



WOLFHEART



NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

RICHARD A. KNAAK

A slight movement in the opposite direction caught Eadrik's attention. The doe, acting only on her instincts and unable to meld those with common sense, had chosen an inopportune time to begin running again.

The worgen lunged after her. Varian waited for a moment, then stepped from the tree. If Eadrik was here, the lord of Stormwind considered, then his master could not be far.

The bow once again ready, Varian moved in the direction from which Eadrik had come. The worgen hunted as a pack to a point. Being also men, those like Genn would seek their individual kills.

Varian retraced Eadrik's path, moving through the brush as readily as the worgen. His eyes constantly surveyed the vicinity and his ears and nose sought signs of his prey.

And at last he saw a worgen who could only be the Gilnean king. Genn flung himself after a massive boar with tusks so sharp and strong that, if the animal turned to face the worgen, Genn would truly risk death. At the moment, though, the boar thought only of flight.

Genn, however, was fast gaining. He ran sometimes on only his legs, but other times used his hands, too. With a liveness that Varian had not even seen from the much younger Eadrik, the veteran ruler closed on the boar.

Having measured the situation, Varian entered the fray. Although without the "benefit" of the curse, he moved with all the skill and pace of one who had survived more critical struggles than surely all the worgen combined. Yet, it was more than merely the reflexes of a former gladiator that served Varian now. Another force guided him, drove him in among the worgen as if he were one of their own and not simply a man. Others in the past had called him Lo'Gosh...and, at that moment, that name was more true of him than the one with which he had been born.



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In addition to *Wolfheart*, his most recent releases include *Dragon Mound*—the first in his Knight in Shadow trilogy for Sea Lion Books—and the third omnibus in the *Legends of the Dragonrealm* series. He is presently at work on several other projects, among them a new *Dragonrealm* novel featuring the sorcerer Shade.

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In the wake of the Cataclysm, conflict has engulfed every corner of Azeroth. Hungering for more resources amid the turmoil, the Horde has pressed into Ashenvale to feed its burgeoning war machine. There, acting warchief Garrosh Hellscream has employed a brutal new tactic to conquer the region and crush its night elf defenders, a move that will cripple the Alliance's power throughout the...



Unaware of the disaster brewing in Ashenvale, the night elves' legendary leaders, High Priestess Tyrande Whisperwind and Archdruid Malfurion Stormrage, conduct a summit near Darnassus in order to vote the proud worgen of Gilneas into the Alliance. However, resentment of Gilneas and its ruler, Genn Greymane, runs deep in Stormwind's King Varian Wrynn. His refusal to forgive Genn for closing his nation off from the rest of the world years ago endangers more than just the summit: it threatens to unravel the Alliance itself.

Varian's animosity is only one of many unsettling developments in Darnassus. An uneasiness creeps over the once-immortal night elves as the first of them fall victim to the infirmities of age. While they cope with their mortality, tensions flare over the reintroduction of the Highborne, formerly the highest caste of night elf nobility, into their society. Many night elves are unable to pardon the Highborne for the destruction unleashed on Azeroth millennia ago by their reckless use of magic.

When a murdered Highborne is discovered on the outskirts of Darnassus, Malfurion and Tyrande move to stop further bloodshed and unrest by appointing one of the night elves' most cunning and skilled agents to find the killer: the renowned warden Maiev Shadowsong. Yet with all that is transpiring in Darnassus, the Alliance might be powerless to stop the relentless new warchief Garrosh from seizing the whole of Ashenvale.

WOLFHEART



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WOLFHEART

RICHARD A. KNAAK

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GALLERY BOOKS

New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi



Gallery Books
A Division of Simon & Schuster, Inc.
1230 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10020
www.SimonandSchuster.com

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First Gallery Books hardcover edition September 2011

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Interior art by Alex Horley.

Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Knaak, Richard A.
World of warcraft : wolfheart / Richard A. Knaak. — 1st Gallery Books hardcover ed.
p. cm.
I. Title.
PS3561.N25W67 2011
813'.54—dc23

ISBN 978-1-4516-0575-4
ISBN 978-1-4516-0577-8 (ebook)

For all the adventurers everywhere . . .

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The Battle Rages on

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I'd like to again gratefully acknowledge those folks who have consistently been there to offer their expertise on the background for this and previous novels. Thank you to Publishing Lead Mick Neilson and Senior Story Developer James Waugh, plus Evelyn, Sean, Tommy, Joshua, George, Gina, and everyone else at Blizzard who's lent a helping hand. Also to Glenn Rane for another fantastic cover!

And how could I not also thank all those who work on *World of Warcraft* in whatever capacity to make the ultimate online gaming experience? You may be behind the scenes, but without you guys in the trenches, this success could not be possible.

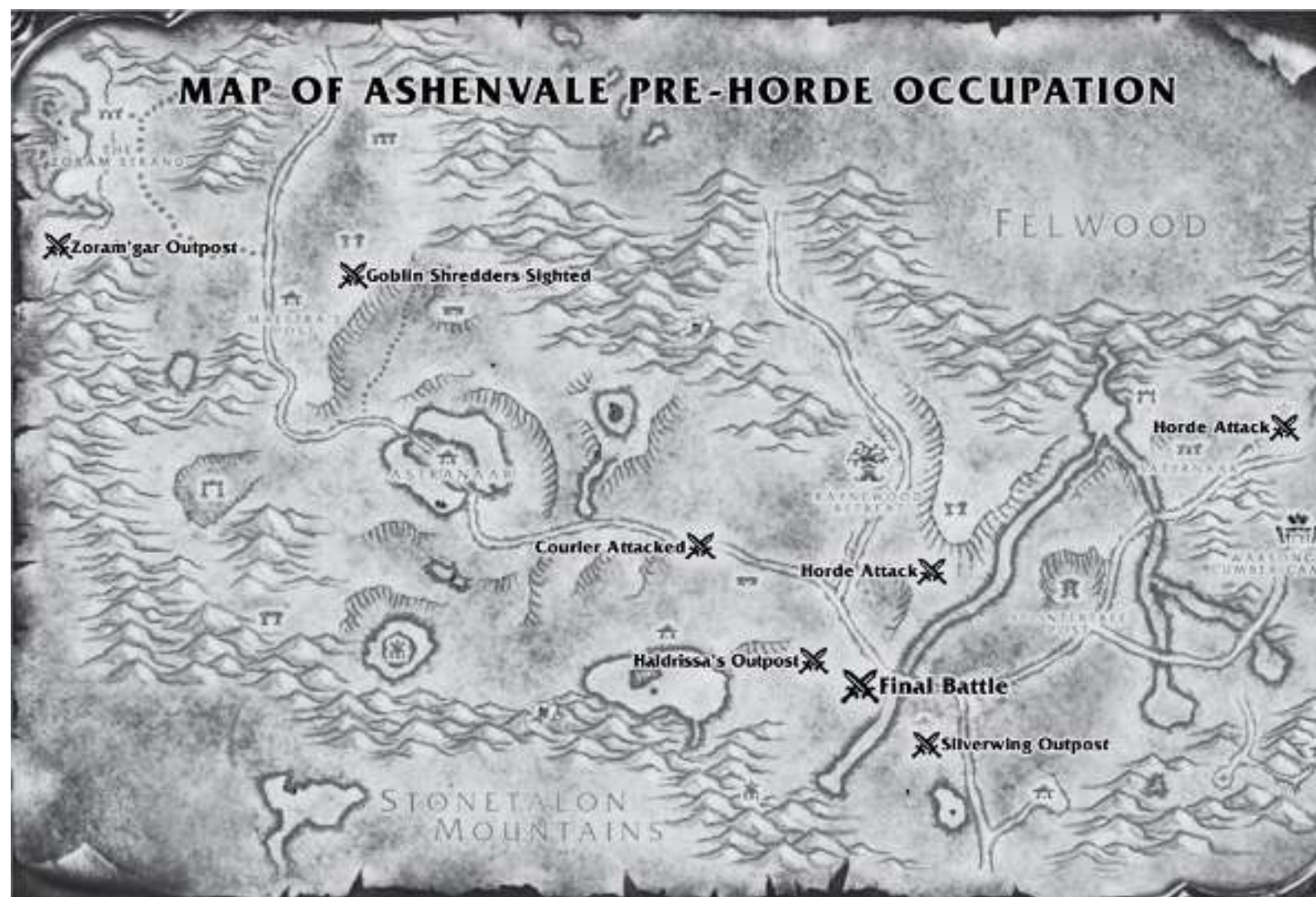
Naturally, my appreciation to Chris Metzen for his creative guidance and for introducing me to Azeroth!

On the publishing side, as ever thanks to those at Simon & Schuster who helped guide the process through—Ed Schlesinger and Anthony Ziccardi.

Lastly, thanks to all of you who continue to enjoy these adventures in Azeroth!

—Richard A. Knaak

MAP OF ASHENVALE PRE-HORDE OCCUPATION



PROLOGUE



NORTHREND

Twin rows of straining, green-skinned warriors tugged on taut, broad ropes as they dragged a colossal wheeled cage slowly up the wide ramp leading into the last of the ships. Despite Northrend's eternal winter, the muscular orcs sweated heavily from effort. Their broad-jawed faces contorted with each new heave of the ropes.

Guards stood alongside the ramp, torches in one hand, ready weapons in the other. With steely brown eyes they watched not the workers but rather the great covered cage. The cube-shaped structure towered over them, its outer covering consisting of a great tarp sewn from goatskin. There were no gaps in the tarp, no hint from the container as to just what the cargo was.

But there was a clue, revealed simply in the fact that the orcs themselves maneuvered the cargo. Desolate as the port was, it did have work animals such as the horned, reptilian kodo beasts, stronger creatures more than capable of taking the places of the struggling orcs. There was even a trio of mammoths generally used for transporting several riders at once. Yet, not only were those animals excluded from the effort, but they had been moved decidedly far from the vicinity of the docks. Even there, they stirred anxiously, the kodo beasts flaring their nostrils and the mammoths waving their trunks as all the animals stared in the direction of the ships.

With a tremendous howl, the winds abruptly picked up to storm strength. Weather in Northrend had only one consistent factor . . . that it was foul. But there were many levels of foul, and the docks shook as the waters of the cold sea suddenly churned with great waves. Ship hulls groaned as every vessel rocked hard.

From deep within some of the ships, there came horrendous roars and banging. On deck, crewmembers rushed to the hatches leading down to the holds. Stern veteran mariners and warriors looked anxious.

The last ship also rocked . . . and the gangplank twisted. It dipped to one side, spilling several startled guards and throwing the workers into a tangle.

The cage shifted. At the last moment, the orcs on the teetering ramp kept the container from falling. However, no sooner had they managed that than it began to shake from within. A roar identical to those emanating from the ships but much deeper echoed through the dank port. Something within began pulling at the tarp.

Guards rushed up from the port. Those still astride the gangplank fought desperately to maintain the balance. One failed, instead tumbling into the chill waters between the dock and the ship.

From the shoreline, the fleet captain—a one-eyed veteran mariner called Briln, whose body bore numerous intricate tattoos marking his journeys—raced toward the side of the gangplank and shouted, “Cage that cage straightened! Don’t let it fall! Get those weapons ready! Where’s the powder? If that cage is damaged—”

The cage beneath the tangled tarp rattled. The dim illumination of the wind-blown torches was insufficient to reveal what was happening, but the nerve-scraping wrenching of metal gave Briln enough

warning.

~~“Spears up front! Hurry, you offal! The right side of the cage!”~~

Two guards either more impetuous or more foolish than the rest moved in closer. From his angle, Briln could not make out everything that happened next, but he saw enough.

The foremost orc prodded the cage with his spear. The next instant, something snagged his weapon and tugged both it and him through a tear in the tarp.

As that happened, the second orc instinctively lunged forward to aid his vanishing comrade.

Something thick darted through the tear.

The orc was too slow to realize his danger. He was plucked from the gangplank as if weighing nothing. Before his fellows could reach him, the massive appendage crushed the guard's torso—flesh, bone, plate armor, and all. The gore splattered those farther back.

The hand threw the limp, ruined body aside, then retreated into the covered cage. From within, there immediately came a cry from the first warrior, apparently left alive for the moment.

Orcs with long, thick spears quickly lunged toward the spot as Briln raced up to join them. Two guards thrust, but the captain knew that it was already too late.

Shrieks that almost stopped him in his tracks echoed through the Northrend port. The utter fear in those cries could be felt as well as heard. There was little that could shake an orc's resolve or even draw up in on anything resembling terror, but what had been captured at already so much cost was more than capable.

A horrific crushing sound punctuated the shrieks. The orcs near the opening stepped back as something liquid sprayed them. A ghastly stench immediately followed, filling their noses.

“Spears! Spears!” Briln roared again as he neared. The captain looked up. The torchlight enabled him to see the rip in the tarp and the bent bars. Those bars had been forged strong; even with all his might, the gargantuan beast had been unable to do more than pull the bars just a little farther apart. Unfortunately for the two guards, that had been quite sufficient.

“Where's the powder?” Briln demanded to no one in particular.

Another orc finally rushed up with a burlap sack the size of a thick fist. He also wore a coarse cloth over his mouth and nose and handed one just like it to Briln, who used the two strings attached to the piece to secure it to his own face. The mask was merely a precaution. Nothing from the sack should have ended up in either Briln's nose or mouth, but there was no sense in taking unnecessary chances.

The captain was tempted to let the other orc do the task, but then he seized the sack himself. From within the nearby cage, sickening ripping sounds continued.

“Cover me!” The captain positioned himself, then studied the gap carefully. Although he had lost the other eye years ago in battle in Kalimdor against the Alliance forces commanded by the human Admiral Proudmoore, Briln still prided himself on his expert aim.

Taking a deep breath behind the cloth mask, the scarred orc tossed the pouch toward the gap.

The wind gusted, and for a moment Briln was filled with fear that the sack would miss entirely. However, it just barely made the edge of the rip, then fell into the obscured cage.

A moment later the captain heard a small, soft thump. The beast within let out a distrustful rumble. There was the sound of chewing. A slight mist of powder exited the tear, but not enough to concern the orcs. The wind carried away what little escaped, dispersing it.

Inside the covered cage, something heavy and moist dropped. Briln knew it to very likely be what was left of the guard. Despite that, the sound gave the captain more hope that his plan had succeeded.

A confused grunt arose from the shrouded creature. Suddenly, the cage shook harder. Inside, a huge force slammed against the bent bars. Heavy breathing arose near the tear in the tarp, but nothing could be made out clearly in the tear itself.

The breathing became labored, exhausted. The orcs heard stumbling.

~~Then there came a violent thud. The cage shuddered and almost slipped again. Only the strength~~
nearly two dozen struggling orcs kept that from happening.

Briln and the others waited several tense moments, but there was no renewed movement or sound. With caution, the captain approached the covered cage. Becoming more daring, he prodded the tarp.

Nothing happened. Briln exhaled in relief, then turned to the others. “Load that thing aboard, then get those bars bent back and that hole covered with something! Better make sure that there’s always a sack of that herb concoction the shaman gave us ready to sprinkle on the thing’s food! We can’t afford this on the seas!”

The other orcs moved to follow his orders. The captain studied the silhouettes of the other ships. Each contained such a cage. The new warchief Garrosh had commanded that this venture be completed regardless of the cost in seeing it done. Briln and the others here had not questioned that cost, either, for they would have readily perished for the legendary overlord of the Warsong offensive. Garrosh’s deeds were epic and retold over and over in the Horde. He was also the son of the late Grom Hellscream and had been an advisor to Thrall, the orc leader who had freed their people from captivity.

Yes, no matter how many lives it had already cost and *would* likely cost by the time the fleet reached its destination, it was all worth it to Briln and the others. The Horde was at last within grasp of its destiny. It had the vitality, the drive, that this altered Azeroth deserved. Those who had held power so long in this world had become decadent . . . too *weak and soft*. The Horde—and especially the orcs—would finally stand its claim on the more lush regions that it needed not only to survive but finally to thrive as it had long deserved.

This recent Cataclysm, so Garrosh had impressed upon his people, was the great sign that this was the day. The world had been torn asunder, and to survive meant to be able to adapt to its much-transformed lands.

The crewmembers finally had the last cage loaded. Briln watched as they sealed the hull. They had a full supply of the sleep powder in stock, and there were other threats that were supposed to keep the creatures in line, but the elder orc looked forward to the end of the journey.

Aboard deck, his first mate saluted. “Everything’s secured, Captain! All set to sail on your word!”

“Get us going, then,” Briln growled. “The sooner we get this cargo to Garrosh, the sooner it becomes the *Alliance’s* trouble. . . .”

The other orc grunted agreement, then turned to bellow Briln’s command. In short order, the ship pulled away from the dock.

The winds whirled madly and thunder crashed. A storm was brewing, the last thing the fleet needed. Still, the captain thought it nothing compared to what the Horde’s enemies would soon face. Briln stared beyond the dark, swirling waters, imagining the fleet’s destination, imagining what his cargo would do once Garrosh had it under his reins.

And for a moment, Briln almost pitied Ashenvale’s defenders, almost pitied the night elves.

But then . . . they *were* only night elves. . . .



THE WOLF

Tyrande Whisperwind knew that the world could never be mended. Deathwing, the great black dragon, had forever changed the face of all Azeroth in a manner even more terrifying in some ways than the Sundering—when the world's lone continent was savagely split apart. The high priestess, who had survived that epic event some ten thousand years ago, had never imagined that she would have to live through anything so brutal again.

To those few who might have been unfamiliar with her race, the night elf, her midnight-blue hair falling below her shoulders, seemed barely more than two decades old, rather than ten thousand years. However, her glittering, silver eyes were filled with the wisdom of so much experience. There were some very fine lines near those elegant eyes, but they were more the result of troubled times during the past ten millennia than from age.

Tyrande strode through the lush Temple Gardens, the centerpiece—though geographically more west of the center—of Darnassus and composed of several islets of varying size filled with the most exquisite flora. The light of a full moon shone down upon the gardens and with what appeared particular favor upon her. That it did so disturbed neither Tyrande nor any who happened by the high priestess. After all, it was a normal sight already familiar to those who knew the solemn figure.

She had hoped that out here she would be better able to think, to come to some conclusion concerning the weighty matters upon her. As high priestess, Tyrande generally sought guidance and peace from the goddess Elune, also called the Mother Moon, from a place of quiet meditation in the temple directly to the south. However, even the calm of the perpetually moonlit sanctum of the Sisterhood—the heart of Elune herself, some called it—had no longer proven enough. Thus, she had hoped the tranquil gardens might suffice where the temple had failed.

But although the gardens in some ways embodied the spirit of the Mother Moon even more than the temple, it was not enough to calm the high priestess this night. Tyrande could not keep from constantly worrying about the upcoming summit. The time of the gathering was fast approaching, and already she and the archdruid Malfurion Stormrage—her co-ruler and mate—wondered whether the event would prove worth anything at all.

The Alliance faced a revitalized Horde now led not by the seemingly conflicted Thrall, who might have kept the peace for the sake of both sides, but rather by a new, much more ambitious warchief. Garrosh coveted the great forests of Ashenvale, though he would hardly stop with them should they fall to his warriors.

Despite, as an archdruid, being more concerned with the wilds of Azeroth and having absolutely no ambitions toward politics, Malfurion had done what he could to help maintain unity in the Alliance. However, Tyrande and Malfurion both knew that the Alliance's future did not and could not rely upon him. It was time for someone who could be more dedicated to that goal. That was thus one of the points of the summit Tyrande and Malfurion had put together, to see if through the talks someone would arise who

could best guide those assembled forward in this new world.

~~Of course, the gathering would not matter if not all the members were in attendance, and there were some of significance who still had not sent word of their participation. If they did not join, then no truce in accord would likely be acceptable.~~

Among those Tyrande passed during her trek were other priestesses, all of whom bowed low in homage to her. They were clad in silver-white, sleeveless robes similar to her own. Tyrande wore little ornamentation, needing none to mark her as high priestess. All knew her. She acknowledged their greetings with a smile and a nod of her head, but so engrossed was she in her dark thoughts that, in truth, she forgot the encounters immediately after.

The foul vision of Deathwing the Destroyer and what he had caused filled her mind, nearly overwhelming her. Her heart pounded and her blood raced as she imagined the continuing repercussions of his terrifying act.

The summit must prove of benefit, Tyrande thought anxiously. This is the one opportunity we have to stave off the downfall of our world. If nothing comes of this, there will be no hope of attempting another gathering. It will be too late for all of us by then. . . .

But they had not received word from three of the major members of the Alliance, including Stormwind. . . and if Stormwind alone did not participate, then—

Around her, the light of Elune grew blinding.

The Temple Gardens vanished.

Tyrande Whisperwind stumbled, then caught herself. Her eyes widened. New surroundings came into view, surroundings not at all even a part of Darnassus, the night elf capital. She now stood in a place far away, a place clearly on the mainland, on the continent of Kalimdor. Tyrande had been transported hundreds of miles in less than a single heartbeat.

More shocking than that, she was surrounded by the unmistakable vision of war. The stench of wholesale death was familiar to her, and darkened mounds roughly the size and shape of bodies—mangled ones—were everywhere.

What had once been pristine wilderness—a few ruined tree trunks marked that this had once been forest—had clearly been ravaged by previous battles here. As the high priestess fought to regain her composure, it quickly dawned on her that she knew this place, this time, though whether from memory or because of Elune, it was impossible to say.

She stood in the midst of Azeroth's first climactic struggle against the Burning Legion . . . a battle fought more than ten thousand years ago during the War of the Ancients. That war had culminated with the Sundering and the sinking of the night elf capital of Zin-Azshari into the waters once housing her people's fount of power—the Well of Eternity. The Legion had sought the end of all life on Azeroth and had come horribly close in achieving that monstrous goal, ironically with the help of the night elves' own queen.

The demonic warriors surged forward, the fiery infernals at the vanguard. The massive constructs were followed by felguard and felhounds, the former towering, armored warriors and the latter fearsome, toothy beasts. Other demons added to their monumental numbers. The insidious army rushed over the landscape unhindered, contrary to what the night elf recalled of that history. Anything touched by the demons burst into the same horrific green flame that surrounded each of the monstrosities.

Tyrande looked for those defenders she knew should be here, her own people and the many fantastical allies who had gathered to prevent the destruction of Azeroth. However, they were nowhere to be seen. Nothing blocked the destructive forces. The land, the world, was doomed. . . .

But then a powerful howl shook the scene. The high priestess felt her hopes instinctively rise. She felt she should know that howl, for it touched her very soul.

The demons faltered, though only for a moment. As one, they let out a mighty roar themselves, the renewed their push forward.

From the opposite direction, a great shadow stretched across the landscape. Tyrande followed it to its origin.

The wolf Ancient was gigantic, majestic, and so pure white that he all but gleamed. He towered over all else. The huge animal howled again, and this time countless other howls joined in from somewhere behind him.

“*Goldrinn . . .*” Tyrande murmured.

From the dawn of its reshaping by the mysterious titans, Azeroth had been guarded by beings who were tied to the world as no other creatures could be. The dragons had been empowered by the titans, but Azeroth itself gave rise to spirits and demigods, creatures eternal in nature yet capable of ultimate sacrifice. But not until the War of the Ancients had any of these protectors faced a threat as terrifying as the Burning Legion. Dragons had perished by the scores, and among the spirits and demigods there were many who fell in the final battle.

One of those had been Goldrinn.

Yet, this bloody scene before her was not exactly history. Tyrande finally understood that, though her natural instinct was to fear not only for her world but also for the wolf seeking to protect it again. Elune had chosen this urgent scene to tell her something, though the high priestess was at a loss as to what it might be. Was she to watch Goldrinn sacrifice himself once more?

Several demons neared the giant wolf, who growled his challenge to them. But as the attackers came upon him, with renewed cries, a vast pack of mortal wolves leapt from the emptiness behind Goldrinn. They poured over the landscape, sleek, furred hunters already sizing up their individual prey. Though they were not as huge as most of the demons, they charged with ferocity and determination unparalleled.

The two forces collided. The demons wielded blades, axes, savage teeth, claws, and more, and knew how to use all of them well. At first it seemed the wolves had only teeth and claws, but their dexterity and swiftness were unmatched. They darted among their sinister foes, snapping and slashing wherever they found an opening.

Goldrinn stood at the forefront. The huge wolf seized a felguard in his mouth and bit through. Great flames erupted as the beast let the fragments fall. At the same time his claws crushed through another foe.

Two wolves brought down an axe-wielding enemy who had just cleaved in twain one of their brethren. The wolves tore the demon's arms off, then one took out the throat. However, other demons fell upon them, overwhelming the pair.

Tyrande strained to join the battle but could not move. She could only watch helplessly as more wolves perished, and even though they seemed to take more than their number in adversaries, that did little to assuage her fears and regrets for them.

More and more demons focused on Goldrinn, clearly aware that he was what guided the wolves. Though the demons tried to hack away at his limbs or drag him down so that they could cut his throat, but Goldrinn shook off those near his paws, batting some away so hard that they crashed into their own comrades. In his savage jaws, the gigantic wolf plucked up one demon after another. Some he bit to pieces like the first, others he shook until the sheer force sent their body parts scattering. Goldrinn barreled through the Burning Legion's ranks, his eager pack ever at his side.

Bloody wolf carcasses and dismembered demon corpses already littered the battlefield, but the two sides' numbers appeared undiminished. Another wolf was chopped to pieces, and even more demons attacked Goldrinn. Yet, the enormous wolf was undaunted and continued to claw and bite one foe after another, leaving them piled three and four high in many places.

Mother Moon, why do you show this to me?!? The high priestess strained to leap to Goldrinn's aid, but she could not do more than observe. *Either let me join this struggle, or tell me the purpose of this endless slaughter, please!*

But the fight went on without revelation, and, worse, matters suddenly took a dark turn for Goldrinn. Harassed from all sides, the wolf could not fend off all his opponents. Demons struck him again and again, the growing number of wounds finally beginning to take their toll on the great Ancient.

One of the felguard managed to climb atop the white wolf's back. The fiendish warrior, his eyes blazing green in anticipation, raised his weapon and struck hard at the center of the wolf's spine.

"No!" Tyrande cried out, realizing what was about to happen. She was well aware of this dire event, though she had never known the details.

Goldrinn let out an anguished howl. His legs collapsed beneath him. Demons pushed at him in great numbers.

From somewhere in the madness to the Ancient's right, a single dark-brown wolf leapt up. Though the height should have been beyond his capabilities, the smaller wolf managed to reach not only Goldrinn's back but the demon who had so terribly wounded him as well.

The felguard turned just as the wolf neared. The demon attempted to slash at the newcomer, but the sleek, lupine form darted under the axe blade. The wolf then bore into the felguard's legs, toppling his towering foe.

Crashing against Goldrinn's back, the demon lost his weapon. The felguard sought to rise, but the wolf was already upon him.

With one ferocious bite, the wolf tore out the demon's throat.

As the corpse slipped off the side, the lesser wolf howled. He glanced down, then jumped. His leap was not without purpose, for he landed atop another demon harassing Goldrinn, then tore out the chest of the one.

Taking the lesser wolf's lead, others of the pack began rending those demons intent on Goldrinn's destruction. The Burning Legion was at last forced to abandon the taking of the wolf Ancient and, indeed, was now pressed back.

But it was too late for Goldrinn. The Ancient managed to push himself up and seize in his mouth the demon. He bit through the armor and sinew, spitting out the pieces. But then the wound took its toll. The Ancient collapsed, crushing a few more of his enemies, and then lay unmoving.

Again, as had happened more than ten thousand years before, Goldrinn died.

Yet, seemingly undaunted by this terrible loss, the dark-brown wolf spearheaded the advance, pushing ahead of Goldrinn's corpse. More and more of the lesser wolves joined their brother, now becoming avengers of their patron.

One demonic warrior after another perished at the teeth and claws of the dark-brown wolf. He howled between adversaries, his cry now as great as that of Goldrinn. He seemed larger, too, more than twice the size of the others.

The Burning Legion began to steer their efforts against him, but that seemed only to encourage the brown wolf. He took on every demon that attacked and left in his wake their tattered bodies. With so many demons much taller than him, the wolf even began jumping up on his hind legs in order to better snap at an arm or even a lowered head. His front claws slashed through armor and flesh as well as any blade.

A helpless Tyrande let out another gasp. The more she stared at the valiant wolf, the more comfortable he seemed on two legs as opposed to four. The claws of one hand clamped together so tightly that they were as one, and also grew with each successive cut.

This was different from what the high priestess had heard had happened during the original battle, and

she knew immediately that history had now slipped into something else. This was what Elune truly wished to reveal to her . . . though what it meant was yet a mystery to the night elf.

The wolf's claws abruptly became a *true* greatsword, and the brown wolf *fully* a man . . . an armored warrior whose face the high priestess could not make out from where she watched. The pack right behind him, he continued to challenge the Burning Legion. His sword thrust again and again.

A startling new change followed, but this time among the demons. They transformed, becoming forms equally recognizable and far more imminent: *orcs*.

The transformation was swift and happened without notice by those involved. The wolves tore at the orcs as if they had always been the enemy.

Felling another opponent, the shadowed warrior raised his sword and let out a triumphant shout that still had hints of a lupine howl. The wolf pack surged again, but now they also stood on their hind legs, and their forepaws became hands wielding axes, maces, and other weapons. Like their leader, they were not human, albeit even more shadowed than he was.

Disarray overtook the orcs. Their numbers dwindled. The lead warrior once again confidently shouted

And from behind the line of battle, in the direction the high priestess knew the body of the wolf Anciel lay, there came an answering howl. Tyrande turned her gaze there . . . and beheld *two* Goldrinn's. The first was the corpse of the slain animal. The second was a glorious, translucent spirit who once more howled in victory.

But though the wolf spirit was like mist, there was something else within him, something more solid and somewhat familiar—

With a start, the high priestess realized that she was staring at the shadowed leader . . . despite the fact that he should have been at the forefront of the battle. Then, blinking, Tyrande noticed that she was watching the forefront. Both areas had suddenly blended together. Goldrinn's ghostly countenance hovered over his champion, who seemed to grow taller yet.

An orc wielding two axes swung at the champion. The warrior deflected the first axe, then swiftly did the same with the second. With a whirl of the sword, he then brought the blade between both axes and thrust it deep into the orc's chest.

Blood spurted from the gaping wound as the champion pulled the weapon free. The orc gaped and staggered. His eyes glazed. The axes fell from his twitching fingers.

The hulking orc dropped to his knees. His body shook and blood flowed from his mouth, dribbling over his jaw and tusks.

The shadowed hero took a step back.

The orc fell forward, landing face-first at his slayer's feet. As he perished, so, too, did the last of his comrades.

The battle was over.

The spectral Goldrinn let out a new howl. Then, he and the warrior fully blended together. At the same time, the shadowed champion at last turned his gaze toward Tyrande. His face was finally visible. . . .

And at that moment, the high priestess returned to the Temple Gardens.

Tyrande wavered briefly, then quickly regained her composure. There was no one else in sight, perhaps coincidence, perhaps Elune's intention. Tyrande also suspected that not even a second had passed in the mortal world.

The high priestess did not question being suddenly thrust into the vision. Elune had clearly wished to relay something of such urgency to her that it could not wait. Understanding what it was, Tyrande was grateful, yet a bit confused.

She realized that someone was approaching her. Smoothing her silver robes, the high priestess met the

gaze of one of General Shandris Feathermoon's aides. The Sentinel looked a bit flushed, as if she had been running hard.

The female Sentinel—her torso, forearms, and legs protected by light armor—knelt with the utmost deference before Tyrande, not only because the high priestess was their leader, but also because the general was Tyrande's adopted daughter. The warrior was armed with one of the favored weapons of the night elves, a triple-bladed moonblade.

Keeping her head down, the other night elf said, "The general knew that you would wish to see this immediately, High Priestess."

The Sentinel held forth a small parchment that bore Shandris's personal seal. Taking the missive and dismissing the aide, Tyrande broke the seal and read the contents. The message was short and to the point, as was the general's way.

Word arrives that the king of Stormwind will be joining the summit.

There was nothing more save Shandris's mark at the bottom. The news was significant in one great respect in that if Stormwind was a part of the gathering, then the other holdouts would quickly send word of their coming as well. The high priestess and Malfurion had been hoping that Stormwind would agree to join the party, though of late they had been concerned that its ruler might instead decide the kingdom's fortunes were better without its troubled neighbors.

But of even more significance to the high priestess was the timing of this news. She knew that Shandris had only just received it herself a few minutes before and that, as the general always did, Shandris had made certain that her beloved ruler and mother would share in that knowledge as swiftly as possible. Elune had intended for the vision to coincide with the arrival of the missive.

"So, Varian is coming . . .," Tyrande murmured. "It all makes sense now. I should have seen it."

And the vision now became clear. The night elf had only had a glimpse of the face, but even then she had been certain that the shadowed champion resembled none other than King Varian Wrynn of Stormwind. Naturally, the Mother Moon had known, but could only give her high priestess a sign when there was something that could actually be done with that knowledge.

"Varian Wrynn," she repeated, recalling so much about the king's troubled past in that name. He had been a slave, a gladiator, a man with no memory of his true self. He had watched his kingdom fall and fought to take it back from none other than what had turned out to be the daughter of Deathwing in human guise.

And during those terrible times, when Varian had lost his name and had been forced to fight for his life nearly every day for the pleasure of spectators, he had been given another name by those in attendance, a uniquely important name.

He had been—and still was by many—called *Lo'Gosh*.

Lo'Gosh . . . another name for the ghost wolf, *Goldrinn*.

The two cloaked travelers disembarked from the small boat. That they were night elves like the majority of the inhabitants of Rut'theran Village was evidenced in their build and their ears, which shoved back through the fabric of their deep hoods. Their faces remained in shadow.

The port village was humble by night elf standards but exceedingly fresh in appearance, for all the buildings were new. It was actually the *second* settlement by the name, the first destroyed by the sea during the Cataclysm. The second most significant characteristic of the port other than its three docks was the hippogryph breeding area, where eggs of the astonishing winged creatures who acted as aerial transport for the night elves were meticulously cared for and the young were raised.

The most significant aspect of the island was something the pair of travelers had been viewing for quite some time. In fact, they had seen it from miles away on the mainland . . . just as anyone else in this region would have.

Teldrassil was the name given for the island, but only as an afterthought. The island was only a small extension of the true *Teldrassil* . . . a titanic tree filling most of the land and rising so high, the top vanishing in the clouds. Its branches were so vast that they dwarfed some kingdoms. The thick crown could have housed an entire civilization—and did.

Indeed, *Teldrassil* was known as the second *World Tree*. The first, ancient *Nordrassil*, still lived, but had yet to recover from the violence of the Third War—again, against the Burning Legion—only a few years prior. While *Nordrassil* had provided immortality, good health, protection from the misuses of the Well of Eternity’s magic, and an open path to the Emerald Dream, the second *World Tree* had served mainly as the new home for the night elf race. Even then *Teldrassil* had already had its share of troubles. The tree had been tainted by the evil of the Nightmare Lord through his puppet, the archdruid Fandral Staghelm. That taint had spread to the flora and fauna upon *Teldrassil*, and only recently had the tree been cleansed.

But as inspiring as the vast tree was to all who saw it, the newcomers almost appeared oblivious to its presence now. The taller of the traveling pair—male, with long, silver hair spilling out from his hood—paused to eye with much interest the adult hippogryphs. The slighter and clearly female figure at his side coughed harshly and teetered against her companion. The male quickly turned his attention from the avian creatures and tightened his hold on her.

“The portal,” he murmured. “It will be nearby and quicker. Just hold on . . . we are almost there. Hold on . . . please!”

The female’s hood briefly bobbed up and down. “I will . . . do my best . . . my husband. . . .”

Her reply was very weak, and by the stiffening of his form the male showed his grave concern for his mate. Guiding her forward, he searched for what neither had ever seen but should have been readily identifiable.

A Sentinel officer noticed the pair. Her gaze swept over the concealing cloaks. Frowning, her glaive gripped at the ready, she confronted them.

“Welcome, visitors,” she said. “May I ask from where you come?”

The male looked at her, his face briefly becoming visible.

The Sentinel’s words trailed off, and her face flushed with shock. “You . . .”

Without a word, the male led his mate past the stunned officer. As he did, that which he sought became visible through the buildings and the crowd.

“The portal . . . ,” he murmured.

A stone path followed a gentle slope up to *Teldrassil*. At the base of the tree loomed a tall portal, a huge shimmering mark in Darnassian script emanating from its side. Yet, even as high as it stood, the magical entry was dwarfed by some of the great roots arcing down from *Teldrassil*.

The portal was a magical, direct link to the city far, far above. Two Sentinels were the only evident guards, but the male traveler knew that there were others hidden near and, in addition, safety measures built into and around the structure.

Undaunted, he led his mate toward the portal. The Sentinels eyed him suspiciously.

From behind the travelers came the officer’s voice. “Let them pass unhindered.”

The guards did not question the command. The male traveler did not waste time turning to thank the officer; all that mattered was getting his mate to Darnassus . . . to help.

“Watch your footing,” he whispered to her.

She managed a nod. They had succeeded in making it to the portal itself. His hopes rose. *Almost there!*

A fit of coughing overtook her. It became so brutal that he lost his grip on her. She fell to her knees, her hooded face nearly to the stone.

He quickly retrieved her, but as he helped her straighten, the soft patter of liquid caught his ear.

A small pool of blood decorated the area near where her face had hovered.

“Not again . . .”

Her hand, which held his, suddenly squeezed with the incredible strength of the truly fearful. “Husband—”

She collapsed in his arms.

The guards moved to assist, but he had no time for them. They might even suggest that he wait while they check on her condition. But in his harried thoughts, any second meant disaster . . . loss. . . .

His only hope was reaching the high priestess.

Gripping his slumped mate, the male lunged into the portal.

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