallowed hard. Oh yes, he had been in the war. In many ways, Anduin felt he had *been* the war. He couldn’t speak, but nodded.

“I’m not saying it wasn’t worth it, to fight. But even a war worth fighting takes its tolls. Some you don’t even know you’ve paid until afterward. And some you just keep paying.”

Anduin stared at the bowl cooling in his lap. He’d been hungry a moment ago, but now the food sat rock-heavy in his stomach. A cold sweat began to grip him.

“Things that you think shouldn’t bother you . . . do. Like a fire outside. There was a time when I couldn’t even sit here like I’m doing now. Still don’t like it much, but it’s better.” He took a breath, held it, then blew it out slowly. “Breathing like that helps. So does moving your body.”

*His body, moving without his will.* Anduin took a deep breath.

“We were ambushed at our campfire. Three of my friends just suddenly sprouted arrows. Fighting in the dark, trolls so much bigger than we were. Anyone who tried to stand against that—” Rodrik paused. His face seemed pale, even in the fire’s glow, and he was trembling. “We ran. We had to. I *know* I had to. But I shouldn’t have left the others behind. I . . . dream about it sometimes.”


*Kingsmourne, glowing icy blue, merciful oblivion ripped away so Anduin could see, understand—his own hand on the hilt, his own blow pulling forth the sigil—*

“Took me a long time to even tell Vera—”

Anduin sprang up, the bowl falling from his lap. “You better get back, it’s late,” he said, his voice broken. He turned and strode off, breaking into a run as he went, just like the fox who followed him. Running from Rodrik’s pain and truth—and his own.



“The Harvest Festival is tomorrow,” Rodrik said two weeks later, after Anduin had finished loading the cart with several bags of flour. “Vera makes a special dessert for it. Served hot right out of the oil and covered with sugar.”



“I’m not saying  
it wasn’t worth it, to fight.  
But even a war worth fighting  
takes its tolls. Some you don’t  
even know you’ve paid until  
afterward. And some you  
just keep paying.”



Anduin knew the treat. Suddenly, he could smell the oil, the sugar, and his mouth watered.

*Varian, king, father, his large, strong hands covered with the sweet powder. "You can lick your fingers here, son. Manners are for formal dinners, not festivals." The taste hitting his tongue, the sound of laughter and music—*

Rodrik must have seen him flinch. "No need to come, of course, but you'd be welcome."

"We'll see," Anduin managed. They both knew what that meant.

The wagon was ready to go, but Rodrik, in the front seat, did not slap the reins to signal the horse to depart. Anduin tensed.

"Jerek . . . about our last conversation . . ."

Shame washed through Anduin. "I'm sorry, I—"

"No, no, *I'm* sorry. That was my error."

Confused, Anduin stayed silent. Rodrik shook his balding head sadly. "I see me in you, Jerek. In those times when you get angry or can't breathe or just plain want me gone. I recognize it when you shake and sweat and seem to see things I can't. I wanted you to know I don't judge anybody for what war, or anything else, might have done to them, so I told you my story. Some of it, at any rate. And it made you think of your own at a moment when you weren't expecting to."

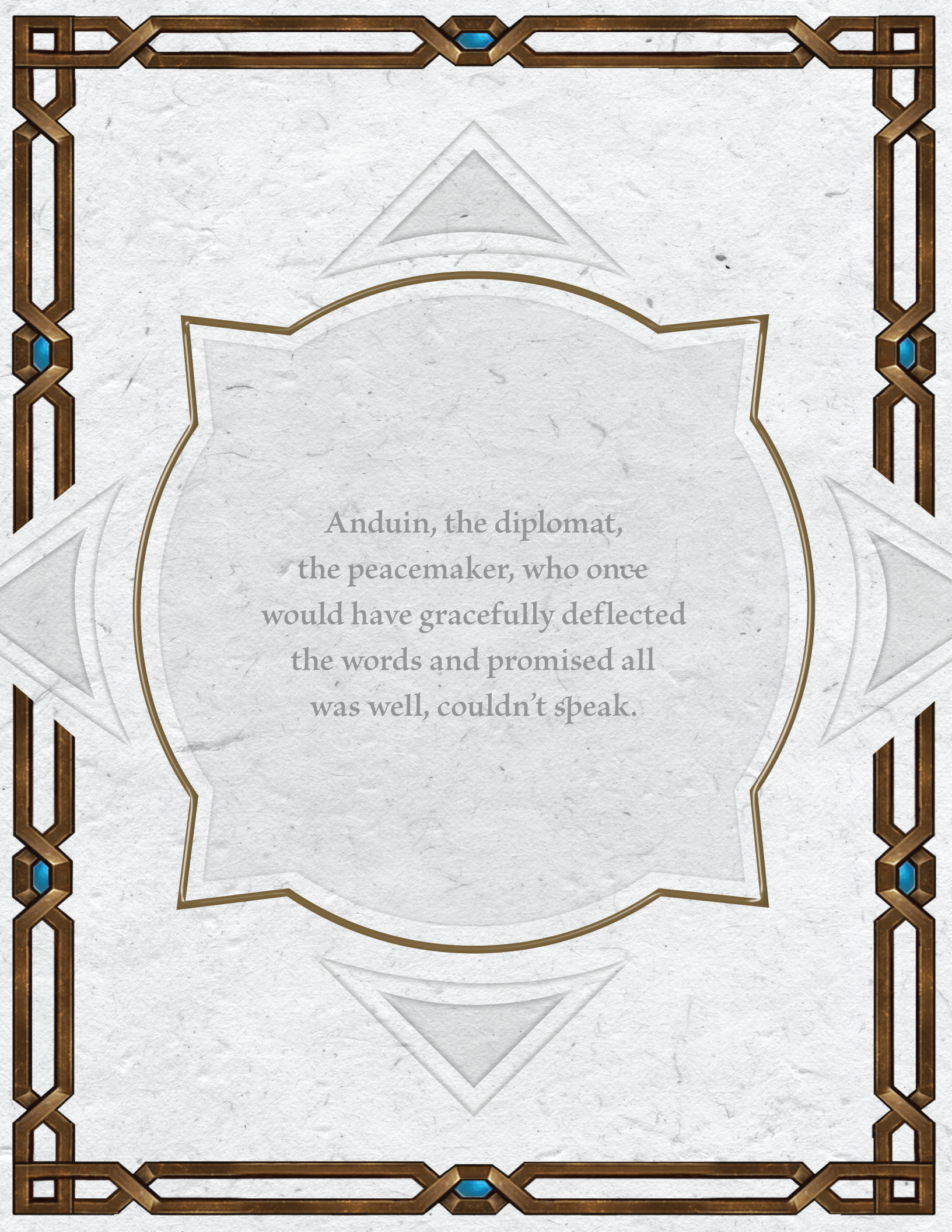
Anduin, the diplomat, the peacemaker, who once would have gracefully deflected the words and promised all was well, couldn't speak.

Rodrik held out a folded piece of parchment. "I wrote down some thoughts about my own experience. Some things I've learned that might help you. You don't have to read it, and you don't have to say a word. But if you do—you know I'm here."

Anduin swallowed. He stepped forward, alert and cautious, just like the fox had been at first. The parchment crackled slightly as he took it.

Rodrik visibly relaxed and gave him one of his easy smiles. "I'll make sure Vera saves some pastries for you," he said, and clicked his tongue. The horse blew, tossed her mane, and began to trot down the road.

Anduin looked at the letter, put it in his pocket unread, and lifted a sack of grain.



Anduin, the diplomat,  
the peacemaker, who once  
would have gracefully deflected  
the words and promised all  
was well, couldn't speak.



The following day was perfect for an autumn harvest festival, crisp and bright, the sun's warmth staving off the slight chill that heralded the winter to come. Anduin spent most of the morning inside the millhouse, tinkering with the gears. He finally finished and stepped outside.

Black smoke roiled in the distance as lighter smoke stained the sky. The festival. Rodrik. A deep instinct—the need to help—drove Anduin's next movements, and before he quite realized what he was doing, he had leaped atop the startled wagon horse and was urging her on to top speed.

Toward his friend—and his family. Anduin had steeled himself for a scene of chaos. Rodrik had mentioned hot oil—there must have been an accident, a fire spreading from a makeshift hearth. Anduin could, and *would*, help.

It was nothing so innocuous.

An utter inferno raged. Through gaps in the smoke, Anduin saw that some festival structures were already consumed and others were fiery skeletons on the verge of collapse. Even the banners were ablaze, and Anduin stared, frozen, almost hypnotized, watching a flag of House Stormstrong curl and twist, blackening as flames licked it.

Shapes on the ground—bodies, Anduin realized. One just there, burned, charred, meat left too long on a spit. Screams on his left as two shapes, a blanket draped over them, emerged from the black smoke.

*Waiting, watching, safe in Stormwind, while a World Tree burned and too many tried to flee through too few portals—*

Anduin, startled, cried out just as his terrified horse reared and threw him. His head struck something hard. Everything went white for a moment, then dissolved into flashes of light, like stars. Anduin tried to rise, but the world was spinning. He couldn't see the two figures anymore, but a third stumbled out of the enveloping smoke. Anduin thought he saw someone behind her, quickly glimpsed and quickly gone. Perhaps not even there. The woman clutched an infant, shielding it as best she could—

*The child, borne by a queen, brought to a priestess, the last survivor—*

The woman dropped like a stone. The baby cried, coughing. More shouting. Laughter. Screaming.

Pain thundered in his skull. Anduin clapped his hands to his ears, the gesture slicking his fingers with blood. He looked around wildly, trying and failing to focus, the coughing that racked his body only increasing the agony, the stench of blood and the cacophony of slaughter making his heart slam against his chest.

The stars started to fade, and Anduin now glimpsed wagons filled with food and supplies waiting out of the reach of the greedy flames. The drivers finally allowed the maddened horses a chance to run, and the wagons careened off. A few of the raiders lingered, barely visible through the smoke, wanting more sport, and then—

*Rodrik.*

Anduin shook violently. His limbs struggled to obey him, and his head threatened unconsciousness as he tried to rise. So he crawled, keeping his face close to the ground, trying to breathe. Everything in him shouted, *Run! Run!*

But he clenched his teeth against another scream and willed himself to keep going.

Impossibly, more folk emerged from the fire. Some stumbled, as if someone had pushed them from behind. How were they still alive? Soot, smoke, and tears stung Anduin's eyes and he was glad of it, glad of the pain, the blurring, so he could not see what horrors the fire had wrought upon the figures.

The baby was still crying, coughing, and a someone swooped down to pick it up and flee. Another figure emerged from the billowing black cloud, burned, but not as badly as others. Something about how it—how *he*—moved the right leg . . .

“Rodrik!” Anduin tried to shout, but all that came out was a ragged sound.

*I'm not too late. I can help him. I—*

Rodrik crumpled to the ground.

Anduin had no memory of how he crossed the distance between him and his fallen friend. The next thing he knew, he was kneeling beside the miller, staring at the blackened flesh, the blue eyes in the sooty face, the well of blood pumping up between his own fingers as he pressed to stanch the flood, to call—

He gasped, pulled his hands back, his body shaking. He couldn't help Rodrik. Not now.

*Anduin, do something. Do something—*

"I can't," he rasped, over and over, his voice a sob. He reached out again, to lay his hands on the wound, to form the prayer—

*It won't come. Not to me. Not anymore.*

Again, he snatched his useless hands back, curling them into fists and pounding them on his thighs with all the force of his rage and helplessness and loathing. "I'm sorry . . . I'm so sorry . . ."

A whisper. "It's all right . . ."

Anduin shook his head. Rodrik's hand twitched and Anduin took it, his heart tearing itself apart as Rodrik cried out at the touch. The dying man gripped all the harder. "Family . . . in town—" A violent bout of coughing threatened to tear him apart as blood and specks of ash burst from his mouth. It took the last of his energy, but even so, Rodrik fought to speak. Anduin stilled him, able to at least grant him peace here, at the end.

"I will take care of them," Anduin said. "I will, I promise . . ."

Rodrik heard him. His taut, tormented body eased. He closed his eyes and was gone.

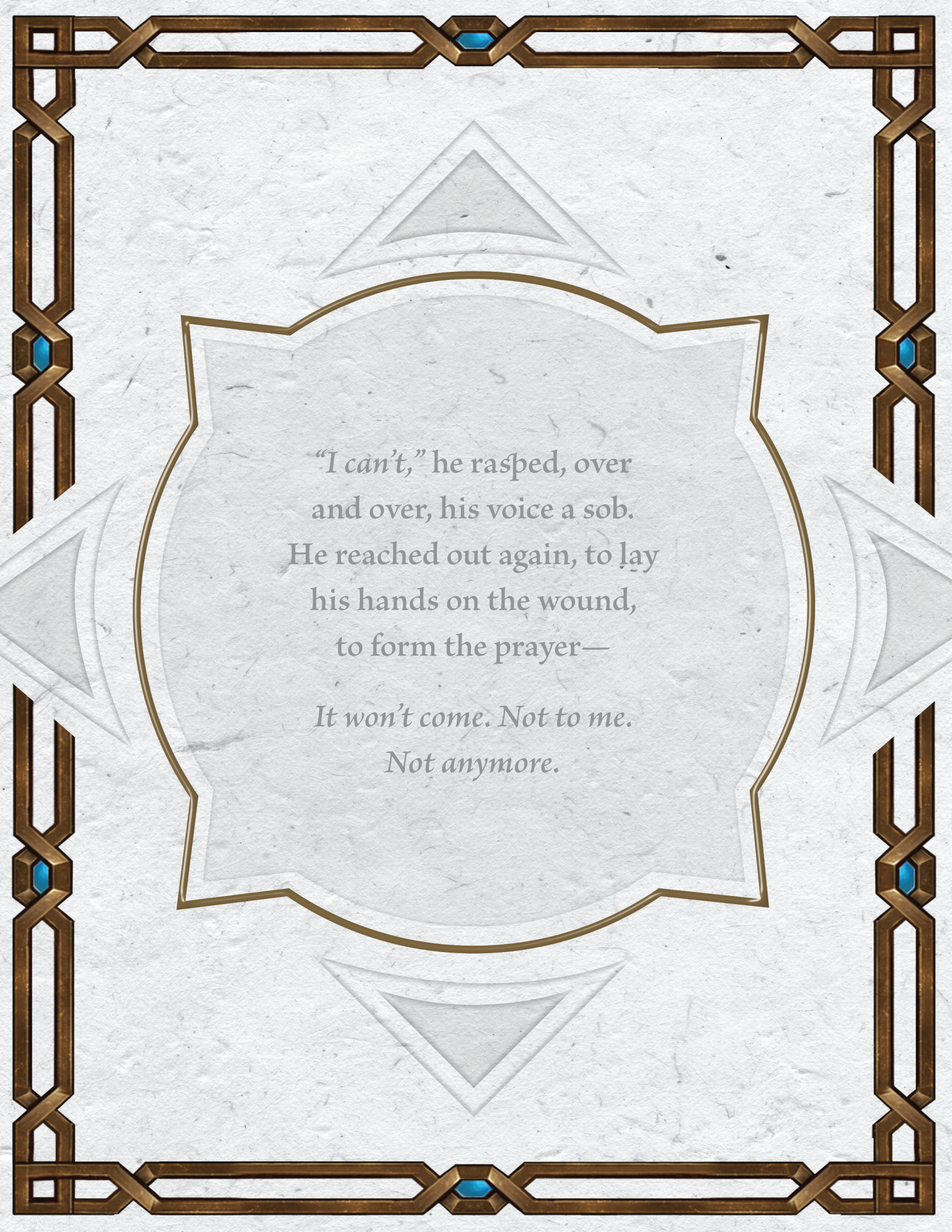


Ben Feldon had his father's eyes. Also, his father's old war pistol, which was now aimed at the stranger who stood at the doorstep.

Anduin, hands raised, was acutely aware of the picture he presented: his clothing filthy with ashes and wet with blood. Rodrik's blood. Rodrik, whom he had wrapped in a singed blanket and placed down so gently before knocking on the Feldons' door.

"My name is Jerek. From the mill."

Fortunately, Ben recognized the name and lowered the pistol. He too bore signs of the fire, a minor burn on one arm and a singed shirt. They must have escaped, while Rodrik had remained behind.



*“I can’t,” he rasped, over  
and over, his voice a sob.  
He reached out again, to lay  
his hands on the wound,  
to form the prayer—*

*It won’t come. Not to me.  
Not anymore.*

“Roddy?”

A woman rushed up, looking past him, hoping against hope to see a beloved face. *Vera*. Her black hair was turning gray, but Anduin observed that her face was remarkably unlined . . . until her gaze fell on her husband’s body. Realization spread over her face, the pain aging her, dimming her light as she sank down beside the corpse, placed a hand on the still form, and bowed her head.

For a moment, Anduin thought he couldn’t keep the wall up. But he knew that if it came down, something inside him would collapse like the burning structures at the festival, in flames and beyond repair.

“Thank you, child.” Vera’s voice shook, but it was kind. “Bless you for bringing him. He . . . did promise he’d come home.”

“*Why didn’t he let me go with him?*” Ben’s voice was full of pain and anger.

“He wanted us to be safe.”

“We could have *all* been safe, but he just *had* to—” Ben’s face crumpled and he turned away.

Rodrik, the soldier, who had been ambushed at a campfire. Who, this time, had decided he couldn’t leave anyone behind.

Anduin heard the urgent thump of small running feet, and a little girl appeared at the door. Her hair was braided with now-drooping peacebloom flowers, her soot-smudged face clean only where her tears had run.

“Daddy?”

“Oh, Cynda, honey, no . . .”

*I failed you. All of you.*

The wall inside Anduin trembled.



Rodrik had wished to be buried near the cliff where he and Vera had pledged themselves to each other years ago, when they were only a little older than Ben.

Anduin dug the grave himself; there was no need to trouble anyone else, and he wanted to do it.

As he worked, he thought of his belongings, far below the six feet of earth he would move. He would never know if the Light would have saved Rodrik and had to live with the knowledge that he had been too afraid to ask. Anything he could do, large or small, to help the bereaved family, he would, except for one thing: he would not attend the funeral. He could not bear to be near anyone wielding the Light. Not now. Perhaps not ever.

That day, he walked. The fox followed, Anduin's little shadow. He didn't return until twilight, to make sure everyone was long gone. To his surprise, there was a box at the cottage door. A small slip of parchment read: *For you, Jerek. Thank you.* The box was full of bread, cheese, vegetables, and some meat wrapped in waxed fabric—even scraps for the fox.

He picked up a piece. "Hey. Fox," he said, and fed him the morsel.

The note reminded Anduin of the one Rodrik had left him, forgotten until this moment. He retrieved it and looked at it for a moment.

*Jerek:*

*We've both known war. It does things to you. You've got a right to whatever you feel. Mad, sad, scared . . . I've felt all that and then some.*

*I know you better than you might think. It's clear how much you care about doing a good job with the mill. I see your patience and good character in how you treat that fox. A man who'll take time to be kind to animals, especially after what I think you've been through, is rare. And his heart's still good, whatever he thinks.*

*It helped me to talk with Vera, and it was my hope you'd talk to me. If not, I hope someday you do find someone you trust. Because if you keep a lid on a boiling pot, someone's going to get hurt, and it might not be you.*



*I guess I'll close with this: Sometimes we have to do terrible things. And sometimes terrible things are done to us. Neither makes us bad people, but we can't run forever. If you can't believe in your own worth right this moment, find someone who does. They'll hold that knowledge safe for you till you're ready to see it too.*

*And when the darkness grabs you and you feel like you'll never, ever be free of it, know you have a chance and a choice every single day to look it in the eye and call it a liar. Some days, you can't make that choice. But another day, maybe you can.*

*Eat Vera's good food. Swim in the sea and sleep and work. Do a little good when you can, how you can, for who you can. And come have dinner with us one of these days.*

—R



Ben wanted to take over his father's task of bringing grain to the mill, but Anduin would not let him. Instead, he came into town himself for supplies. It was the least he could do for them. For Rodrik.

On this first trip, Vera insisted he come into the bakery for tea and small pastries. She wanted him to understand what had happened. Word of the area's bounty had reached the ears of some raiders, she said.

"Rats on ships. I tell you, Jerek, there's no monster in the ocean's deep crueler than the ones that sail its surface. Roddy brought us home in the wagon, then went back to save as many others as he could. Said he wasn't going to run this time." She bit her lip. "If . . . if we did have to lose him, I hope he was able to . . . before—"

“He was,” Anduin said quietly. “He did.”

He saw her brow relax, only a little, and knew the words had given her a little bit of peace.

Over time, a new rhythm and routine took form. Anduin still worked the mill, but at dusk, more often than not, he would sit beside his friend’s grave. The fox accompanied him, nestling against him. Sometimes Anduin would speak, as if Rodrik were still there, listening. Quiet confessions, questions that Rodrik would never answer; other times, angry outbursts. Or he’d reread the letter and remember to breathe.

On his visits to town, Anduin would occasionally help Ben with paperwork or loading and unloading the wagons. Now and then, Vera asked for assistance kneading the dough. After a while, Anduin realized she’d sneakily taught him how to bake. She and Ben wanted to talk about Rodrik, which Anduin resisted at first. But over time he realized . . . he *wanted* to hear those stories. They were little ones, mostly—a brilliant quip at the right time, patience with a child’s rebelliousness, a Halloween costume gone awry. Only Cynda seemed disinclined to talk about her father. Vera confided to Anduin that she was glad that Cynda had been so young when it happened. “Less to miss,” Vera said with a sad smile.

But Anduin had often visited Stormwind City’s orphanage. He had spent time with refugees who had fled to his city after their home had burned. Intimately familiar with the strange ways of grief and guilt, he wasn’t so sure about Vera’s statement. He wanted to believe she was right, but that fragile hope was dashed one deceptively calm morning, along with a teapot Cynda grabbed and hurled to the stone floor.

“Cynda!” Vera shouted. “That was a wedding gift from your father!”

“*I know!*” Cynda shrieked back. “He’s not here to care about it, so why should you? *He* didn’t care about *us!*” She seized one of the matching teacups and hurled it to the floor as well, deftly eluding her mother’s grasp and racing outside.

“Cynda!” Vera cried, starting after her.

“Let her go,” Anduin said, and Vera turned, looking at him sharply. “I know what she said is hurtful, but . . . let her feel what she needs to.”

Vera softened.

Surprising himself and her both, Anduin continued. “My mother died when I was a baby. And . . . my father . . .” His throat was tight, but something inside him pushed to keep going.

“Something happened to him, and he left when I was around Cynda’s age. He came back. Things were better, but . . . it’s hard to understand complicated situations when you’re so young. She’ll come back, and she’ll talk to you when she can. She knows you—” *love her* was what he wanted to say, but couldn’t.

Vera’s sweet smile returned. “You’re right. Hard to remember to breathe when you’re in the thick of it. You’re a good man, Jerek. Roddy was right about you. You’re welcome here anytime.”

He stammered his thanks and departed.

On his next visit, he brought the fox with him. The animal was skittish, but Anduin knew a way around it. Plucking a berry from a bowl on the table, he said, “Hey. Fox.” That got Anduin’s attention, and the berry rapidly vanished into the fox’s mouth.

“I like berries too,” Cynda said, delighted, and quickly emulated both the fox and Anduin, popping some berries into her mouth while offering a handful to the appreciative creature.

“No berry pie today, I guess, but it’s worth it to see her smile,” Vera said, smiling herself. “Come sit with me for a moment, Jerek. Tell me what you think of this. It’s got honey and flowers in it.”

The little roll looked small in his large palm. It smelled wonderful, and for the first time in a while, Anduin felt real pleasure at the flavor. He finished it in two bites. Vera’s eyes crinkled, and she handed him another one.

“He likes you,” Anduin said to Cynda. The fox was presenting his white belly for the girl to rub. When she did, the fox squirmed with delight, emitting a high-pitched, squeaky cackle.

“He’s laughing!” Cynda said, laughing along with him. Still grinning, she looked up at Anduin, and her smile turned a bit sad.

“Mama told me about your mama and papa. I’m sorry.”

Surprised, Anduin looked over at Vera.

“It helped,” Vera said. “For her to hear that.”

“I miss Papa a lot,” Cynda said. She was still petting the fox. “Mama says that won’t go away, but it’ll get easier. And we have each other.” She looked at Anduin, sad, but smiling. “Don’t we?”

Anduin was about to reply when he realized that she was including him.

*Oh no, little one. No, I don’t. One day, I’ll let you down too, just as I have everyone else.*



Time passed. Anduin worked, keeping his hands busy. The nightmares dwindled further, becoming rare. The anxiety that sometimes descended out of nowhere eased its grip on his soul. And the flashbacks, those shattering, raw moments of hellish memories seeming far too real, all but ceased.

In the end, as a part of him had always known would happen, it did not last.

*They would die at his hands. His friends. Those who believed in him, who were trying to save him. He’d failed them.*

*The smoke, the infant crying, calling for help as best it could—*

Anduin bolted up. The crying was coming from the fox, who whimpered and pawed at him. His ears were flat against his head.

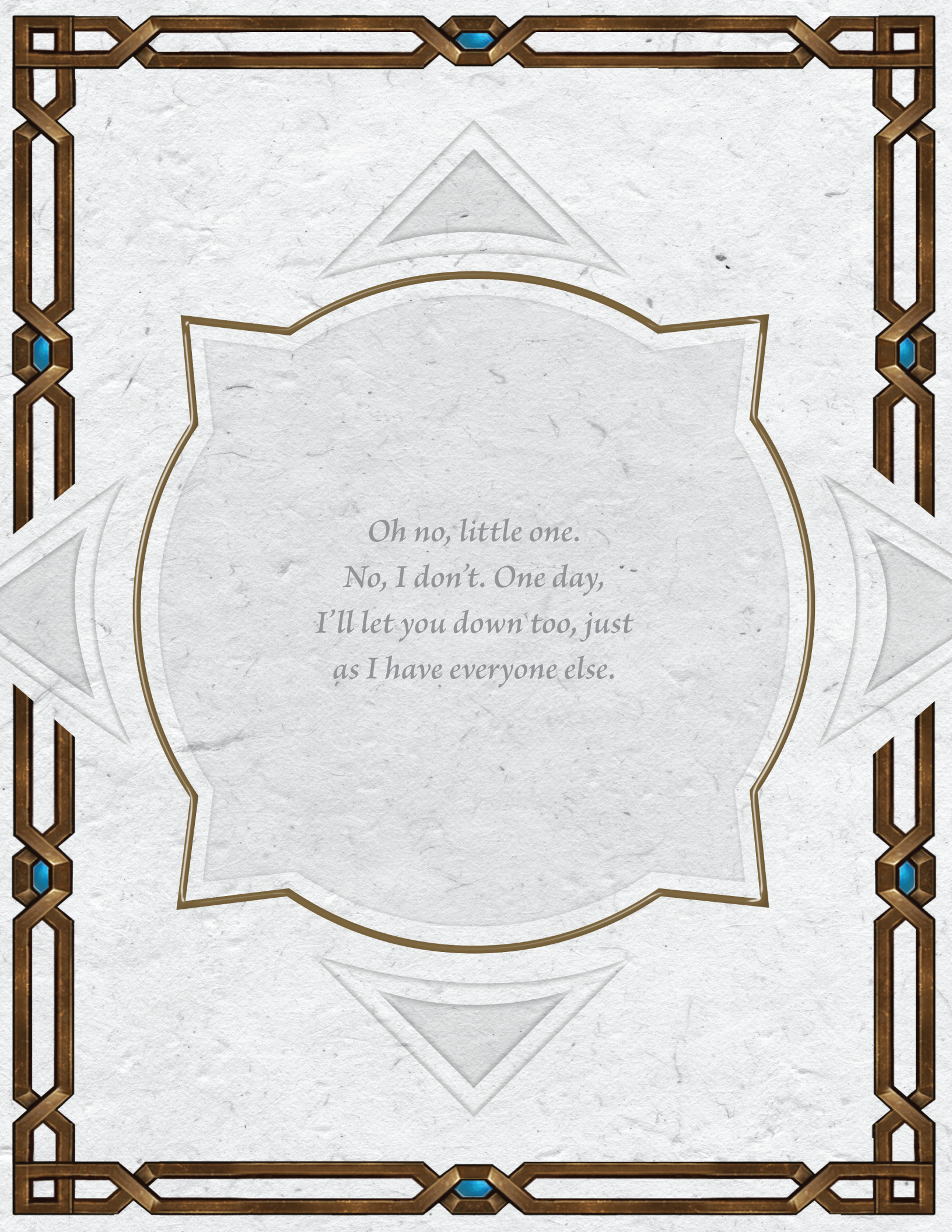
Something was very wrong. Anduin shook off the dream almost physically, stroking the animal to reassure him as he got to his feet and looked out the window.

In the south, a thin gray pillar stretched upward.

Smoke.

“No,” Anduin whispered. His legs trembled.

He couldn’t do fail them. Not again. He couldn’t bear it. And yet still his legs were moving, dreading every twitch of muscle. Racing now to the wagon horse, racing now to the bundle he’d buried. Even as he couldn’t unwrap the sword for fear of gripping its hilt. What if he couldn’t stop? What if he took too much pleasure in hefting it once more? There was no way to be safe, to ensure he stayed in control.



*Oh no, little one.  
No, I don't. One day,  
I'll let you down too, just  
as I have everyone else.*

And still he rode for the village. For Vera and Ben and little Cynda and the promise he'd made to a man who understood him, who trusted him, when he had no reason to. When he couldn't know what Anduin had done, how he'd so deeply betrayed his every charge and duty.

At the festival, the smoke had been black and oily and the buildings all but gone by the time Anduin had arrived. This time, everything was different.

Only a few structures were burning, and the raiders were clearly only beginning their assault. The cacophony was the same, though: Laughter. Screams. Violence.

Anduin clenched his teeth, blocking the rush of fear as if with a shield. He slipped easily off the horse and sent it to safety. His right hand clenched tightly, his left coming to join it as, for the first time since he had left the realms of Death, Anduin Llane Wrynn lifted high his father's sword.

Shalamayne.

So much more than a simple weapon, gloriously crafted, each part of it in harmony despite its origin as two individually powerful blades. Anduin stepped forward, grim-faced, devoid of armor but hoisting this sword out of legend. This sword whose purpose he had so utterly failed, which he now lifted in hope of redemption.

One of the pirates turned and paled. His eyes grew enormous—

*The wide eyes, wider in terror—*

For a terrible instant, Anduin froze. He couldn't breathe.

The brigand started to smile, lifting a cutlass.

Shalamayne came down in a deceptively graceful arc, mortally wounding the man.

Its perfect balance made its wielding easy, almost effortless. There was little it would not cut through and few foes it could not fell. The brutality of it stole his breath, but then muscle memory took over. Anduin struck again and again, Shalamayne almost singing in his hands, as if it rejoiced in being used once more at the defense of innocents. He and the sword, for this moment, were one.

Blood splattered on his face, warm and wet; it stung his eyes, seeped into his mouth. He wiped his lips and pressed on. Another fell, and another. He ceased to count, and

time ceased to matter. He moved as if in a dance, without thinking, feeling only the power of his arm and hearing only the song of the sword. Anduin lunged, burying Shalamayne almost to its hilt, then yanked it free only to parry blows again and again.

The enemy was on the ground, but Anduin continued to fight. The sword lifted and descended—

A muffled voice tried to cut through the chaos. A word. Nonsense and nothing to him now, in this scarlet span of time.

A name. Not his, no . . . but he knew it . . .

“Jerek! *Jerek!*”

Anduin shouted incoherently, lifting Shalamayne to strike—

Cynda stood, staring up at him, her mouth open in a look of shock. But she was not afraid of him. Unthinkably, foolishly, *she was not afraid*, and she squeezed his arm, saying things he could not understand but were gentle and comforting.

*Anduin . . .*

The call was quiet, but this voice was not that of the child before him. It slammed into his being, shattering his thoughts into a kaleidoscope of agony and brilliant colors. It was a song with words he understood yet did not recognize, which vibrated along every nerve of his body. And the singer, the speaker, knew his true name.

*Anduin*, it whispered, the softness laced with pain. An image filled his mind: what seemed to be a sun, white-hot at its heart, with hues of yellow and magenta flickering along the edges.

*Anduin*. So beautiful, this voice, this vision, but he understood that what he beheld was in danger. That at some point—perhaps soon—it might explode.

It was calling him away. He was needed.

*No*, he pleaded, to who or what he did not know. *I’m needed here. Please.*

*Anduin . . .* came the implacable reply, and he could feel the voice’s sorrow and torment.

The touch on his arm galvanized him, and he started, blinking, the vision retreating. Cynda was still there, her expression one of concern. “Are you all right, Jerek?”

Anduin looked at the bodies littered around him. At Vera and Ben, who huddled

together, looking at him with sympathy and gratitude, at the shocked faces of the townsfolk. There was no more screaming or shouting. Anduin had brought silence. How many had he killed, without even—?

He stared at Shalamayne, seeing it as if for the first time.

There was no light moving in the blade's curve.

No gold, but at least, blessedly, no icy blue.

The sword clattered to the street as Anduin dropped to his knees, gasping, staring at Cynda. "Why did you come to me? I . . . I could have *killed* you."

She smiled a little. "Because I knew you wouldn't."

Anduin's eyes filled with tears.



"I wish I could stay," Anduin said to Rodrik, to the wind, to himself.

He had cleaned the blood off Shalamayne, then retrieved pieces of his old armor from the cave where they had lain undisturbed for what felt like a lifetime. He had tidied the cottage, fed the goats and chickens, and organized the sacks of grain. Now he sat beside his friend's grave, clad in armor, with Shalamayne on his right and the fox, eyes closed as Anduin scratched his ears, on his left.

"But I know you would understand. Thank you. For everything you've taught me."

He gripped Rodrik's letter, then tucked it into his pocket.

Suddenly, the fox sat up, alert, and gazed toward the road before running toward it. Anduin thought he had made his goodbyes to the Feldons after Cynda, in her innocent faith, had broken the spell that violence had held on him. For the moment. But he was not altogether surprised to see Rodrik's wagon coming up the road with all three Feldons on it.

"You're a fool if you think we're letting you go without proper food and supplies," Vera said as Ben brought the wagon to a halt.

Anduin stood. "I thank you, but I'll be traveling light."

"My pastries are light," Vera countered.



Anduin could not disagree.

“Jerek,” Ben said, “that sword . . .”

“Plenty of wandering adventurers fight with swords, Ben,” Vera said swiftly. “You know how your father hated anyone prying.”

“It’s all right, Ben.” And, oddly, it was. It didn’t matter now if someone recognized him, or Shalamayne.

“Can’t you stay, Jerek?” Cynda asked, racing to him. When he shook his head, she said, “Will you ever come back?”

“I cannot stay,” he said. He knew nothing about what awaited him—who or what was calling to him or what it wanted. Only that it was in pain and needed help, and so he would go. “I—” His voice cracked as he spoke. The next thing he knew, Cynda had thrown herself at him, hugging him tight. Anduin froze, then, gently, awkwardly, patted her on the back.

“Let the poor boy go, Cynda,” Vera said. The girl did so, reluctantly. Vera handed him a bag heavy with food, water, potions, and other supplies. Anduin accepted it with a nod, then picked up Shalamayne wrapped in his cloak.

“I don’t know what you’re going toward, but I wish you safety and joy, if you can find it.”

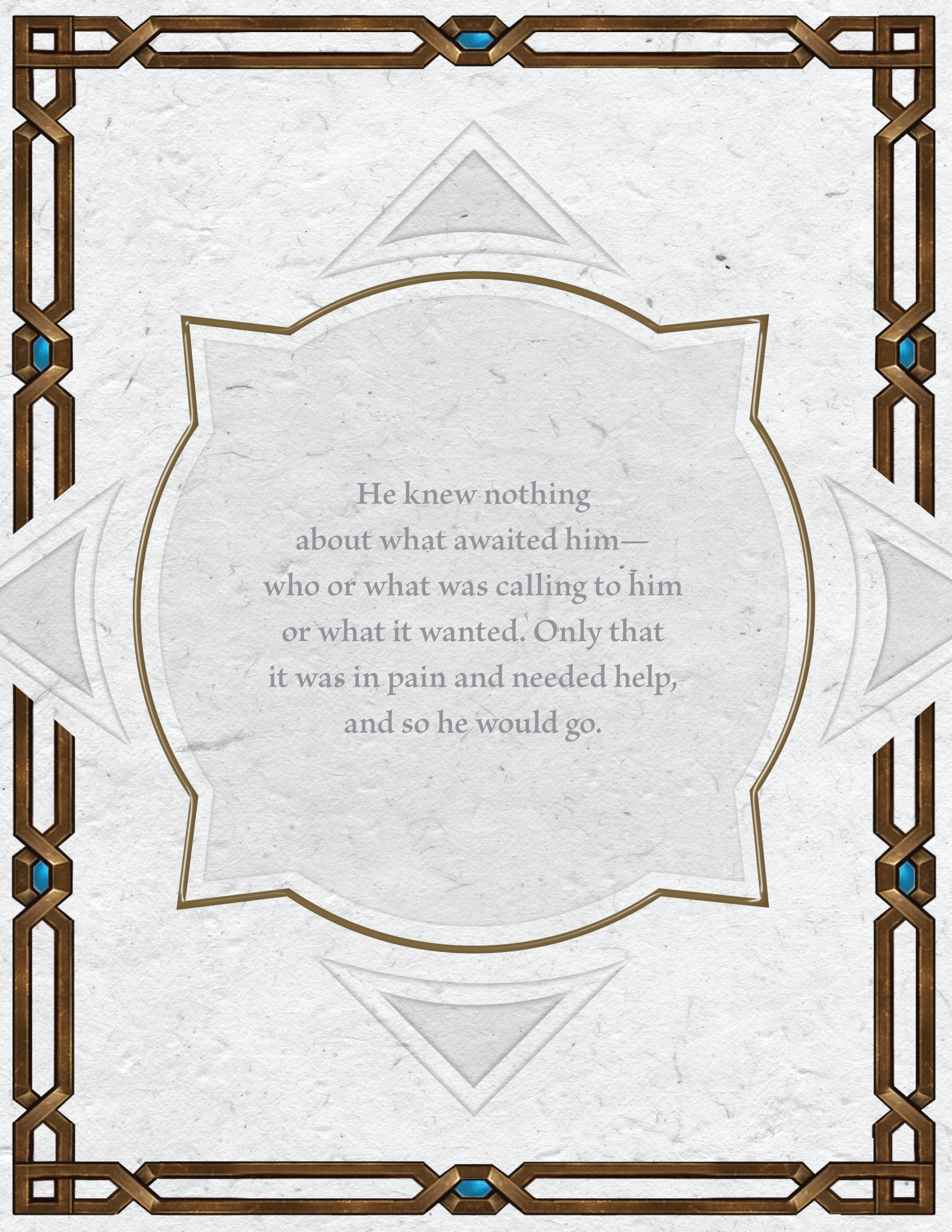
He couldn’t speak, just nodded, then quickly turned, knowing that if he lingered but a moment longer, he might not be able to leave at all. He had scarcely gone three steps when a red blur sped toward him and nearly knocked him down.

Anduin broke.

He knelt and pulled Fox—“*Fox*,” not the fox or a fox, not anymore; of course he’d gone and named him and been too foolish to see it—into his arms. Fox licked the tears from his face as Anduin held him tightly. Where he was going, Fox must not follow. To endure whatever awaited him, Anduin needed to know that this family, Fox among them, was safe and at peace. And so he picked him up and bore him to Cynda, placing him in the girl’s arms.

“Hold Fox tight,” Anduin told her. “Don’t let him follow me. He’s yours now.”

Cynda’s eyes filled with tears, and she nodded, clutching the squirming creature who cried piteously, marking the girl’s bare arms with welts from his claws.

The page features a complex, ornate border made of interlocking gold lines. At the center of the page is a large, irregular gold frame that resembles a stylized shield or a piece of parchment. Inside this central frame, the text is written in a simple, dark grey font. The background of the page is a light, textured grey color. The overall design is symmetrical and has a classic, elegant feel.

He knew nothing  
about what awaited him—  
who or what was calling to him  
or what it wanted. Only that  
it was in pain and needed help,  
and so he would go.

Alone, Anduin faced the road. His feet were heavy, but he wasn't running anymore. He was being called—away from people he cared for, yes, but toward something that needed his help. He still didn't trust himself, but the people he cared for did. He would let that be enough, while he struggled to find peace with his past.

In the meantime, he would follow that call, whatever—whoever—was waiting for him.

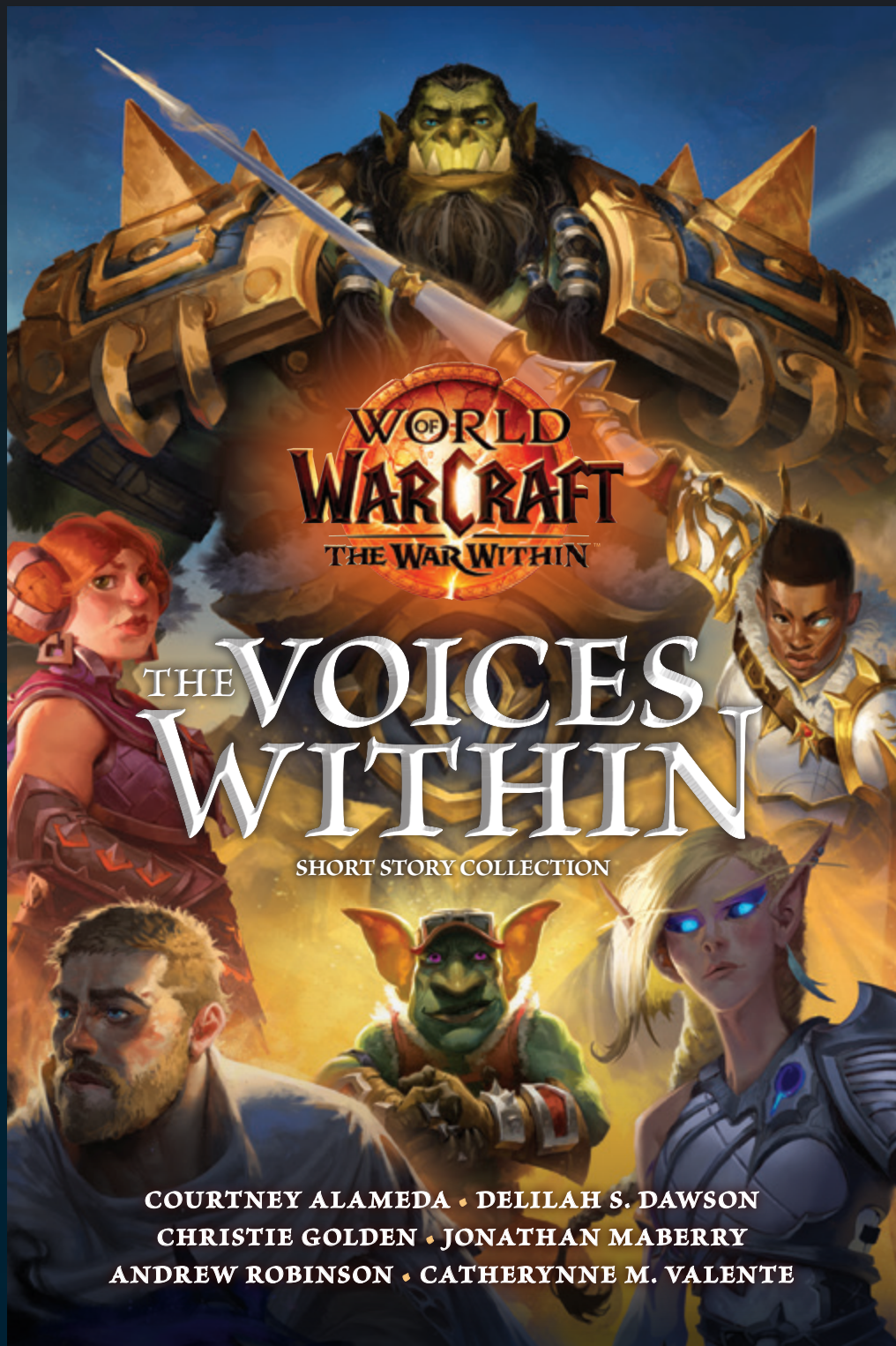


## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**CHRISTIE GOLDEN**, award-winning *New York Times* bestselling author, has worked with Blizzard Entertainment for nearly a quarter of a century. She's written more than sixty books, including *Arthas: Rise of the Lich King* and *Sylvanas*. Audiobook fans can hear Christie narrate some of her Blizzard titles on Audible. During her years as a formal employee, Golden authored *World of Warcraft* cinematics and cutscenes, *Hearthstone* song lyrics, as well as short stories and other projects for *Overwatch* and *Diablo*.

A VOICE IS CALLING FROM DEEP WITHIN THE WORLD . . .

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