

The cover art features two characters in a tense conversation. On the left is a large, green-skinned orc with a thick beard, wearing ornate blue and gold armor with fur trim. He has a stern expression. On the right is a smaller, orange-skinned character with pointed ears and a mohawk, wearing brown leather armor with fur and metal accents. She is gesturing with her hands as if speaking. The background is a dark, cavernous space with large, curved stone structures and a glowing red light source. At the top, the 'World of Warcraft' logo is prominent, with 'THE WAR WITHIN' below it. The title 'HEARTLANDS' is written in large, white, serif font, and 'BY ADAM CHRISTOPHER' is in a smaller font below it. At the bottom, the number '3' is centered between two horizontal lines, with the word 'BLOODLINES' written in large, white, serif font below the lines.

WORLD  
WARCRAFT  
THE WAR WITHIN

# HEARTLANDS

BY ADAM CHRISTOPHER

3

BLOODLINES





Thrall woke with a gasp. He went to rise, only for a pair of hands to push him gently back onto the cot.

“Easy, am’osh.”

Thrall blinked his vision clear. “Aggra,” he whispered. With her help, he sat up slowly; then, suddenly remembering, his fingers found the spot where the arrow had struck him. It was tender, yes, but the wound was healed, the numbness in his arm gone.

“The Lok’osh are skilled,” said Aggra. “They say it may take time for your strength to return fully, but I think they underestimate your stamina.” She smiled. “I’m not sure they quite believe you walked all the way from Stromgarde in your condition.”

Groaning, Thrall said, “How long was I out?”

“A few hours, no more.”

Thrall eased his legs off the cot and allowed Aggra to help him to stand. He held her there, running his fingers along the line of Aggra’s jaw. “It is good to see you, my love.”

“And I, you,” she said. She paused. “I just wish I could wake you with better news.”

Thrall sighed. “No luck with Geya’rah?”

Aggra shook her head. “The situation is . . . difficult.”

Thrall kneaded his sore shoulder. “So I gathered.” He looked around and saw they were in basic military barracks. On the other side of the room was another cot, on which Thrall’s armor had been laid—armor that had once belonged to Orgrim Doomhammer.

Thrall’s journey across the Highlands came back to him, his fever dream fresh in his mind. As he moved over and began dressing, he thought how strange it was now, to be back here in Doomhammer’s armor, as those old hatreds between the orcs and humans rose again.

Just what would it take for Azeroth to move beyond this, to let go of a past that deserved, if not to be forgotten, then consigned to history where it belonged?

He hefted the huge spiked spaulders onto his shoulders and began doing up the straps across his chest. “I must speak with Geya’rah at once.”

“Go’el,” said Aggra. “That may be harder than you think.”

Thrall grunted. “But she knows I am here?”

“Of course. It was fortunate she sent out the patrol that found you. She did not trust Stromgarde to treat with you.”

Thrall began pulling his boots on. “Then it is time to talk.”

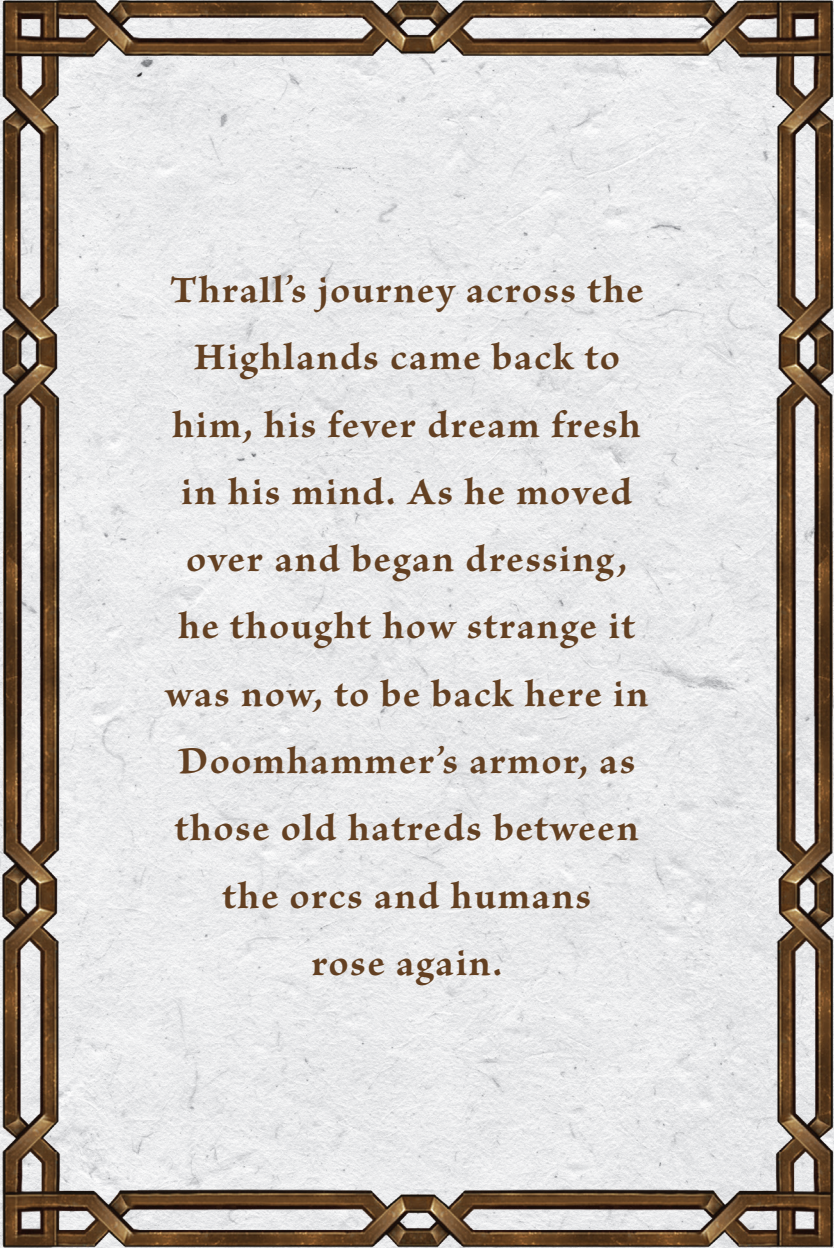
“You don’t understand,” said Aggra. “She will not grant you an audience.”

“We shall see,” said Thrall.



Thrall wound his way through the corridors of the base, followed close by Aggra, until he came to a chamber guarded by two Kor’kron, who moved instinctively away from the door to let him pass. It seemed Danath had spoken true in Boralus: though Thrall would never have had reason to test it, the Kor’kron would still defer to him in the absence of a warchief. As he strode into the council chamber, he saw Geya’rah standing over a table covered by maps, with two other orcs—the current Kor’kron general, Talgar, and another green-skinned, gray-bearded warrior he was surprised to see.

“Eitrigg!” Thrall cried, moving around to greet his old friend. “What are the Blackrock doing here?”



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Eitrigg clasped Thrall's outstretched arm. "You are not the only one on a mission of diplomacy, Thrall. But I'm glad you are here. We would benefit from your counsel."

Geya'rah met that remark with a scowl. "Eitrigg has advised me to stand down, while the fields of the Highlands are still wet with the blood of our people." Her eyes met Thrall's, and in her fury he could see a fire in her that he had often possessed himself. In many ways, he thought, he and Geya'rah were so alike.

"But *I* command here," said Geya'rah, aiming this comment at Eitrigg before turning back to Thrall. "And if I wanted your counsel, Go'el, I would have called for it."

Thrall held firm. "It seems my hour is very late, and I am sorry for that. I must speak with you, Geya'rah." He gestured to his mate. "I'm sure Aggra has told you everything."

"She told me much I already knew," said Geya'rah, "and you come at the worst possible time, my friend."

"I fear we cannot choose our moment," said Thrall, "but I came here to ask for your help."

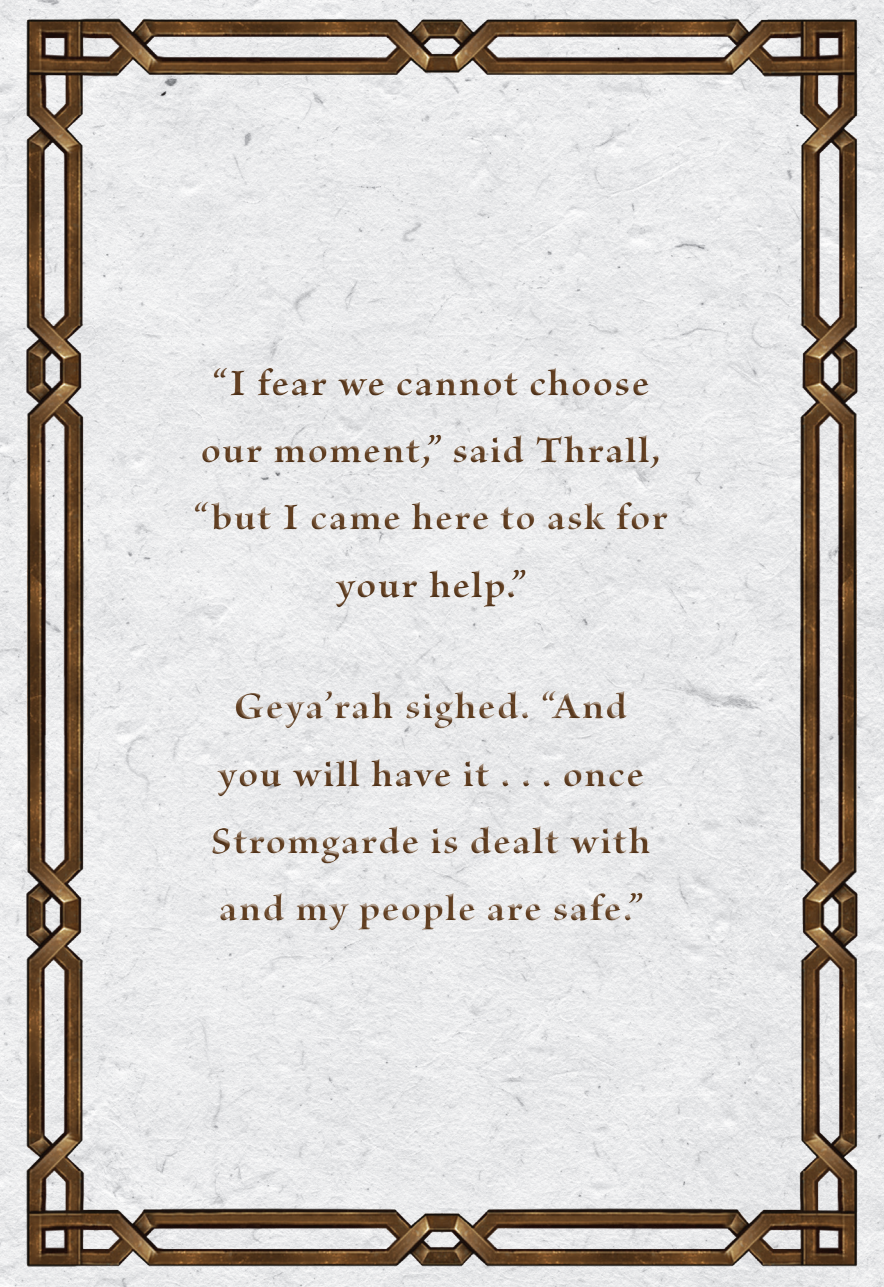
Geya'rah sighed. "And you will have it . . . once Stromgarde is dealt with and my people are safe."

Thrall glanced at Eitrigg, but the old orc just shook his head. If Geya'rah had sought the advice of the Blackrock chieftain, then the situation was clearly bad. He needed to take a leaf from Eitrigg's book—he wasn't here to browbeat Geya'rah into cooperation. He was here to negotiate.

"Tell me what is happening," said Thrall, pointing to the map. "And perhaps we can help each other."

Geya'rah didn't move, the muscles at the back of her jaw working as she stared down Thrall. Then she nodded and seemed to calm.

"Fine," she said. "Since coming here, we've existed in peace with Stromgarde." She pointed to their position on the map. "We shared a problem with the area's predators, and all benefitted from culling their numbers. But then Danath Trollbane installed his niece, Marran, as regent when his duty drew him to Stormwind City. She gave us only a few months of peace before she began amassing the 7th Legion Auxiliary." She tossed several tokens on the table, representing the Auxiliary. "She



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said it was to help Stromgarde do their part, protecting farms from predators, but soon their patrols began roaming farther and farther from their base. What had once been amicable encounters between our forces gave way to violence. Today's skirmish marked yet another escalation, and she is far from finished."

"The humans do nothing but provoke," said Talgar. "They make a sport of it."

"They left us no choice," said Geya'rah. "The only way to ensure the safety of our people was to bring the Kor'kron here, to reinforce the base." She placed a different color token on the table, which fell heavily into place beside Hammerfall.

Thrall sighed. "Something that Marran would have seen as a clear act of intimidation too." He gave Talgar a pointed look. "Building two armies only risks one terrible outcome. There is another way."

Geya'rah laughed. "Then please, tell us."

"Talk," said Thrall. He gestured to Eitrigg. "Diplomacy. Negotiation. Even now, Lady Jaina Proudmoore is at Stromgarde, on the same mission as I."

"And good luck to her," said Geya'rah. "Marran Trollbane is not one for conversation. She far prefers to let her archers do the talking. Besides, as I told you—she isn't finished."

"Explain," said Thrall.

"We know that Stromgarde is planning an attack," said Talgar. "No mere skirmish this time: they intend to capture territory and expand their borders."

Aggra stepped up to the table. "They plan to strike Hammerfall?"

"The cowards wouldn't dare," said Geya'rah. "No, their target is Go'Shek Farm." She indicated on the map. "If Marran thinks to claim an easy victory against our farmers, then she is sorely mistaken." She looked at Thrall. "And trust me, even with the 7th Legion, Stromgarde would fall quickly against the strength of the Mag'har, let alone the Kor'kron. Many will die, and they will not be orcs."

Thrall looked at Geya'rah, at that fire in her eyes. She was so like him, yet so . . . different. True enough, he had been in her position once. But where Thrall had learned, it seemed Geya'rah had hardened. Perhaps because she was from another world, another timeline, a living testament to the older, harsher ways of Draenor.

He shook his head. "Geya'rah, if Stromgarde falls, the full might of the Alliance will answer. There *is* another choice."



“Diplomacy?” Geya’rah spat. “You were shot by *their* archer while on a *diplomatic mission*. We have the enemy preparing to slaughter our civilians in an ambush, and you talk of diplomacy? Marran Trollbane is driven to destroy us. She sees her own victory as the only path to peace.”

Thrall felt the heat rise in his face as he took a step to Geya’rah. “Then *show* her! Make the first move to treat. I challenge you! Prove to her that there is *always* a better way.”

“What are you afraid of, Go’el?” shouted Geya’rah. “The armistice has made you complacent. Soft. Just like our father!”

*Our father?*

Thrall felt his jaw go slack. “What did you say?”

But Geya’rah wasn’t listening. “I am alive and Durotan is not because I have seen hatred unbridled and dared to stand against it.” She slammed a fist on her war table. “Not so long ago the humans kept the orcs as *slaves* on this very ground. Aggra tells me you were here to free them! Or did you forget the legacy of the armor you bear, brother?”

At this, Thrall took a step back. He blinked, his mind racing.

“That’s enough!” Aggra silenced Geya’rah. She put a hand on Thrall’s arm. He turned to look at her . . . and then he could see. It was plain on her face.

*“Brother?”* he said.

Aggra’s eyes widened. “Go’el, I—”

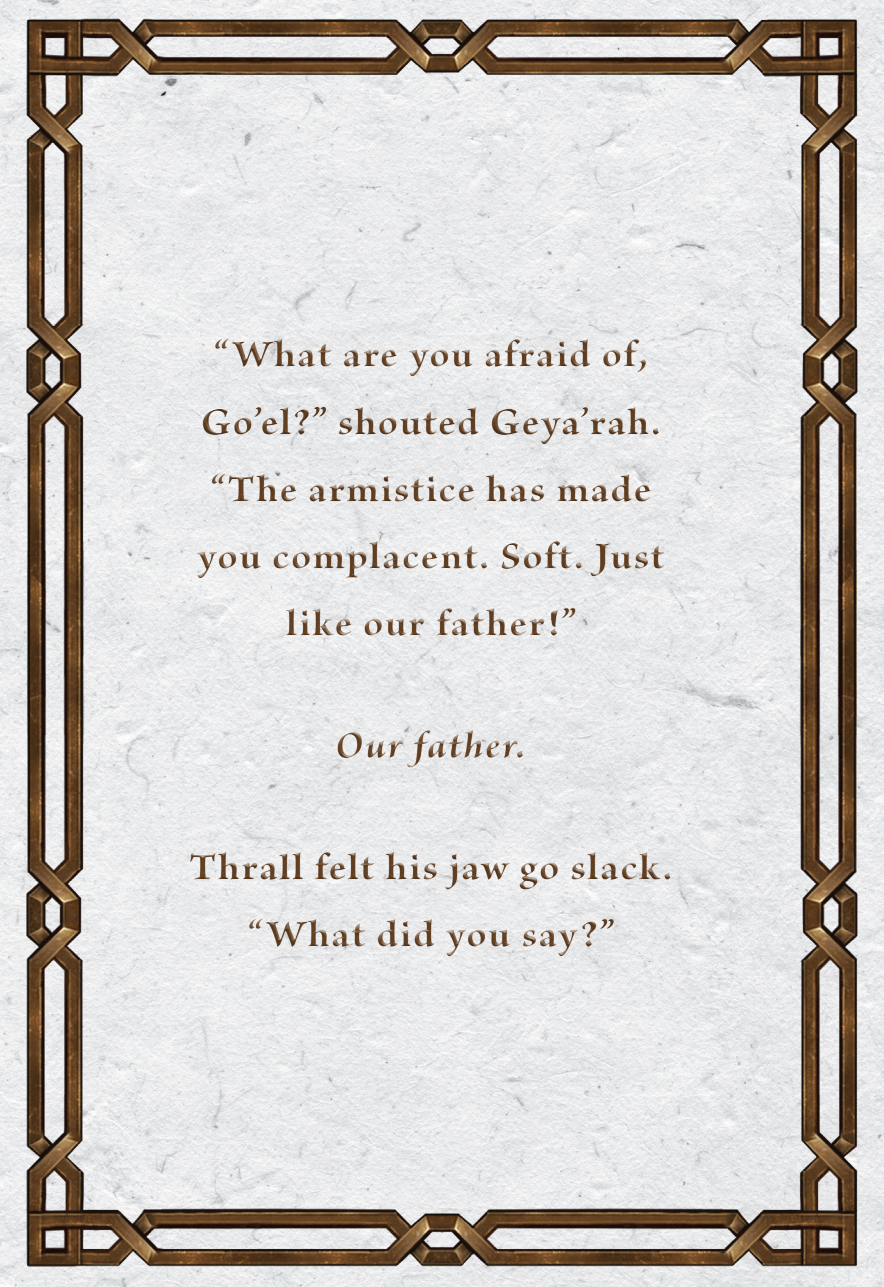
“You *knew*?” He nodded to himself. “You knew.”

Thrall brushed her off and stormed from the council chamber.



After returning to the keep, Jaina brooded in her chambers, knowing she would need to leave on the morrow unless she could convince Danath’s kin to see reason. As the hours grew small, she heaved a sigh and resolved on seeking out Marran herself. Today had been filled with bloodshed for Stromgarde, and Marran’s emotions were naturally running high. As the sun sank low on the horizon, Jaina hoped her chance hadn’t come and gone.

But as she opened the door to her chambers, she was stunned to see Marran herself, looking exhausted and somewhat embarrassed.



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"I . . . apologize for my words, earlier," she said. "They were offered in haste."

"They are forgiven," Jaina said. "But I would speak with you further."

"Let us find somewhere private," Marran offered, "away from the castle's ears."

Marran led Jaina into a long stone chamber, cool and dark, lit only by a flaming torch Marran took from a sconce and the soft glow of Jaina's staff. The chamber was clearly ancient, buried deep beneath Stromgarde's keep. The long spiral stairs that had led them down here had been worn by countless centuries, and the blocks that formed the chamber walls were of a different shape and size to those of the city above.

Marran stopped and held her torch aloft. "We walk in Arathor," she said. "This is all that remains of that ancient place, the last echo of an old world. A fitting place for us to speak freely."

Jaina nodded. "I grew up learning the legend, how Thoradin saw the vision of his father, clad in the pelt of a black wolf, and how he founded the first kingdom of humans."

But Marran shook her head. "Not legend. *History*. One that I have been trusted to uplift and enrich through my own contributions. One that must not be forgotten." She sighed as she turned to the other woman. "I am eager to continue our earlier conversation, but first I wanted to speak with you, about this." She produced a crumpled piece of parchment.

Jaina's eyes widened in the dim light—it was her letter to Danath.

"My spymaster, Zatacia, is a fine shot with a bow, as your orc friend has already discovered. A shame to lose a valuable horse, but in war, sacrifices must be made."

The glow of Jaina's staff flared just a bit brighter. "Marran," she said, "take care with your actions."

Marran ignored the comment. "When I heard you'd come," she said, "I thought you were here to help me. That you might *understand* the position my uncle has put us in."

Her words caught for a moment, and Jaina drew breath to speak.

"Marran, I want to offer you my counsel," she began. "But I must do so in truth and with good intention. Lies will not serve you."

Marran's fist tightened around the parchment. "Then give me your true counsel."

Jaina clenched her jaw as she thought. Every word from now on had to count.

“The Mag’har are a people forged in battle,” she said, “and the Kor’kron are the most elite warriors in the Horde. Continue to escalate tensions with the Mag’har and you *will* lose. You say you wish to honor your people, care for them. Forge a pact with Geya’rah and enrich both your peoples, through *friendship*.”

Marran took a moment to think. “Yet I stand in the same room as the most powerful mage in all Azeroth, the one who tipped the Battle for Lordaeron to the Alliance. And you tell me still that I will lose?”

At this, Jaina sighed. “I came to offer you my advice, Marran, not my magic.”

Marran held Jaina’s gaze for a moment, then turned and walked toward the other end of the chamber. She stopped and knelt down, her torch revealing a large, dark mass on the floor.

Jaina followed Marran over, then gasped as she saw what it was.

It was a dead wolf, still wearing the harness of its Kor’kron raider. She’d spoken with Thrall many times about the orcish mounts—for the Frostwolf clan especially, the relationship between orc and wolf was based on respect and friendship, rather than discipline and domestication. The poor creature was huge, its thick black fur shining in the torchlight.

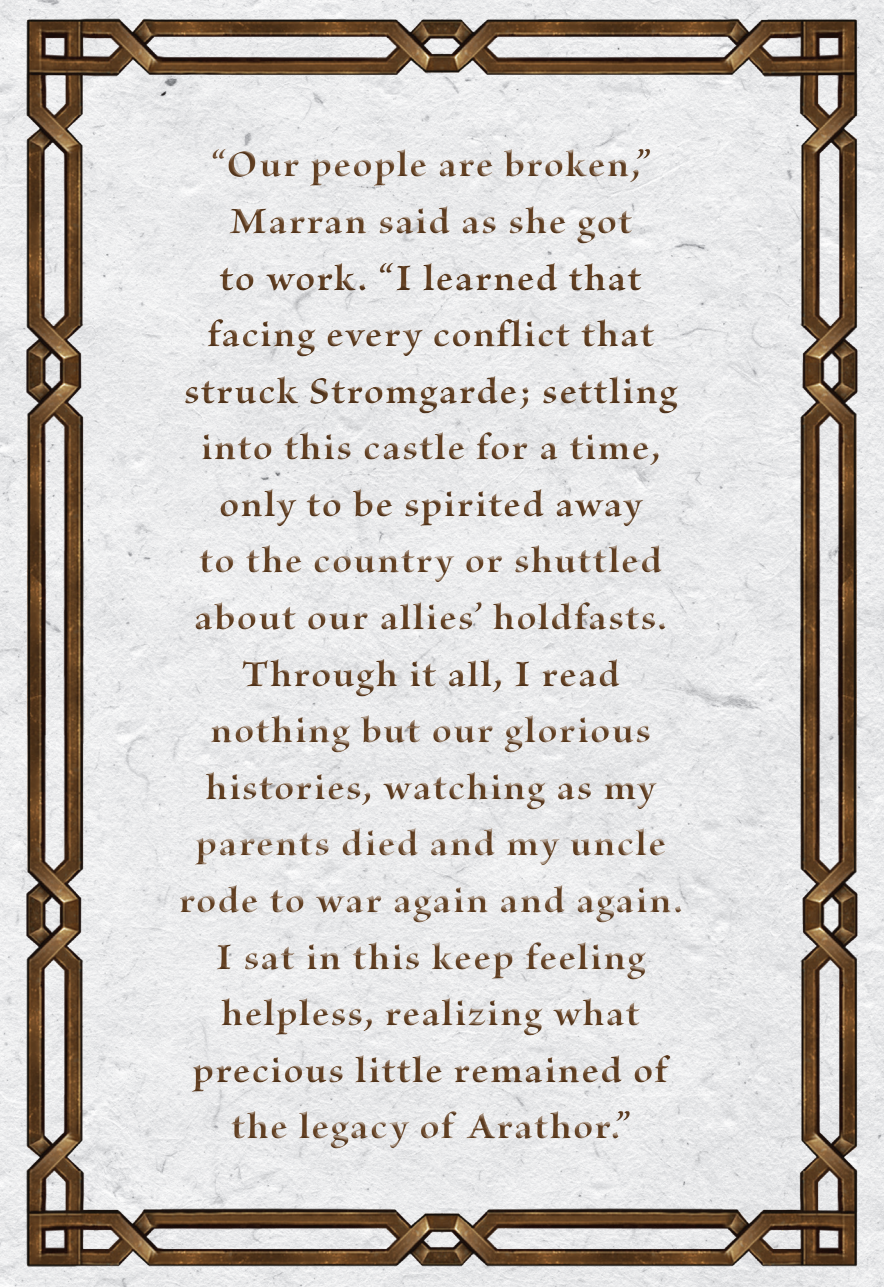
Marran stood and, placing her torch in a wall sconce, pulled a short knife with a curved blade from her belt. She grabbed the wolf’s fur at the back of its head and lifted. The creature’s jaw hung open, revealing dagger-sharp white teeth.

“Our people are broken,” Marran said as she got to work. “I learned that facing every conflict that struck Stromgarde; settling into this castle for a time, only to be spirited away to the country or shuttled about our allies’ holdfasts. Through it all, I read nothing but our glorious histories, watching as my parents died and my uncle rode to war again and again. I sat in this keep feeling helpless, realizing what precious little remained of the legacy of Arathor.”

Jaina could only watch in horrified fascination as Marran began to skin the wolf, sickened by what she knew this ritual represented.

“Dalaran’s fall marks the passing of yet another human kingdom, though it had become unrecognizable in recent times. Gilneas succumbed for so long to blight, and we do not speak of what transpired in Alterac . . . or Lordaeron.”





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There came a terrible ripping sound as Marran separated skin from muscle and bone. “You nearly lost your seat in the Fourth War. And Stormwind . . . what used to be a *backwater* country, now leads us, determines what cut of the Alliance’s takings we may taste.”

The regent of Stromgarde cut the skin carefully from the back now, hefting her prize with a spatter of blood. Sheathing the knife, Marran dragged the pelt clear of the wolf and laid it out over the ancient flagstones of Arathor. “The people look to us for strength, but we sell it time and again to the Alliance. We send their armies our grain while the Stromic starve. We send them our fighters while our children grow up not knowing their storied legacy. As we struggle to repel the ogres, the Syndicate, or worse.”

Marran stood back and took the torch once again from the sconce. In its flickering light, Jaina could see Marran’s skin was slick with sweat, her chest heaving at the exertion. But she saw something else too. The regent stood in silence before the pelt, staring down at it, entranced, even though she was the one who had just prepared it.

Jaina felt her heart sink as she realized the truth.

Marran was more than just an inexperienced ruler, an idealist.

She was a *believer*. A believer in a glorious past that Jaina also knew to be fantasy. Marran worshipped a misguided, even dangerous nostalgia for a golden age she had never experienced herself.

Marran looked at Jaina. “The Arathi Highlands belong to humanity. They are the heart of a great empire whose blood runs in *our* veins even now, Jaina. We must purge them of all invaders and take back our kingdom. It is our birthright. It is what Thoradin fought for. And we are—I *am*—destined to continue his legacy.”

Jaina struggled to contain her disdain as she spoke. “Marran, you are set on a path of annihilation.”

“Will you help me, Jaina?”

Jaina shook her head, lost for words.

At this, Marran seemed to tense, bracing for a blow.

“I knew you wouldn’t understand,” she said. “And I’m sorry.”

Jaina felt a sharp sting, and something clattered on the stone-flagged floor. Jaina’s hand flew to her neck, and her fingertips came away bloodied. She turned and saw an

archer step out of the shadowed corridor behind them. A woman in a long black hooded cloak—the same Bowman, Zatacia, who had shot Thrall and intercepted Jaina’s letter.

And then Jaina collapsed, hitting the hard floor, her staff rolling out of her grip. She looked up, tried to focus on Marran as the world began to gray around her.

Marran ducked down and picked up a dart from the floor before collecting the wolf pelt. “That won’t kill her, right? I can’t have the entire Alliance at us too.”

The archer smirked. “The Daughter of the Sea will sleep well tonight.”

And then Jaina was lost to the darkness.



### 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.*