



WORLD
WARCRAFT
THE WAR WITHIN

HEARTLANDS

BY ADAM CHRISTOPHER



1
SUMMIT AT BORALUS

STORY

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“I would offer a coin for your thoughts,” said a warm voice behind her, “but I fear the price may be too high.”

Lady Jaina Proudmoore turned from the view of the city below as her old friend joined her on the parapet. Despite his size and heavy armor, he had somehow made it up the tight and winding stair of Proudmoore Keep’s tallest tower without making a sound.

Thrall leaned on the old stone and looked out across Boralus, took a deep breath of the cool air. “I can see why you treasure this spot.”

Jaina nodded. The tower offered her the solitude and privacy to think, while the view of Boralus offered perspective, a reminder of where she was—and of *who* she was.

And right now, as the sea mist cleared, Boralus shone like a sapphire in the dawn. A thousand roofs, a hundred spires, all glowing with the promise of a new day. From the tower Jaina could fully glimpse her domain, from the snowy mountains to the great harbor, in which sat the mighty Kul Tiran fleet, with a dozen of its fastest ships ready and awaiting her command.

“I know you thought it would be easy,” said Thrall.

Jaina blinked out of her reverie. Thrall's face had lost some of the fear she'd seen the day Dalaran fell. But there was still a shadow over him—over them both. Up here, it was easy to forget the darkness plotting at the heart of the world, a darkness that would soon cast its pall over not only Boralus but all of Azeroth, if they couldn't defeat it.

"Easy is . . . not the word I would use." She sighed. "But yes, I had hoped for more."

She'd counted ten sunrises since that terrible day. And every night since, Jaina had relived the horror of that moment in her dreams, as the city of light and wonder was plucked from the sky over Khaz Algar like a child's toy.

But that nightmare had been real. And Jaina knew that it was just the start.

Something terrible was coming. Another Sundering, another Cataclysm. An evil that had a name.

Xal'atath.

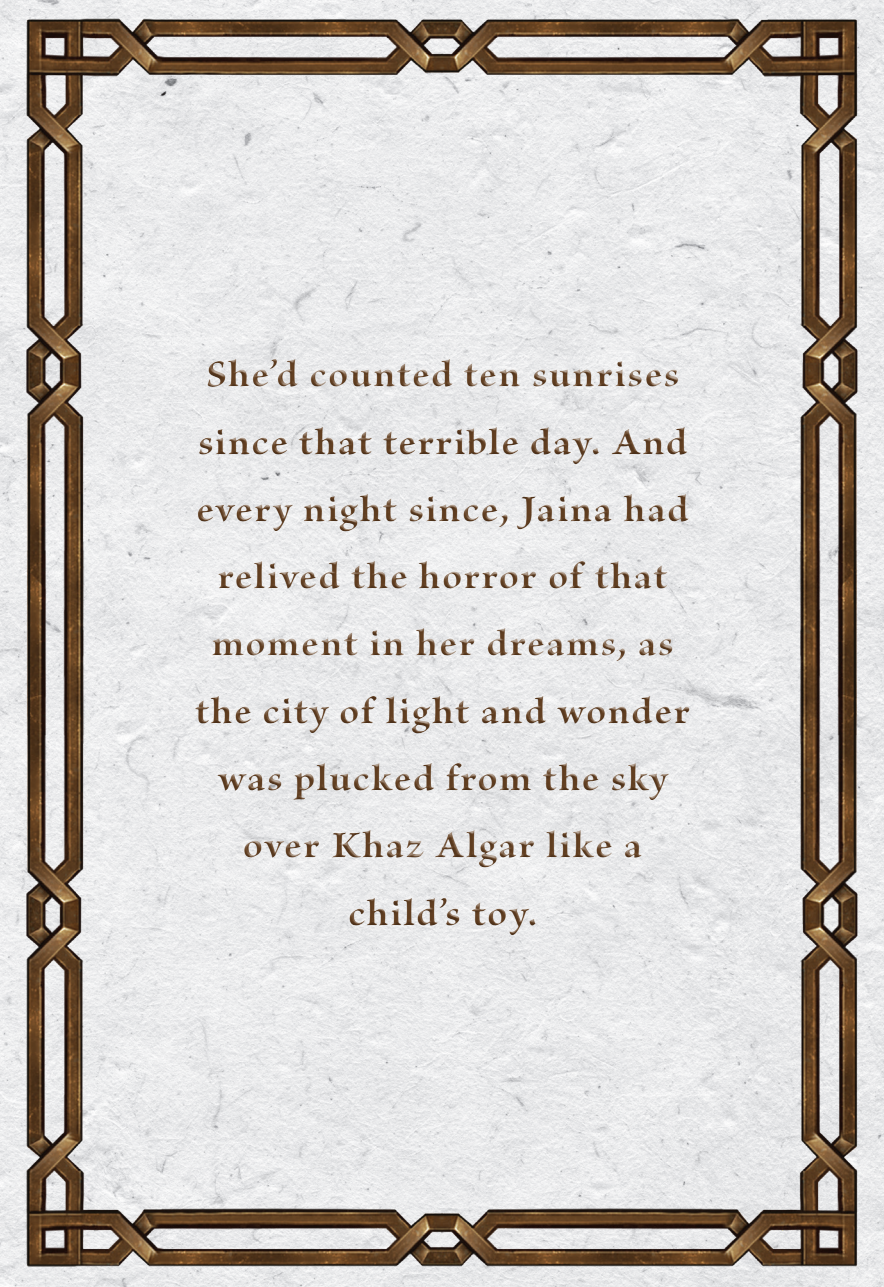
Those ten days since Jaina and Thrall had returned to their respective capitals had been a blur of activity. Couriers had been dispatched to every corner of Azeroth, carrying with them the full authority of both Horde and Alliance within a singular, imperative message: a call to unite, a call for all leaders to meet at Boralus, ready to face this new enemy. They would come, Jaina had been sure of it.

And some had—but many had not.

Perhaps she had been naive, in retrospect, not realizing quite how badly the Radiant Song had affected people across the world. Even now, as she looked across her own city, watching the guards on patrol, workers in the docks, innkeepers sweeping their steps while market traders rolled barrels and loaded carts, she wondered how many of her people had heard the song, unsettled by the vision and the voice. How many were afraid, left wondering what it could mean.

There was a metallic clatter from behind them, followed by muttered curses and the sound of heavy footfalls on the spiral stair. Jaina and Thrall watched as Danath Trollbane emerged onto the roof. He paused for breath, chest heaving under his red tabard.

"By Thoradin's blood," he said, "for such a seafaring people, the Kul Tirans do have a fondness for stairs."



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Jaina stifled a laugh—she couldn't help it, despite her foul mood. Danath was the first to respond to her call. He had been in the city for several days already, helping Jaina prepare for the summit. If he was disappointed by the responses from the other leaders as they trickled in, he had never shown it. Instead, he had been a steadfast companion, an excellent sounding board—and a very good friend.

“Have they come up with a solution?” asked Thrall.

“Actually,” said Danath, “I think we have.” He turned back to the stairs. “Come, there is much to consider.”



Jaina could hear the mumbled discussions as she and Thrall followed Danath back into the meeting room, deep at the heart of Proudmoore Keep. With the return of the trio, those discussions fell into a respectful silence.

The assembled leaders had been locked in conversation all night, trying to overcome both geography and politics to assemble a strike force that Jaina and Thrall could take to Khaz Algar. And now, as the representatives stood around the huge war table in the center of the chamber, Jaina dared to hope that Danath had spoken the truth—that they could soon take the fight to Xal'atath.

The leaders who had answered Jaina and Thrall's joint call were, Jaina reflected, an unusual mix. On the Horde side was Aggralan—Aggra—of the Earthen Ring and Thrall's life-mate; Baine Bloodhoof, the tauren High Chieftain, towering over the slim form of Thalyssra, First Arcanist of the Nightborne, who in turn stood tall over the diminutive Kiro, Caravan Leader of the Voldunai vulpera.

On the other side of the table were the representatives of the Alliance—Shandris Feathermoon, newly risen to leader of the night elves, and Magister Umbric of the void elves stood almost back-to-back, making an impressive, even beautiful pair next to the stout form of Kurdran Wildhammer, the dwarf deputized as Falstad's representative from the Council of Three Hammers. Finally, Tess Greymane represented Gilneas, a queen in title and, of the group, looking perhaps the most battle-ready in her purple-and-brown leathers. It was she who broke the silence, her warm greeting a relief to Jaina, who didn't quite know what to expect of the assemblage. When they had left the group

several hours before, tempers had been high, the atmosphere tense as each leader had argued about their respective burdens of office and the limitations this placed on them to contribute to the strike force.

Jaina approached the table, covered now by a large map that had not been there earlier. She recognized the region at once.

“The Arathi Highlands?”

Danath opened his mouth to speak, but Umbric got in first.

“This is a risk,” he said quietly, long blue fingers steeped under his chin. “I need something less . . . *uncertain*.”

“So do we all,” said Baine. The tauren folded his massive arms and raised his chin, making Thalysra duck out of the way of his feathered headpiece. “But sometimes what we need and what we have are two different things.”

“Agreed.” Shandris leaned over the table. “We must take the opportunity offered and use it well.”

Jaina looked around the group. “What opportunity? Danath?”

“The 7th Legion.” He pointed to the location of his own kingdom on the map of the Arathi Highlands. “There is a considerable force massed at Stromgarde. A ready-made army, awaiting command.”

Thrall rubbed his chin. “Interesting. Who commands this garrison?”

“My niece, Marran,” said Danath. “As my diplomatic duties draw me to Stormwind, she stands as regent of Stromgarde. I have had word she has been reinforcing her position with the 7th Legion Auxiliary.” He spread his hands. “Her own decision, but I trust she is—”

“Stoking tensions with the Mag’har.” Aggra stepped forward, shaking her head. “The Horde granted the base at Hammerfall to the refugee orcs amid the Armistice. After the Fourth War, Overlord Geya’rah and her people had nowhere to go. The lands surrounding Hammerfall are much like Nagrand, a gentle place for their people to make a fresh start on Azeroth.” She pointed to the other side of the map, where the orc stronghold lay nestled under the hills, and turned to Thrall. “But the wounds of her Draenor have not fully healed, for Geya’rah *or* her people. The Kor’kron now train in number there at her request, to deter action

from Stromgarde.” She looked at Danath, a hard expression on her face. “What Stromgarde does, Hammerfall answers.”

Kurdran swore under his breath. “An old fight, one we thought long settled,” he said, running thick fingers through his beard. “The situation in the Highlands is no good, no good at all.”

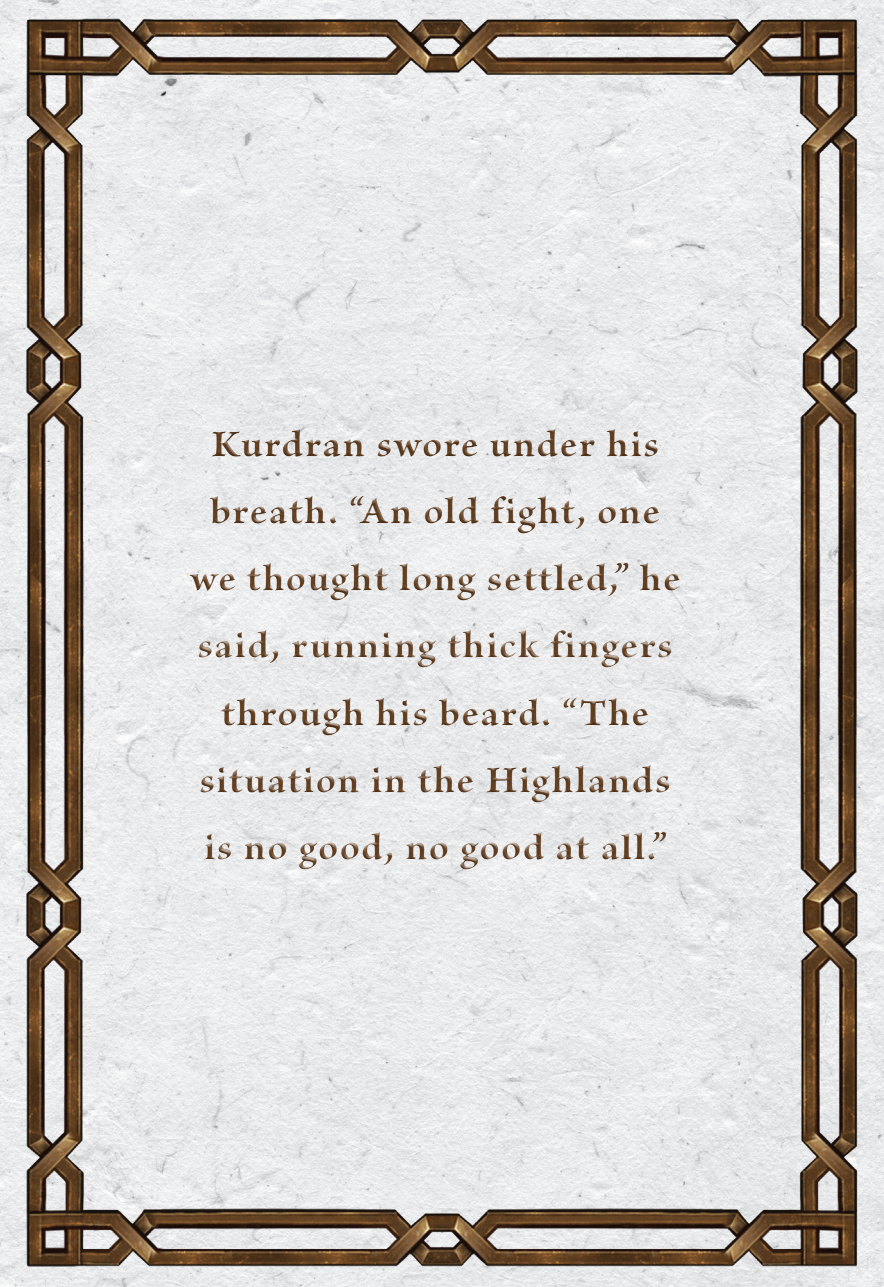
Jaina watched as Tess and Umbric exchanged a glance, and Thalysra bent down to listen to something Kiro muttered into her ear. Then Jaina looked at Thrall, but the former warchief was silent, his brow once again furrowed. He was studying the map, not the people around it.

Danath raised his hands. “*Please*, we have been through this.” He sighed and began a slow circuit of the table. “I understand your fears, but you forget, Stromgarde still struggles to recover from the Fourth War. Marran requested aid from the 7th Legion to help farmers fend off predators, to train new soldiers to support the Alliance, to maintain our family’s rule while I am absent. I trust she is only doing what she feels she must as leader and that the matter will easily be righted.” A fresh murmur spread around the table, but Danath would not be deterred. “*Here* is our strike force. The 7th Legion *and*”—he nodded as he walked by Aggra—“the Kor’kron. Two of the best fighting forces in Azeroth. Trained. Ready! We could not hope for a better army.”

He stopped and now stood by Jaina and Thrall once more. He looked at the two of them. “Marran will listen to you, Jaina. I have heard how well she regards you and your mother. I will write to her as well, to tell her of your coming and to prepare the 7th Legion to march. And while I don’t know Geya’rah, I know *you*, Thrall. The Horde may not have a warchief, but the Kor’kron are yours to command.”

Thrall held Danath’s gaze for several moments, then nodded. His eyes found Jaina’s. “Perhaps this is our best option, for both rallying a strike force and avoiding a larger conflict.”

Jaina considered. The situation in the Arathi Highlands sounded delicate, to put it mildly, but Danath was right. They needed an army, and here was not one but *two*, waiting for a proper target.



Kurdran swore under his breath. “An old fight, one we thought long settled,” he said, running thick fingers through his beard. “The situation in the Highlands is no good, no good at all.”

Jaina reached for her staff. “Then so it will be. I will order the fleet to sail for Stromgarde. By the time they arrive, the strike force will be ready. Thrall, you will go to Hammerfall and negotiate with Geya’rah for the Kor’kron.”

“I will come,” Aggra said. She stepped around the table to join Thrall. “Geya’rah is as a sister to me.” She laid a hand on her mate’s shoulder. “I promise, she will listen.”

“Agreed,” said Jaina. “Danath and I will go to Stromgarde.”

“I am sorry, Lord Admiral,” said Danath, bowing his head in apology. “I have been away from Stormwind too long already. Turalyon has sent word that I am urgently needed to rejoin his court. But on my honor, Marran will gladly receive you and your word on this matter.” He smiled.

“Very well,” said Jaina. She turned to the assembled leaders. “I thank you all for your courage and candor on this council. We are adjourned.”

As the leaders began filing out, offering their farewells, Jaina turned to Thrall and Aggra.

“Prepare yourselves,” she said, conjuring a portal. “We leave at once.”



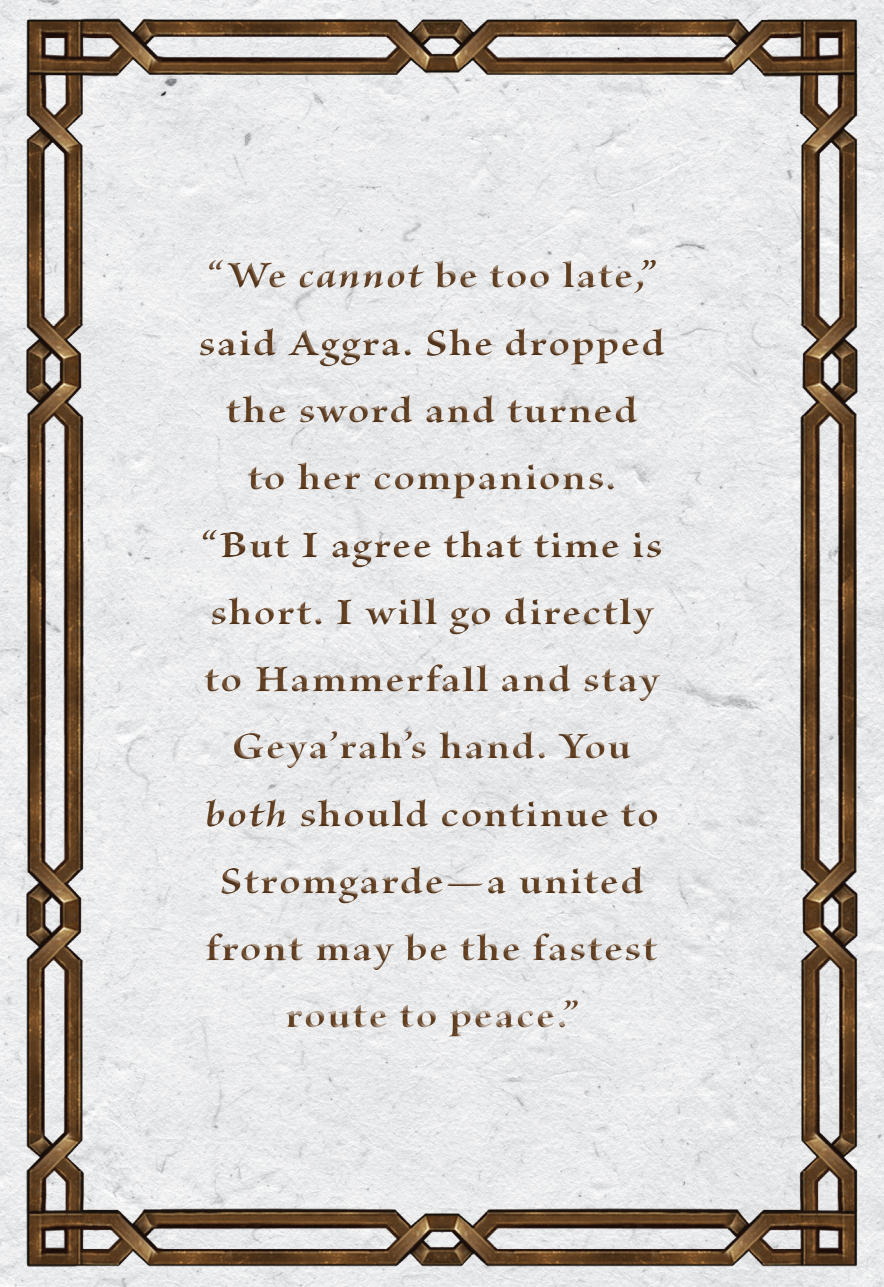
Jaina, Thrall, and Aggra had barely stepped through the portal from Boralus to the Arathi Highlands when they sensed the situation had taken a drastic turn. They had arrived in a hollow, shielded from view by steep hillsides. No sooner had they got their bearings than Aggra rushed forward, cursing under her breath. Jaina watched as she crouched by a body, lying face down.

It was not the only one.

Thrall stepped over a human corpse, the man’s armor split by axe blows.

“Oh no,” Jaina whispered. She counted the bodies—twelve in total, six human in the colors of the 7th Legion, six orcs in the furs and leathers of the Kor’kron. Casting a wary eye over the surrounding hilltops, she joined the other two. “What happened?”

Aggra pulled a bloodied 7th Legion sword from the nearest Kor’kron. “A fight to the death,” she said. She stood and used the sword to indicate several orcs, arrows stuck in the weak points of their armor. “The humans staged an ambush . . .”



“We cannot be too late,”
said Aggra. She dropped
the sword and turned
to her companions.

*“But I agree that time is
short. I will go directly
to Hammerfall and stay
Geya’rah’s hand. You
both should continue to
Stromgarde—a united
front may be the fastest
route to peace.”*

Thrall picked up his life-mate's train of thought. "Only to find the Kor'kron a formidable foe." He looked down at the bloody scene, his expression grim. "A battle of mutual annihilation. Two small forces, equally matched in number, perhaps equally—and foolishly—surprised at the strength of their enemy." He looked at Jaina. "I fear we may be too late."

"We *cannot* be too late," said Aggra. She dropped the sword and turned to her companions. "But I agree that time is short. I will go directly to Hammerfall and stay Geya'rah's hand. You *both* should continue to Stromgarde—a united front may be the fastest route to peace."

Thrall nodded. "Luck, my love," he said. The two clasped hands, then without another word, Aggra took off, sprinting for the northern hillside, which she deftly scaled before disappearing from view.

Thrall watched her go, then turned to Jaina. "To Stromgarde, then."

But as they left their cover, Jaina heard a high whistling sound. Almost before she registered it, Thrall jerked where he stood and took a stumbling step backward, the feathered shaft of a projectile emerging between his shoulder and chest armor.

Jaina spun, instinctively putting herself between Thrall and the archer. She raised her staff high and cast a protective shield for cover. Another whistle, but this time the arrow glanced off the shield. That moment was all Jaina needed to spot her target. There, by the solitary tree at the top of the hill opposite, came a flash of movement. A cloaked figure broke cover, bow raised, quiver bouncing on their back as they fled.

At once Jaina balled her fist and threw it forward, sending an orb of crackling purple energy flying toward the hillside. A moment later, the tree exploded in a gout of yellow flame and pink light, but of the Bowman there was no sign. Cursing, she knelt beside Thrall.

"Leave it, I will be fine," said Thrall, waving her away. He grabbed the shaft of the arrow, still protruding from his flesh, and pulled it free in a single tug. He held up the arrow to examine it. "I hope, anyway."

Jaina peered at the arrowhead. It was smeared with blood, the liquid near black, but there was something else too—another substance, bright blue, oily. Her eyes widened in horror.

"Poison? Thrall, you—"

Thrall tossed the arrow to one side, then gave his injured shoulder an experimental roll. He winced; the wound was still seeping. "I'll be fine," he said, then paused. "But we do need to get to Stromgarde, and quickly." He gestured to the hillside. "Lead the way."



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.