

The cover art depicts a dramatic scene in the Heartlands. In the center, a woman in a white and blue robe, likely a priestess, stands holding a glowing blue staff. She is surrounded by soldiers in blue and gold armor. In the background, a large, menacing green dragon-like creature looms over a group of soldiers. The sky is dark with a full moon and a bright light source, possibly the sun or moon, creating a high-contrast, atmospheric setting.

WORLD  
WARCRAFT  
THE WAR WITHIN

# HEARTLANDS

BY ADAM CHRISTOPHER

4

MARRAN'S CHOICE

## STORY

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As twilight fell on the Highlands, Thrall looked out over the dusky landscape from his position atop one of Hammerfall's many watchtowers. In the distance, the vague shadow of Stromgarde's tallest tower was quickly swallowed by the falling night.

Thrall wondered how Jaina's mission was going. It couldn't be any worse than his. "Go'el!"

He didn't turn as Geya'rah climbed the watchtower. For a moment, he felt the heat of anger rise again, but he quickly quelled it. He had spent hours in solitude and had thought much about what had been revealed—and how he felt about it. He still wasn't sure, but he did know that he wasn't here to fight Geya'rah.

The Mag'har leader leaned on the wall next to him. He could feel the tension between them, and he didn't like it.

He sighed and turned to face her. "I'm sorry."

Geya'rah bowed her head. "It's I who should apologize. I . . . wanted to tell you when the time was right. You should never have found out in the middle of a war council." She looked up and met Thrall's gaze. "I am sorry. Truly. I allowed my anger to take over."

“So did I,” said Thrall. “And the truth is, I *am* angry. But I know that feeling will give way to gratitude in time.”

She barked a laugh. “Gratitude? Aggra and I should keep secrets from you more often, it seems.”

He smiled. “You are a gift, Geya’rah, truly. One I never expected to receive. To know I have a sister, even one from a world—a timeline—different from mine. To know I am not alone. To know that through you I can learn about our parents, even as we learn about ourselves.”

“Durotan and Draka—at least, my Durotan and Draka—would have loved you,” said Geya’rah softly, “just as they loved me. I should not have spoken ill of our father before. I shamed his memory. It saddens me that you never felt that love.”

Thrall shook his head. “I had the good fortune to know them for a time, before you were born, and to meet our mother’s spirit in the Shadowlands, to fight alongside her. These encounters alone were enough to fill my cup, but to have a sister too? I hope to know you better, and to hear your memories of Durotan and Draka, if they are not so painful to share. We are nothing but the sum of our memories, all of us. Durotan and Draka live on—through us.”

They fell into a more comfortable silence.

“About Aggra,” said Geya’rah. “Please, do not be hard on her.”

Thrall nodded. “I’ve thought of little else besides you and Aggra these last few hours. I know the heavy burden a secret can be. And I know it was not hers to share.”

Geya’rah inclined her head. They moved to the other side of the watchtower, where Thrall could look down into the muster yard of Hammerfall. Even as night fell, the Kor’kron were busy training.

“You are a fine leader, sister.”

“Must run in our bloodline.”

Thrall sighed. Even as he did not want to turn to it, there was more urgent business at hand.

“You must hear me, Geya’rah. I have seen enough injustice against our people to fill a lifetime—*several* lifetimes. But I have always tried, at least, to stay true to a single path, to walk toward an ideal that all our people can strive for.” He gestured at the





*“You are a fine leader, sister.”*

*“Must run in our bloodline.”*

activity down in the yard. “Sometimes that ideal must be reached through battle. But more often it can be reached through peace.”

Geya’rah shook her head. “Marran will not speak with us, Go’el. She doesn’t care about our claim to this territory. She does not believe in our right to exist *at all*. She will not stop until the flag of Stromgarde flies over this very watchtower . . . or it is razed to the ground.” She sighed. “At least when the Mag’har faced the Lightbound, they offered us a choice.”

Thrall nodded, acutely aware of the history Geya’rah spoke of. “Your first responsibility is to your people,” he said. “I will not deny that. But I will give you this challenge, Geya’rah: Find where Stromgarde is hurting. Seek out the pain that drives them to this path, and you may find that better way. Perhaps Marran will never choose peace over victory, but the people of Stromgarde might.” He looked up at the far horizon as the two moons of Azeroth, the White Lady and the Blue Child, began their journey skyward. “It is not just the Arathi Highlands that are in danger—it is all of Azeroth.”

“Xal’atah,” said Geya’rah. “Aggra tried to explain the situation while you slept. I fear I pushed her away.”

“Jaina will make Marran see sense. I know it.”

Geya’rah tightened her fist. “I cannot believe that Marran will agree so easily.”

Thrall raised an eyebrow. “But will *you*?”

“I will help, Go’el. You know I will. But we must fight one battle at a—”

A horn sounded, distant. Geya’rah froze, then ran to the opposite wall. Thrall followed and soon spotted a raider tearing up the road to the main gates. The orc blew his horn again, this time answered by the same from within Hammerfall itself.

“Raider!” yelled Geya’rah, leaning over the parapet. “What news?”

“The 7th Legion, the Stromic army!” The raider’s wolf mount rose up on its hind legs and howled at the rising moons. “They march! We are under attack!”

The yard below jolted into frantic activity. No sooner had the war horns sounded than the Kor’kron and Mag’har assembled, quickly organizing themselves into companies of raiders. Thrall turned to where Geya’rah had stood just a moment before, but quickly realized she was already gone. Thrall could only despair as the Kor’kron headed out through the opened gates, ready for battle.

“Thrall!”

As the last of the mounted warriors rode out of the muster yard, Thrall saw Eitrigg and Aggra waving at him. He hastened over to join them, the trio clasping hands in greeting.

“Eitrigg is with us,” said Aggra. “The Kor’kron will stand down if you command it.”

Eitrigg cursed under his breath. “This could very well start a new war,” he said. “I will not let the armistice that Varok Saurfang fought for die so easily.” He laid a heavy hand on Thrall’s shoulder. “Say the word, my friend, and I will deliver your orders to Talgar.”

“No,” Thrall cut in. “Not yet. Countering Geya’rah’s command would only sow chaos on the field. I may be able to sway her, but I must reach her.”

“Luck, then, my friend,” said Eitrigg. As the old chieftain rushed off, Thrall surveyed the muster yard, spotting the wolf stables on the other side.

“Come,” he called to his mate. “We may yet have a chance.”



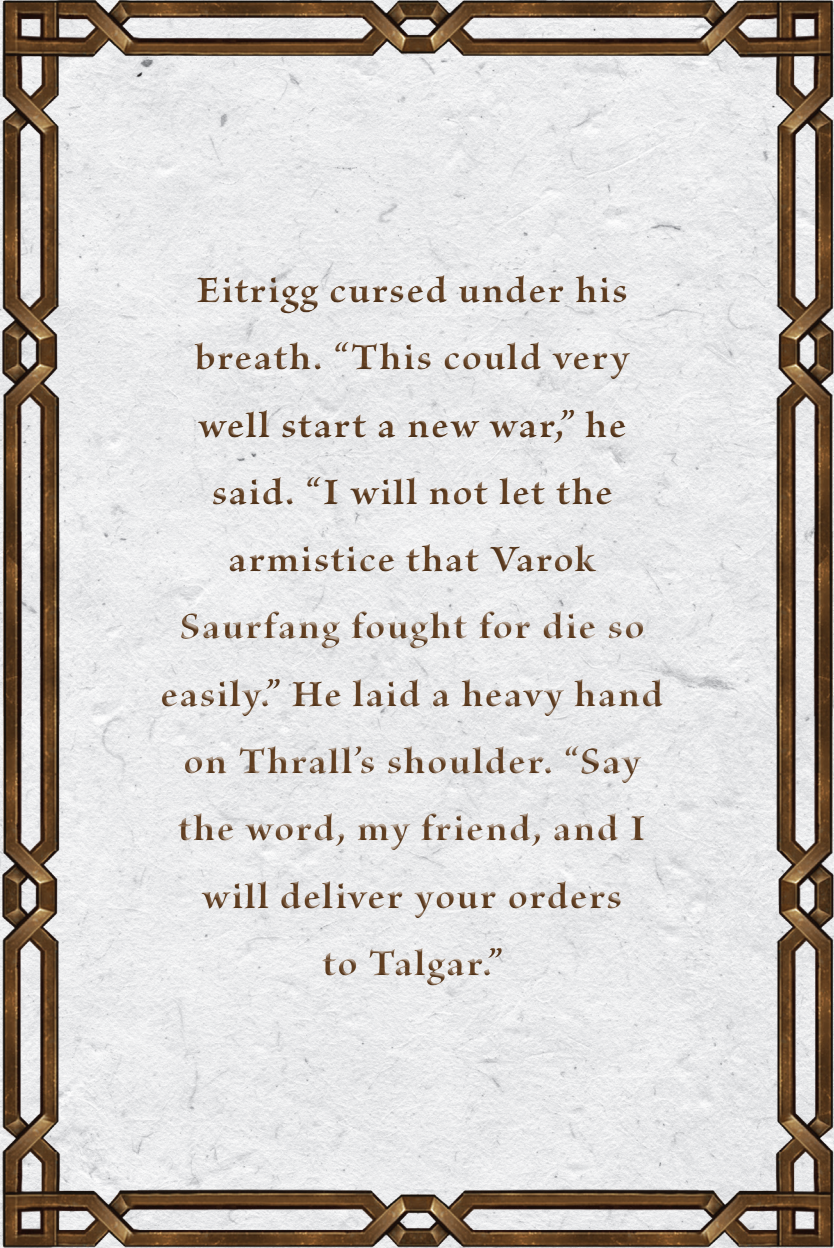
Jaina woke with a start. The room was dark and eerily quiet. She sat up, only for the thundering pain in her head to almost send her back to oblivion. Closing her eyes, she counted to ten, then tried again—slower this time.

This seemed to work. She saw she was back in her quarters, but it was now night. She gingerly felt her neck. Zatacia’s dart had only just grazed her, but it had been enough to deliver a knockout dose of sleeping poison.

Or had it? Because now Jaina was awake, and while it was night, she realized that the effects of the poison had worn off far sooner than Marran had planned. She moved to the window and opened the drapes, revealing a city brightly lit by two moons high in the night. A city that was quiet and still—far too still. While it was reasonable to expect the citizens of Stromgarde had retired for the night, there was also no sign of the 7th Legion or Stromic army below.

It didn’t take Jaina long to realize why. She could hear it—distant, but clear. The shouted commands, loud over the clank of plate armor; the thunder of many steel boots





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marching beside the trot of heavy horses. And there, coming out from behind the far city wall, ordered rows of flaming torches, carried by troops as they advanced in the night toward the orcish holdings.

Jaina wasted no time. She had to stop Marran before it was too late.

Picking up her staff from the floor, Jaina focused her power and teleported out of the room.



Atop a crest a few miles from Hammerfall, Thrall swiftly dismounted, ducking down into the shadowed cover of the tall rocks to get a view of the battlefield. He turned at the sound of Aggra's mount following up the slope, waving a hand for her to join him in the shelter.

On their journey from Hammerfall they hadn't sighted Geya'rah at all, though their search had been impeded both by the darkness and the battle itself. Even now, as he and Aggra watched the fighting below them, it was all Thrall wished to be able to somehow stop the bloodshed. It wasn't just the warriors who would die needlessly this night—there were civilians too, common folk on both sides who had made the Highlands their home and who now found themselves in the middle of a pointless, bloody fight.

"Go'el, there!"

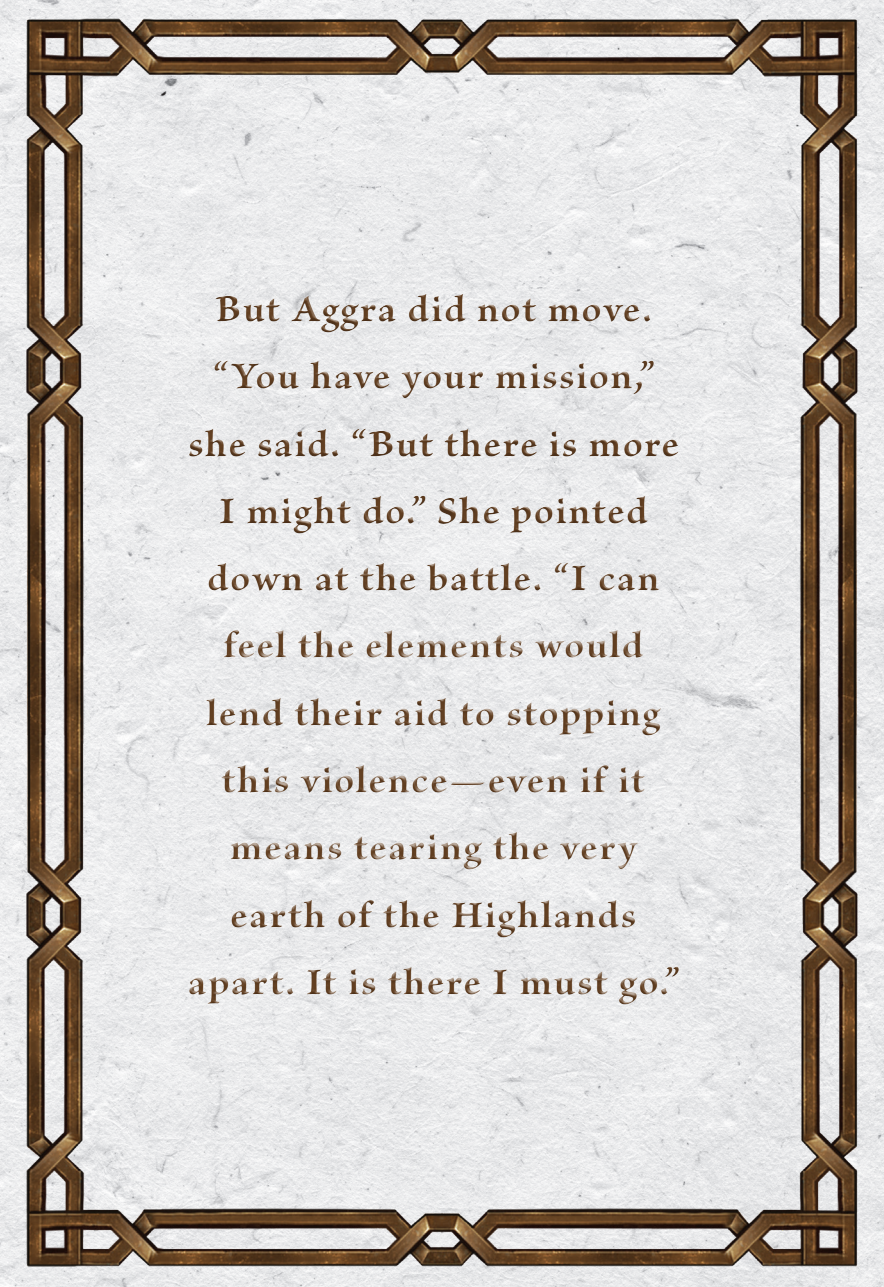
Thrall followed Aggra's outstretched hand—and yes, there was Geya'rah. The Mag'har leader, still on her mount, was perhaps half a mile distant, her axe swinging as she fought off one hapless Stromic soldier who dared get too close. As the man fell, Geya'rah reined in her mount, then disappeared down a hillside.

"Come," Thrall said. "We must get to her."

But Aggra did not move. "You have your mission," she said. "But there is more I might do." She pointed down at the battle. "I can feel the elements would lend their aid to stopping this violence—even if it means tearing the very earth of the Highlands apart. It is there I must go."

Thrall looked wary. Though he would never doubt Aggra's skill, he knew well the chaos of battle and the many friends he'd lost on the field. "You're certain?"

Aggra nodded as she mounted her wolf. He registered only a moment of shock on her face before she cried, "Go'el, down!"



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Thrall did exactly as Aggra commanded, ducking as somewhere over his head came the roar and heat of flame. Risking a glance at the hillside, Thrall saw a fire elemental careening toward a squad of 7th Legion soldiers who were advancing toward them. At Aggra's command, the fire elemental exploded before it reached its target, the resulting shockwave knocking the humans back.

Immediate danger over, Thrall stood. The dazed humans rolled on the ground, groaning, as he went back to Aggra.

"I suppose I have no reason to worry," he said, and to his surprise he found the compliment sticking just a little in his throat. Aggra's command of the elements was indeed masterful, and he was . . .

He cleared his throat. At this, Aggra smiled.

"They will come back to you, am'osh. As will I."

Thrall smiled as he watched Aggra disappear into the fray. Then he returned to his wolf and took the reins.



Jaina materialized back in the same hollow she and Thrall had first arrived in.

She reeled, senses alive to the battle already raging around her. At her back, a squad of 7th Legion—recovering from the surprise of her sudden arrival—lifted their weapons as warriors of the Kor'kron appeared on two sides from behind the ridgeline. The orcs, their battle cry loud enough to make Jaina's ears ring, charged down the slope. The humans, answering, braced themselves for combat.

Jaina was caught right in the middle. Spinning on her toes, she swept her staff in a great horizontal arc, the crystal lighting the hollow with its magic, her hands radiating frost and snow. Around her, a water elemental spawned with a great splash, the apple-size globe of blue-and-pink light growing instantly into a towering giant of energy. It surged out, rolling like a wave as it pushed both humans and orcs out of the hollow.

Racing up the slope, already conjuring another elemental, Jaina saw a troop of warriors engaged in a fierce melee.

Staff alight, Jaina channeled the arcane. She might not be able to stop the battle single-handedly, but she could do her best to keep the combatants apart and casualties low.



Geya'rah raced across the battlefield, cutting through the wheat fields of Go'Shek Farm on her mount, axe high to rally the Kor'kron as the army spilled out behind her. Already the 7th Legion was close to their holdings, already she could hear the din of battle as advance riders from both sides clashed in the shadowed foothills of the Arathi Highlands. To attack at night was madness, Geya'rah knew, but she expected nothing less from Marran Trollbane.

She did not expect to see flashes of vibrant color in the distance, however. As her warriors surged around her and met their enemies in bloody combat, Geya'rah commanded her mount to a nearby hilltop so that she might survey the scene.

She glimpsed a mage, aiding the battle for the humans.

*Jaina Proudmoore.*

Geya'rah felt the fury burn within her. It seemed the Alliance treachery ran deeper than her brother knew. She would put a stop to this interference.

With a battle cry, Geya'rah kicked her heels into her mount and rode off toward the mage, but as she crested the next hill, she realized all too late that she had charged straight into an attack.

She saw the flash of light, bright as the morning sun's first shard, and then the water elemental, summoned by Jaina, barreling toward her, growing in size until it filled her entire vision. Geya'rah knew it was too late to even try to outrun it, but she still pulled the reins of her mount, turning the beast, which howled in protest in a last-ditch attempt to avoid contact.

The elemental struck her like a runaway kodo, and as the magical creature vanished in a splash of purple light, Geya'rah found herself thrown from her mount.





### 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.*