

BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT

The Council of Three Hammers: Fire and Iron

Matt Burns

The sky above Aerie Peak beckoned Kurdran Wildhammer like the distant glow of a campfire on a frigid winter night. After twenty long years trapped on the hellish world now known as Outland, he was home. Never once had he regretted joining the Alliance expedition to battle the orcish Horde on its homeworld, but over the harsh years there the longing to see this sky had burned in his heart.

His gryphon, Sky'ree, glided above him with three of her kin, as vibrant as she had ever been over the last two decades. He craved to be up there with her and feel the mountain air rushing against his face. Fate had ordained that he would walk the earth on two legs, but the sky was where he felt free. That was Sky'ree's greatest gift to him. More than her ferocity during war or her friendship during peace, it was flight. For now, though, he would let her soar in the sky on her own.

Kurdran took a deep breath and surveyed his home: verdant forests stretched out in all directions; Wildhammer dwarves milled about in shops and homes along the mountain's slopes; and the colossal aviary, a stone enclosure sculpted in the image of one of the noble gryphons, towered atop Aerie Peak. Everything was just as he had left it.

He drew a small iron scepter from his side, wrapped in strands of grass and adorned with gryphon feathers. It wasn't a weapon—his battle-worn stormhammer was hanging on his back—it was a reminder. On Outland, the scepter had become almost mystical in nature, a symbol of who he was and the home he was fighting to protect. Many times he had held it close and felt hope surge through him, driving him forward. Yet now that he was home, the scepter's potency seemed—

A shrill cry pierced the air. Kurdran looked up, and a pang of fear stabbed him. Sky'ree was spiraling toward the ground, her wings twisted in unnatural ways.

"Sky'ree!" Kurdran bellowed.

The gryphon slammed into the ground with a sickening thud. Jagged bones protruded from her shattered hind legs, and blood spurted from a vicious crack in her skull. Sky'ree attempted to rise, but she crumpled from the pain. She opened her beak, and a frail cry escaped from it.

"Dinna move, lass!" Kurdran yelled. He was charging toward his fallen companion, heart pounding, when suddenly his hand went stiff.

The scepter he held was bubbling and transforming into something chillingly familiar... crystal... *diamond*. Glittering tendrils shot from it and slithered up his arm, freezing his limb as solid as stone. The viscous substance reached his chest and expanded downward until it fused his legs to the ground.

Kurdran struggled for the stormhammer on his back, but diamond encased his arm before he could pull the weapon free. Frozen in place, he could only watch in helpless despair as the gryphon who had saved his life countless times, who had become an extension of his own being, slowly bled out before him.

The diamond prison continued up Kurdran's neck, icy and heavy, until it poured down his throat and filled his lungs. At last it covered his eyes and ears, and Sky'ree and the inviting blue sky were gone.

But Kurdran was denied the freedom of death. He existed in a void while dread burned through his mind like liquid metal in a forge. Eventually, he heard a faint rhythmic thud, louder and louder.

THUMP. THUMP. THUMP.

Each blow sent dull vibrations through his body, as though someone were slamming a blunt object against his crystal death shroud, trying to liberate him.

THUMP. THUMP. THUMP.

The rigidity in his body faded. Feeling returned to his limbs. Then the sound took on another tone.

CLANG. CLANG. CLANG.

The familiar noise was all he needed to know where he was and realize that he had merely been awakened from one nightmare into another. It was the metallic twang of hammer striking anvil that went on day and night, grating in Kurdran's ears. The pulse of a city not his own, built so deep within the heart of a mountain that it would never know the joy of open skies.

It was Ironforge.

The city of Kurdran's ancestors was a simmering cauldron of old prejudice. It churned endlessly, its toxic fumes dissolving whatever logic and reason remained within the Bronzebeard, Wildhammer, and Dark Iron dwarves living together in Ironforge for the first time in over two centuries. And Kurdran was standing at the edge of it all, gazing into its fiery heart with confusion as it grew closer and closer to erupting.

In an unsettling way he felt as if he were still at war with the blood-cursed Horde and trapped on Outland. Yet there were no clear enemies in Ironforge. No crazed demons. No rampaging orcs bent on decimating all life on his world. There were only words.

When Kurdran had arrived in Ironforge mere weeks before, he had been treated as somewhat of a hero for his sacrifices in Outland. It was different now. Baseless rumors targeting the Wildhammer clan had emerged from the city's shadowy halls like vengeful ghosts from the bloody War of the Three Hammers that had shattered the unity of the dwarf clans so many years ago. They ranged from stories of ritual sacrifice performed in Aerie Peak to tales that Kurdran had executed a dozen other Alliance fighters on Outland for retreating from battle. A week ago, the dwarves' attention had turned to a new topic of interest.

"The council is expectin' ye, Thane Kurdran."

Kurdran ignored the Ironforge guard and clutched the Wildhammer scepter tight in his hand. From his vantage point in the city's gryphon roost, Kurdran peered at the cavernous Great Forge—the aptly named heart of Ironforge. Streams of molten metal cascaded from the ceiling into scalding orange-yellow pools. Beyond the churning liquid-metal vats, dwarven smiths swung hammers down on anvils. The heat, especially so near the forge, was oppressive in an unnatural way, like being trapped in an opaque glass bottle and left to suffocate under a blazing sun.

Sky'ree was lying atop a bed of straw at his side, her legs tucked under her massive body. Kurdran ran his callused fingers through her feathery mane and contemplated his fate.

"Why did I ever choose tae come here?" Kurdran muttered to himself under his breath.

"Because ye didna want tae see the bloody past repeat itself," a calm voice replied. Eli Thunderstrike stepped near Kurdran, raking stray clumps of straw into neat piles. "Because King Magni, despite bein' a Bronzebeard, was an honorable dwarf. And because, as ye said yerself tae Falstad, ye're the only dwarf fit fer the job," Sky'ree's tender continued.

Eli's words brought stinging memories to Kurdran's mind. Upon returning from Outland, Kurdran had shown great disrespect to his close friend Falstad, who had ruled over the Wildhammer clan in Kurdran's absence. Dwelling on Falstad now, though, would only add to Kurdran's woes, and so he forced away the thoughts concerning his friend.

A low coo rumbled from Sky'ree's throat, and she nudged Kurdran with her beak as if to punctuate Eli's words.

"I wasn't talkin' tae ye." Kurdran waved his hand dismissively at Eli and then turned to Sky'ree. "Or ye."

Sky'ree simply repositioned herself atop the straw nest, briefly revealing three cream-colored eggs dotted with blue that she had laid shortly after arriving in Ironforge. Kurdran had wanted her to return to Aerie Peak with the clutch rather than stay in the city, but she wouldn't leave him. She wasn't a pet. She was a free spirit, free to choose her destiny just as Kurdran was free to choose his.

Sky'ree's decision to stay filled Kurdran with a mixture of joy and anger. Immediately after laying her eggs, she had become so weak and frail that she could no longer fly. The numerous priests, gryphon masters, and alchemists who had examined her had all drawn the same conclusion. Sky'ree's condition wasn't due to some strange malady contracted on Outland or in Ironforge. It was an ailment for which there was no cure: time.

"Thane Kurdran—"

"I'm comin'!" Kurdran snapped, glaring at the Ironforge guard.

"Ye canna very well do that when ye're sittin' on the ground, now can ye?" Eli chided as he continued his work.

Kurdran grunted and rose to his feet. The plated Bronzebeard guard abruptly turned and then clumsily threaded his way through the mounds of gryphon nests that stretched into the walkway encircling the Great Forge. The roost had more than doubled in size since the Wildhammers had arrived in the city with their own gryphons. In a way the area had become a reminder of Aerie Peak, a home away from home.

With the scepter at his side, Kurdran followed the guard, nodding to Wildhammer gryphon riders who sat among the piles of straw. As forlorn as Kurdran was, the expression on the other dwarves' faces was as if they were watching him go off to meet his death.

In a way, he was.

Kurdran followed the guard around the walkway until he reached the High Seat. A boisterous crowd of dwarves stood outside the chamber, their faces awash in a combination of shadow and light from the fiery iron braziers that burned throughout the city. Members of each clan were present: Bronzebeards in polished silver plate; tattooed Wildhammers adorned with gryphon feathers; and ashen-skinned Dark Irons clad in work aprons and smudged with soot. The gathering provided a miniature glimpse of Ironforge as a whole, with a small number of Wildhammers and Dark Irons sprinkled among the city's Bronzebeard majority.

As Kurdran pushed his way through the crowd, he caught fragments of the heated conversations taking place among the dwarves.

"The Bronzebeards kept our piece o' Modimus's hammer as it was, as it should be!"

"Ye kept it stuffed away in yer library, gatherin' dust. The Wildhammers made somethin' new out o' our piece."

"Och, lad, no use arguin' wi' a Bronzebeard about this. Every good piece o' wares that comes outta Ironforge is just somethin' they pilfered from an ancient vault," a nearby gryphon rider yelled.

Someone among the throng shoved the speaker into Kurdran, and the crowd shifted, closing in around him.

"Make way!" Kurdran shouted.

A few of the dwarves nearest to him made a path. Others glared, their faces contorted in anger.

"Make way fer Kurdran, representative o' the *butterflies!*" a voice roared sarcastically, using a derogatory term for Kurdran's clan.

"A round o' ale on me if Kurdran agrees tae give up his piece o' the Modimus hammer!"

"Nae dwarf wi' his head on straight would pass up wagerin' against that!"

Kurdran elbowed through the last line of dwarves and emerged in the High Seat. The chamber, home to Ironforge's regency, was like the rest of the city—dim and shadowy, with high metallic stone walls illuminated in the glow of hanging lamps. At the back of the room, atop a raised platform, were the three identical thrones of the Council of Three Hammers.

A chill went through Kurdran as his eyes locked with the middle throne, once that of King Magni. When Kurdran had joined the council, Magni's brother Muradin had taken him to the lower depths of the ancient city. There Kurdran had seen an image that would haunt his dreams: Magni transformed into a diamond statue. The petrification had happened while the king had been performing a mystic ritual to commune with the earth and glean answers as to the troubling quakes, storms, and other calamities befalling the world at the time.

Now Muradin stood at the central throne. Kurdran glanced at the Bronzebeard dwarf, who glared back balefully. It was a far cry from the jovial welcome that he had given Kurdran upon entering the city. In his first days on the council, Kurdran had shared many pints of ale with Muradin and recounted his tales of Outland while the Bronzebeard had told of his own adventures in the frozen

continent of Northrend. As the days had worn on, Muradin had grown cold to Kurdran for reasons that the Wildhammer did not understand.

To Muradin's right stood Moira Thaurissan, Magni's daughter. Despite having devastated her father by marrying into the Bronzebeard clan's former rivals, the Dark Irons, she was the legal heir to Ironforge, as was her small toddler, Dagra, who was rocking idly in a crib at Moira's feet.

The heiress, her hair drawn up in perfect buns, bowed slightly at Kurdran. "Welcome, Kurdran."

"Aye," was all Kurdran said. He marched past a wooden table standing at the bottom of the ramp to the thrones. On the table were two artifacts that had, in the past week, stirred the simmering cauldron of Ironforge into a torrent: a gnarled wooden staff with a deep-violet gem set in it and a scarred, warped hammerhead.

Kurdran grimaced at the sight of the relics and took his place at the throne to Muradin's left. Not for the first time since he had come to Ironforge to rule alongside Moira and Muradin, he felt out of place. The council was thick with Bronzebeard and, due to Dagra, Dark Iron blood, but not on Kurdran's side of the thrones.

The babble of voices at the entrance to the High Seat died down, and Advisor Belgrum, a wizened dwarf standing at the foot of the platform, bowed. Two younger historians standing nearby mirrored Belgrum's gesture of respect. One of them was a short Wildhammer dwarf dressed in a bright red tunic—a very thorough fact checker by all accounts.

Belgrum straightened and shuffled forward. "Welcome, Thane Kurdran. I take it ye've made yer decision?"

Kurdran took in the room. Everything was the same as it had been in recent days. The same question. The same crowd of bickering dwarves. The same feeling of being cornered. On each previous occasion he had answered Belgrum the same way: no. Yet just last night, a Wildhammer and a Bronzebeard had been killed during a petty brawl concerning the scepter in Kurdran's hands.

"I dinna think I have a choice," Kurdran replied.

"Och..." Muradin sighed. "How many times are ye gonna go on about—"

"Kurdran," Moira interrupted, "of the three of us, it is you who have the most to sacrifice. If you choose to keep your piece of the hammer, we will forgo what we have planned."

Kurdran's attention shifted to a tattered scroll in Belgrum's aged and trembling fist. The parchment, discovered in Ironforge's library a week prior, depicted parts of the dwarven civil war centuries past. As the story went, when the high king of Ironforge, Modimus Anvilmar, had died, the clans had battled for control of the city. In the process, Modimus's weapon—the Hammer of the High King—had mysteriously disappeared. Over the years, Kurdran had heard his share of rumors regarding what had become of the hammer. The parchment put an end to the speculation. It said that Modimus's hammer had been broken into three pieces. During the chaos of the war, each clan had, in one way or another, managed to obtain one of the fragments. Faced with the uncertain future of Ironforge, Kurdran surmised, the dwarves foolishly saw mending the hammer as a path to peace, or simply an outlet for their old rivalries and animosity.

Kurdran shook his gaze from the scroll.

"I've made me decision," he yelled, lifting the iron scepter in his hand. "This heirloom has been a part o' the Wildhammer clan fer centuries. I joined this council tae maintain peace, not argue over reforgin' an old hammer!"

Angry shouts rose from the shifting mass of stout dwarven onlookers.

"The hammer was Modimus's tae begin with! It belongs tae the city!"

"If the Wildhammers dinna want peace, they dinna belong on the council!"

Kurdran looked on, agitated, as the throng closed in on the few Wildhammer dwarves in the crowd just as armed guards were rushing in to quell the unrest.

"But one o' me clansmen is now dead because o' this hammer," Kurdran bellowed over the clamor. "I'll not have it happen again."

He squeezed the Wildhammer scepter in his hand one last time and set it down on the wooden table, alongside the other artifacts, with a hollow thud. The crowd went silent.

Belgrum nodded and raised his hands to everyone present. "So it is, by decree o' the council, that the great hammer o' Modimus Anvilmar, last high king o' Ironforge, will be reforged!"

A roar of applause rose from the dwarves in attendance, and Kurdran scowled.

"As ye now see," Belgrum continued, "from the Wildhammers comes the handle o' Modimus's hammer, taken by one o' the clan and reforged into a scepter carried by Thane Kurdran, an' before him, Thane Khardros."

Kurdran eyed the scepter. Its size and shape were slightly different from the description of the hammer handle in the parchment. He remembered asking Khardros years ago where the scepter had come from. The elder dwarf had simply replied that the heirloom's past was not important; its significance lay only in what it had become. Kurdran had always viewed the thane's ambiguous explanation as one of his usual philosophical musings, perhaps even a metaphor for the Wildhammer clan. Now he wondered if it had been Khardros who had taken the handle and reshaped it, never speaking of its origins again.

Belgrum gestured to the deformed hammerhead atop the wooden table.

"From the Bronzebeards comes the head o' Modimus's hammer, damaged beyond recognition in a fire durin' the civil war and tended tae in the city's library along with other debris gathered in memory o' the conflict."

Then, Belgrum extended a hand to the gnarled staff adjacent to the hammerhead.

"And from the Dark Irons comes the once-golden-hued crystal that had been set into the head o' Modimus's hammer, found by one o' the clan's sorcerers and altered in color tae hide its identity."

Loud, erratic applause issued forth from the Dark Irons in attendance.

"The forgin' will begin three days from now. Fer the time bein', the council asks that ye go about yer business as it chooses who will reforge the pieces," Belgrum said.

The onlookers slowly dissipated, picking up their fiery arguments where they had left off as though the meeting had never happened. Kurdran stared hard at the Wildhammer scepter resting on the wooden table. A troubling question ate at him: what more, in the weeks and months to come, would Ironforge strip away from him and his clan?

Without a word he descended from the stone platform and strode toward the exit of the High Seat.

"Kurdran," Moira called after him with concern, "we have yet to decide who will forge the hammer."

"It doesnae matter," Kurdran growled as he left the room.

Kurdran strolled beside Sky'ree past rows of apartments and merchant shops at the outer ring of the city, where the sound of hammer striking anvil from the Great Forge was only a faint echo. The cloud of age was thick in the gryphon's eyes, and the slowness of her gait was painfully obvious. Much to Kurdran's chagrin, though, Sky'ree seemed to enjoy exploring every nook and cranny of Ironforge.

More than anything, Kurdran longed to escape Ironforge and fly with Sky'ree, but a simple walk was all that the gryphon could muster. The walks were usually a welcome distraction, but today his mind was racing with thoughts concerning Modimus's hammer. After Kurdran had stormed out of the council meeting the day prior, Moira and Muradin had chosen a Dark Iron smith to reforge the hammer. The decision made Kurdran's blood boil, although in retrospect he had only himself to blame for not being present to argue against the choice. His dislike for the Dark Iron clan ran deep. Betrayal and treachery seemed as ingrained in the Dark Irons' culture as gryphons were in that of the Wildhammers.

Sadly, sacrificing his scepter had done nothing to abate the tension in Ironforge. As Kurdran walked, he felt the spiteful stares of passersby gawking at his tawny, weathered skin, his fiery red ponytail, and his tattoos. Kurdran knew that the glares went much deeper than just at his outward appearance. Ironforge was a clash of cultures, each one holding itself superior. The Wildhammers preferred living on the surface and soaring in the skies of the northern lands with their beloved gryphons. The Bronzebeards preferred to dwell in the mountain as they always had. And the Dark Irons... the Dark Irons lived even deeper in the shadows, their ways shrouded in—

A steel-plated shoulder rammed into Kurdran's side, jolting him away from his thoughts. He turned to see two Dark Irons carrying a large keg. The dwarf who'd bumped into him glared at Kurdran with the glowing eyes common among the Dark Irons. They reminded Kurdran of the demonic eyes he had seen on Outland.

The Dark Iron grunted, and then he and his partner continued on their way. They were followed by a line of their clansmen divided into pairs, each carrying a keg. A strong odor wafted from the containers, which Kurdran recognized as the smell of spirits brewed by the Dark Irons. The concoction wasn't like the ale he enjoyed. It was the type of drink that numbed the senses and made one forget after consuming only a glass. Kurdran had seen groups of Dark Irons carrying kegs of the

stuff throughout the city numerous times, apparently looking for something more potent than what Ironforge had to offer.

"Kurdran," someone unseen said as the last of the keg-bearing Dark Irons passed. The voice was unmistakable—calm and regal in a practiced way.

Kurdran turned to see Moira approaching. Alongside her was a stout Dark Iron dwarf named Drukan, whom he had observed accompanying Moira on many occasions.

"Taking noble Sky'ree for a stroll, I see," she said with a polite smile.

Kurdran searched Moira's face for some sign that would belie her cordiality. He suspected that she and her Dark Irons were in some fashion responsible for the rumors circulating about the Wildhammer clan.

It had, after all, been due to her aggressive actions—after Magni's accident, she had held the city hostage with armed Dark Irons and had claimed the throne—that the Council of Three Hammers had been formed in the first place. The decision to reforge Modimus's hammer had also come at her behest.

Yet time and again Moira had proven to be Kurdran's greatest ally in Ironforge. When complaints—in most cases, unfounded—had been made about the Wildhammers, blaming them for food and housing shortages and the overcrowded gryphon roost, she had defended his clan. But her apparent benevolence gave Kurdran no satisfaction.

"She needed tae get away from the heat," Kurdran said as he patted Sky'ree's leonine hindquarters.

Moira stepped close to Sky'ree and raised her hand to the gryphon's beak. "A magnificent creature. How is her condition?"

"Improvin'," Kurdran lied, not wanting to discuss the matter with Moira any more than necessary. He was surprised that Sky'ree had been able to rise from her nest today.

"I have a feeling she'll be as good as new in no time," Moira said. She stroked Sky'ree's mane, and the gryphon lowered her head, cooing softly.

Kurdran had always known Sky'ree to be a good judge of character. The fact that she regarded Moira with such favor filled him with doubt about his suspicions concerning the Dark Iron leader.

Moira glanced at Drukan, who stood farther back with a dour look on his face. "Come, Drukan. Sky'ree is a legend. She's faced dragons before: did you know that?"

"I dinna trust a beast that has a taste fer dwarven blood," Drukan said, sneering.

Moira's eyes grew wide in shock, and she stifled a laugh. "Don't be ridiculous."

"That's what they say about the Wildhammer lands," Drukan said. "They feed their prisoners tae the gryphons. An' Sky'ree here, well, the story goes she's had more than her fill."

Kurdran felt his body flush with heat, and he took a step toward Drukan.

"Watch yer tongue, lad."

"You know how these absurd rumors have been spreading," Moira said, placing her hand on Kurdran's armored shoulder. "Drukan is—how should I say it?—still learning the finer points of civility."

She turned to Drukan, and her tone was malevolent. "Apologize."

"But, Yer Highness—"

"Now." She glared at Drukan with a cold gaze that spoke more than words.

"Beggins' yer apologies," Drukan said to Kurdran through clenched teeth.

"Well, I don't mean to trouble you and Sky'ree," Moira said, her tone cordial once again. "I merely wanted to say that your decision yesterday was one of great humility... something I've come to expect after hearing of your heroics on Outland. Reforging the hammer *will* bring unity, and it will be due to your decision that this unity comes to be."

"I'm not one o' the dwarves out there who canna think fer themselves," Kurdran said harshly. "What's done is done."

The Ironforge heiress simply smiled. "Of course. I'll leave you and mighty Sky'ree to your walk."

He watched Moira and Drukan as they went on their way, his moment of peace with Sky'ree sullied by the interaction. He wanted Moira to be the enemy. That, at least, would make the confusion in Ironforge understandable. Yet Kurdran felt with growing unease that he was searching for reason in a city that had abandoned any semblance of it.

"Let's get back tae the roost, lass," Kurdran said, and he tugged on Sky'ree's wing.

Kurdran stood at his throne within the High Seat, forcing himself to stay calm. It took all of his willpower to keep from lashing out at Belgrum, who was standing before the thrones.

"I take full responsibility fer this," the advisor said, lowering his head in respect to Kurdran and the other council members.

The High Seat was empty save Belgrum and the three clan representatives. Even so, the old dwarf spoke in hushed tones. Between his words, a tense silence filled the room. Clutched in his hand was the parchment recounting the story of Modimus's hammer.

"It's a well-made piece o' lies." Belgrum lifted the scroll and grimaced. "After further scrutiny, it seems as though the parchment was aged wi' magic. An' it was stuffed away in the record books. On the surface, nothin' was a cause fer concern."

"Nothin' a cause fer concern?" Kurdran said. "One o' me clan is dead!"

"In case ye forgot, one o' me clan has died as well," Muradin retorted. "It wouldna have come tae this if ye would've given up yer piece o' the hammer in the first place."

"Are ye deaf, lad? It isn't a piece o' anythin'!"

"Dinna use that as an excuse! Ye didna want this tae begin with!"

"Muradin, Kurdran, please," Moira said, turning her attention to Belgrum. "The reforging is a day away. You understand what this means, don't you?"

"Aye, Yer Highness. But the parchment is a fake. I'd stake me life on it. Someone took a mighty effort tae pass it off as real, but the script used doesnae match that o' other scrolls from the same period o' time."

"So when did the pieces originate?" Moira asked.

"Fer all we know, the Wildhammer scepter an' the Dark Iron gem came about after the civil war. The parchment described the damage on the Bronzebeard hammerhead in detail, which was how we found it. But knowin' what we know now, there's no tellin' when it was damaged and put into the library."

"Who did this?" Kurdran grumbled. He wiped a fresh layer of sweat from his hairless scalp. Despite his hearty constitution, the stifling heat of the city was getting to him.

"Och... impossible tae say. Many dwarves pass through the library each day," Belgrum replied.

"It matters not. We must go through with it," Moira said. "Our fellow dwarves are expecting an act of unity. If this story comes to light and we cancel the reforging, they'll want *someone* to blame. Word of this does not leave this room," she added, fixing her gaze on Belgrum. The graying dwarf nodded.

Kurdran slammed his fist against his throne. "I'll not give up somethin' that rightfully belongs tae me clan tae keep this lie alive!"

"It's not a lie tae the city anymore," Muradin said. "Not after days o' arguin' about it."

Much to his agitation, Kurdran recognized the wisdom in Muradin's words. Discussion of the Modimus hammer had set the tension in Ironforge on an immovable path, like a roaring avalanche that would continue its course until the reforging, regardless of what the council said.

Kurdran sat in the gryphon roost and mulled over the troubling situation. The truth of the Modimus hammer weighed heavy in his mind. He had hoped to take Sky'ree for a walk and clear his thoughts, but she couldn't rise from her nest. She simply lay motionless, her breathing barely noticeable.

Wildhammer gryphon riders sat near their winged companions, distraught over Sky'ree's condition as well as the tense atmosphere in Ironforge. Even Eli's usually jovial demeanor was absent, and the gryphon tender lethargically raked bundles of straw in silence. Many of the gryphon riders, including Eli, were veterans of Outland. They had followed Kurdran to Ironforge just as they had

followed him to the orcish homeworld, never questioning his decisions. For the first time in Kurdran's life he felt that he had led them into an unwinnable, pointless battle.

Kurdran rose and paced through the roost as ten Dark Irons carrying wooden kegs began traversing the nests that stretched out into the walkway. The Dark Irons glared with their unsettling eyes at the seated Wildhammers as they passed. One of the Dark Irons tripped on a stray pile of dry straw, sending a keg crashing to the ground. The wooden container cracked open, and a pale liquid gushed out into the roost.

The fallen Dark Iron beat his fist against the ground and struggled to his feet.

"Why do ye Wildhammers have tae have yer birds scattered out where we walk?" the Dark Iron said, and he spat on the nearest gryphon. The creature squawked and swiped the edge of his nest with a talon, sending a clump of straw into the enraged dwarf's face.

Eli stopped his work and calmly approached the Dark Iron.

"It's not their fault, lad," he said in an even tone.

"Yer beasts have been nothin' but a nuisance since they got here. As if havin' tae dance around their dirty nests wasn't bad enough, I can smell their stench from the city's gates." The Dark Iron was seething. He cracked his knuckles and then took a step toward the nearby gryphon, both hands balled into fists.

Eli instinctively thrust up his pitchfork toward the Dark Iron. "Dinna ye lay a hand on the gryphon, lad."

The Dark Iron's eyes widened at the sight of the pitchfork pointed at him. "Ye see this, lads?" he said to the other Dark Irons. "A Wildhammer raisin' a weapon against us."

Eli hastily lowered his pitchfork. "Dinna make this into somethin' it's not."

Five gryphon riders squatting close by rose to their feet. One of them stepped forward and jabbed his finger into the Dark Iron's armored chest.

"Take the rest o' yer swill an' be on yer way," the Wildhammer said.

Kurdran could sense it coming. The cauldron boiling up, its fiery contents rising higher and higher. After the troubling revelation about Modimus's hammer, a brawl was the last thing he needed to deal with. He walked toward the Dark Irons, hoping to avert the inevitable.

"Ye Wildhammers would see this city burn before harm ever came tae these beasts!" the Dark Iron roared, and then he turned to his companions. "Give 'em somethin' tae calm their nerves, lads."

Without hesitation, two of the Dark Irons heaved their keg into the roost. It soared by Kurdran's head and came crashing down next to Sky'ree, spraying her and nearby gryphons with Dark Iron spirits.

Rage momentarily welled up inside of Kurdran, and he took a deep breath to regain his composure. He marched to the lead Dark Iron to send him and his clansmen on their way. At seeing Kurdran,

the Dark Iron took an involuntary step back, slipping on the straw and landing on the ground with a thud.

Raucous laughter erupted from the gryphon riders. "Just seein' Kurdran scared the wee bairn!" one of them yelled.

The Dark Iron glanced furtively around, his face awash with humiliation. Finally he rose and stepped forward, inches away from Kurdran. "Butterfly Thane... why dinna ye go back an' sit in the straw wi' the rest o' the animals?" the Dark Iron growled. Then he spat in Kurdran's face.

The tiny force of the insult dislodged something in Kurdran, something that had been lurking deep inside of him since he had come to Ironforge. The fleeting dream of seeing the skies above Aerie Peak... his decision to give up the heirloom... Sky'ree's condition. Everything exploded at once, blinding him with fury.

Kurdran's fist connected with the Dark Iron's head, sending the other dwarf off his feet.

Without any order to do so, the Wildhammers at Kurdran's side charged forward. The Dark Irons hurled their kegs at the attackers, who expertly dodged and rolled out of harm's way. Loud squawks rose from the gryphons as kegs landed throughout the roost, splintering against areas covered in only a thin layer of straw. Then the Wildhammers and the Dark Irons collided, clutching whatever limbs or armor they could grab.

The groups pushed back and forth until the Dark Irons finally lost their balance and crashed into a nearby brazier. Fiery embers erupted from the iron container and caught a nearby mound of straw alight. The fire surged through the surrounding nests, fueled by the Dark Iron spirits.

In seconds, the entire roost was aflame. Smoke billowed up toward the ceiling of the Great Forge. A number of gryphons voiced shrill cries and took to the air, leaving a torrent of feathers, ash, and embers swirling below them.

"Water!" Kurdran roared, stepping over the pile of dwarves on the ground.

From other parts of the Great Forge, dwarves began rushing toward the roost. Gryphons were now circling in the shadowy recesses of the area, but four remained on the ground, three of them huddling around Sky'ree and her nest.

"Sky'ree!" Kurdran yelled. "Get out o' there!"

From her direction came a cry that made Kurdran clench his eyes shut in pain. It was a sound he hadn't heard since Outland. A battle cry that had on many occasions been enough to send Sky'ree's enemies fleeing in terror.

Flames raged around her. Kurdran could barely see Sky'ree through the heavy smoke that covered the roost. One of the gryphons at her side shot upward in a blur, leaving a trail of singed feathers in the air. The two other gryphons rose as well, but they did not flee. They hovered in the air with the talons on their forelegs clutching Sky'ree's wings, voicing brief caws to each other. In unison, the two gryphons began beating their wings furiously, trying to lift Sky'ree off the ground, but she jerked herself free from the grasp of her kin.

Dwarves started dousing the fire with kegs of water, while a newly arrived pair of gnomes in long flowing robes muttered incantations that sent crystals of ice over the roost. The fire, however, continued to roar. Kurdran moved to strip off his armor, but in his state of shock he could do little more than fumble with the straps. He abandoned the idea and barreled toward the flames.

"Kurdran!" Eli yelled.

The gryphon tender and two other Wildhammers wrapped their arms around Kurdran's body. Even with three powerful dwarves clinging to him, Kurdran edged closer and closer to the flames. It took another two Wildhammers to finally wrestle him to the ground.

Pinned down, Kurdran could only watch as the two gryphons near Sky'ree fled from the roost, the heat and smoke too much for them to bear any longer. After an agonizing few seconds, Sky'ree slumped to the ground.

When the last burning embers had been extinguished, Eli and the other Wildhammers released Kurdran, and he rushed into the smoldering roost. Sky'ree was there, motionless. Blackened and smoking.

A hand touched Kurdran's shoulder.

"I... I'm sorry," Eli said in a hoarse voice.

"Why'd she fight her kin? They were tryin' tae save her...." Kurdran muttered in disbelief.

"Och... o' course, lad. She was protectin' the eggs!" Eli said suddenly.

The two dwarves carefully moved Sky'ree's body. Underneath, where three pristine eggs had once been, were scattered fragments of charred shells and the half-cooked remains of Sky'ree's children.

Kurdran stared at the grim sight, speechless.

"She... she tried," Eli said, and he knelt down in front of the blackened nest.

The crowd around the ruined gryphon roost stood in silence. Even the Dark Irons who had been partly responsible for the fire seemed bewildered and at a loss for words. All eyes were on Kurdran. The smoke roiling around him was tinged with the smell of burnt flesh and straw, and he felt dizzy.

Kurdran wandered out of the Great Forge while gryphons were still circling in the air and the city's residents were attempting to piece together what had happened. It was all he could do to keep from collapsing. The fire had burned a wound in him, and from it had drained the last remnants of hope, ambition, and joy that had once coursed through his veins.

For hours he sat alone in a sparsely populated tavern with a pint of untouched ale as memories of Sky'ree came to him. Each one was overshadowed by images of her charred corpse. She should have died in battle, or at the very least in the comfort of her home near Aerie Peak. Not in the heart of a mountain.

It was a mistake to come here, Kurdran thought. His regret dredged up reminders of someone whom he had kept almost completely out of his mind for the past few weeks: Falstad.

Falstad had taken over the title of Wildhammer high thane from Kurdran during his years on Outland. After finally returning to Aerie Peak, Kurdran had felt an overwhelming urge to make up for the decades he had been absent from his homeland. Although he hadn't officially laid claim to his old rank, Kurdran had issued orders to his clan without consulting Falstad, which had undermined the high thane's position.

Kurdran's journey to Ironforge was one example of his overzealous attempts to prove that he was the leader he had always been. As current high thane, Falstad had been slated to join the Council of Three Hammers, but Kurdran had snatched the opportunity from him, stating in not-so-subtle words that his friend did not possess the experience to undertake such a task. In the jubilation surrounding Kurdran's return from Outland, the clan had backed his reasoning. Kurdran could still see the anger and hurt in the high thane's eyes after all had been said and done, as if Kurdran had felt that Falstad's twenty years of bravely leading the clan had been meaningless.

Now Kurdran realized the foolishness of what he had done. For the first time, he wished that Falstad could take his place in the city. Not because Kurdran wanted him to endure the tension rife in Ironforge, but because he believed that Falstad was a better dwarf for the job.

No, Kurdran told himself.

Calling upon Falstad, even after everything that had happened, would be a sign of weakness. There was still a means, Kurdran realized, to prevent Ironforge from stripping away all that he held dearest.

There was still *something* that the city hadn't taken.

The High Seat was empty when Kurdran stalked through it to Muradin's throne. Adjacent to the stone seat was the large iron chest where the three pieces of the Modimus hammer were stored. Each council member had been given a large, heavy key to the container. Kurdran slipped his into the lock.

Slowly he opened the chest and withdrew his clan's scepter. It looked barren and defiled now, stripped of its gryphon feathers and dry strands of grass in preparation for the reforging.

"I knew you would take it back," said a voice tinged with glee.

Kurdran whirled. Moira was standing at the bottom of the ramp to the thrones, still dressed in her formal wear, holding Dagra in her arms. A shaft of light cut across the High Seat from the open door of her chambers at the back of the room.

"I'll not be part o' this lie."

Moira gracefully ascended the ramp. "You remind me of Dagra clutching one of his toys for dear life and throwing a tantrum when I try to take it from him."

"Ye never understood what this meant tae me... an' ye never will."

The Ironforge heiress strolled over to Kurdran's throne and looked it up and down.

"I'm still puzzled as to why you ever came here," Moira said. "You and your clan don't belong in Ironforge. Nor do you want to be here, it seems."

"I was asked tae come."

"Not by me."

It was true. When Moira had arrived in Ironforge with her Dark Irons, she had effectively taken the city hostage. One of the visitors trapped within had been Prince Anduin of Stormwind. In reaction, his father, King Varian, had accompanied a group of SI:7 assassins into Ironforge, intent on killing Moira for her misdeeds. Ultimately, he had spared her, but he had resolved to create the Council of Three Hammers to maintain peace. In doing so, Varian had named Falstad as the representative of the Wildhammer clan.

For a moment the two dwarves simply stared at each other, until Moira broke the silence. "I wonder how it feels for a dwarf like you, who has won so many battles, to be defeated."

"What do ye mean?"

Moira set Dagrán down near Muradin's throne, and the toddler climbed up onto the stone seat, giggling and oblivious to the conversation taking place.

"It must be a strange and terrible feeling."

"What are ye talkin' about?" Kurdran asked with growing agitation.

A smile crept onto Moira's face. It was the same practiced grin that Kurdran had seen countless times, but in the current situation, there was something sinister to it. A cold realization began dawning on him.

"I was concerned when you joined the council. You were a dwarf of iron will, strength, and resolve who had sacrificed everything to protect our world. But when finally you arrived, I saw how you clung so tightly to that old piece of iron. It was a strange sight... as though you had somehow put all of your pride into that single object."

Kurdran barely heard Moira's words. His thoughts were racing. The strange rumors about the Wildhammers. The steady escalation of tension brought about because of the falsified parchment found in the library. Even Moira's defense of his clan. All of it had painted the Wildhammers as nonconformists and methodically eaten away at their reputation. As a result, attention had shifted from Ironforge's usual object of animosity: the Dark Irons.

The simplicity of it all filled Kurdran with the terrible sense of ineptitude that came with being bested by an enemy not your equal. This was the sort of devious behavior he had expected of Moira, but he hadn't trusted his intuition.

"So was it ye who put the parchment in the library? Or did ye have that rat Drukan do it fer ye?"

The Ironforge heiress simply smirked and patted Dagrán's back, ignoring the question. "I've stationed guards at the library. I can assure you something like this will not happen again."

"Answer me!" Kurdrán roared, drawing his stormhammer and pointing it at Moira.

Moira eyed him evenly, unfazed. "You've slain dragons with that hammer, correct? Countless orcs as well, I assume? I can only imagine what it would do to me."

"It'd crack yer skull wide open before ye even made a sound."

Moira stifled a laugh. "And with my blood still warm on this floor, my people would rise up and burn this city. You and your brutish clan would be the first cast into the fire."

"If ye had even one ounce o' honor in ye, ye'd admit what ye did."

"It's over, Kurdrán. You're a dwarf of action, not words. Alas, in Ironforge words are all that matter. This isn't Outland, where victory is measured in the amount of blood you spill. It's measured in the number of hearts you win. And you have failed quite spectacularly at that. Perhaps Falstad would have been a more appropriate dwarf to represent your clan after all."

"All this time ye've been blabberin' on about unity," Kurdrán said, his grip tightening on the stormhammer. "Ye dinna even know what ye want."

Moira's face stiffened, and she struggled to keep smiling.

"I know exactly what I want," Moira hissed. "You were never willing to extend a hand in peace to the Dark Irons. Your opinions were already fixed when you came here, clouded by old hatred."

"So ye sacrificed me and me clan so the Dark Irons wouldna be treated like the scum they are?" Kurdrán asked.

"I did what I did for the future. So that when my son inherits this throne, he will not rule over a city that treats him like a pariah due to the blood that flows through his veins."

"If only Magni could see ye here. I can only imagine the pain he'd feel, watchin' his degenerate trogg o' a daughter tear down everythin' he worked tae build."

"Do not speak to me as if you know of my past, or Magni's." Moira was exploding with rage. "You and your clan are *guests* in this city. The sooner you leave, the better!" Moira unconsciously squeezed Dagrán's arm, and the toddler began to wail.

"I always expected that—" Kurdrán stopped short. A terrible thought suddenly came to him. He took a step toward Moira, the stormhammer inches from her face. "Ye... ye killed Sky'ree. Ye sent yer dirty clan tae start that fire."

"No," Moira said with indignation, "do not accuse me of something that *you* are responsible for. I punished the Dark Irons who participated in the fight, but from what they told me, it was you who threw the first blow."

Guilt welled up in Kurdran. Ever since the fire earlier that day, he had tried to forget that he could have prevented the brawl. His arm went slack, and he lowered the stormhammer.

"Take it and leave," Moira said, eyeing the Wildhammer scepter. "Or don't."

She scooped Dagra into her arms and descended the ramp without looking back at Kurdran.

"We will commence with the reforging regardless. On the morrow it will be a Dark Iron who brings unity to the clans," Moira said as she entered her private quarters, slamming the door behind her.

The truth in Moira's words, in everything she had said, carried a terrible weight. The enemy Kurdran had longed to find had shown herself, but he could do nothing to fight her without endangering the entire city. He was as helpless as the crystalline statue that had been King Magni. All at once, the foreign feeling of defeat washed over him.

Sweat began pouring down his body. Every breath seemed filled with stagnant heat, not air. Kurdran shoved the scepter through an opening in his chestpiece near his arm. With the heirloom hidden, he rushed out of the room and toward the gates of Ironforge as the city's stone walls closed in on him.

Kurdran inhaled the frigid air at Ironforge's gates deeply. The sweat covering his body chilled in the cold night, and he shivered.

In the distance, through a curtain of snowfall, shapes illuminated by light from the open city gate were unloading crates from a cart. One of the silhouettes looked up in Kurdran's direction. It trudged through the snow toward him.

It was Muradin.

"Been lookin' fer ye, lad," the Bronzebeard said as he brushed snow from his plated shoulders. "I canna say how sorry I was tae hear about Sky'ree. She died like she lived, free o' fear. Fightin' fer what was most important... her people. Her future."

"Her future died wi' her," Kurdran said. He let out a long sigh, his breath white in the cold.

Muradin stood for a moment, silent. "Aye... but I'd rather die fer me kin in a fight I know I canna win than not fight at all. I suppose ye wouldna understand much about that, though, would ye?"

Kurdran's eyes narrowed at the affront, but he felt weak after the encounter with Moira. "I've been fightin' fer me kin since the day I set foot in Ironforge."

"Dinna mistake stubbornness fer bravery. They ain't the same," Muradin replied.

"Ye wouldna understand. Ye're no different than Moira."

Muradin sighed and lowered his head. "When ye joined the council, I thought tae meself, 'Now there's a dwarf who can set the bickerin' in this city straight.' Instead, all ye did was make things worse."

"Aye, because I had tae go at it alone. Ye greeted me wi' open arms, but as soon as I made a stand fer somethin' I believed in, ye turned yer back on me."

"How many times did I tell ye that this business wi' the hammer wasn't worth fightin' over? I stopped wastin' me breath when it was clear ye wouldna listen tae reason," Muradin retorted.

To the Bronzebeard's credit, Kurdran recalled numerous times in the past days when Muradin had approached him in private and spoken with him about giving up the Wildhammer scepter. But each of those conversations had seemed more like a personal attack than advice.

"Dinna ye see, lad?" Muradin continued. "That old piece o' iron is a shackle holdin' ye back. Holdin' this whole city back. The more ye argue about it, the tighter it becomes."

"An' what if I dinna go through with the reforging tomorrow?" Kurdran blurted out. As the words left his mouth, he felt the scepter hidden beneath his armor dig into his ribs.

Muradin's brow furrowed. He looked at Kurdran with disdain. "Magni enjoyed the tales o' yer fightin' with Sky'ree in Outland. I'm only happy that he isn't here tae see the fool ye really are."

Kurdran had considered telling Muradin about his confrontation with Moira. Now, though, he wondered if Muradin had colluded with Magni's daughter. Yet there was an air of forthrightness to Muradin that lessened Kurdran's fears. In a way that made the Bronzebeard's words all the more painful to hear.

"That scepter kept the heart o' me clan alive in Outland!" Kurdran shouted.

"The heart o' yer clan is in ye!" Muradin's voice rose to match Kurdran's. "It was in Sky'ree. An' it's in all those Wildhammers in the city, sufferin' every moment that ye keep arguin'. I'm tryin' tae move this city forward, not bog it down with nonsense about old iron."

"Move forward?" Kurdran scoffed. "The hammer wasn't the right way tae move forward when we thought it was real, an' it sure isn't the right way now that we know it's a lie."

Muradin took a deep breath and placed his hand on Kurdran's shoulder. "Just let it go, lad. Nothin' good comes without sacrifice. Ye know that more than any o' us."

Kurdran shoved the Bronzebeard's arm away. "Is this the reason ye were lookin' fer me? Tae tell me how tae run me clan?"

Muradin's face became twisted in anger. He glanced back at the shadowy forms working in the night. The other dwarves continued unloading crates, oblivious to Muradin and Kurdran. When the Bronzebeard turned back, he whipped his right hand in Kurdran's face, knocking the Wildhammer back.

"Nay, lad. Just wanted tae see fer meself where the line between fact an' fiction lay."

Muradin was already on his way back to the cart by the time the shock of the blow had worn off. Kurdran simply stood at the gates, staring into the dark of the night.

The Wildhammer scepter felt oddly heavy at his side. Many of his memories on Outland were tied to it. But before that, he'd had little emotional attachment to the heirloom. In fact, he remembered nearly leaving it behind when he had set out for the orcish homeworld. The scepter had been

hanging on a wall, coated with a layer of dust, when on a whim he had decided to pack it with his belongings.

All at once he felt foolish for taking the scepter from the High Seat. What did he intend to do with it? Leave the city and forsake his duties as a member of the council, tarnishing not only his own honor, but that of Falstad and the rest of his clan as well?

Kurdran mulled over the question as he walked through the gates and back into the heat of Ironforge. As he paced aimlessly at the outer ring of the city, a voice called after him, "Kurdran!"

Eli jogged toward him, carrying a bundle of furs.

"I'm nae in the mood," Kurdran muttered.

"Aye, aye. I know the feelin'. But ye'll want tae see this, lad!" Eli said, and he nearly tumbled to the ground.

The gryphon tender set the furs down on the stone floor and knelt beside them. Kurdran also knelt and watched with sudden attention as Eli unwrapped the bundle.

"It's hers," Eli said. A smile bordered by his thick beard was stretching from ear to ear.

Kurdran leaned closer to the furs in disbelief. Nestled within was an egg stained with soot.

"How...?" Kurdran was at a loss for words.

"I found one o' the other gryphons carryin' it. He'd been hidin' up on a perch in the Great Forge. Must've grabbed the egg durin' the fire. None o' the others were tendin' tae eggs," Eli said. "I've been lookin' fer ye ever since."

Kurdran recalled then, among the chaos of the fire, the ash, the feathers, and the terrible cries, a gryphon shooting up in a blur from next to Sky'ree, his forelegs tucked tight to his chest. Kurdran raised his head and saw Eli's eyes watering. The gryphon tender quickly wiped them.

"Dinna tell anyone about this. If the other lads knew I was sheddin' tears, I'd never hear the end o' it."

"It wouldna be the first time ye went all weepy." A laugh rumbled from deep within Kurdran as the words left his mouth. Yet the joy was tinged with anger as he gazed back down at the egg. It was a miraculous turn of events, but if he had the choice, he would have traded the egg for Sky'ree without a second thought.

"It isn't Sky'ree...." Kurdran said.

"Och, a thought like that'll put poison in yer head, lad. Put it tae rest now, or else ye'll spend yer whole life waitin' fer somethin' that'll never be." Eli gripped Kurdran's forearm. "This will nae ever be Sky'ree," Eli continued, his face as serious as Kurdran had ever seen it. "But it's her blood. It's her gift tae ye. An' I can promise ye that one day it'll grow into a gryphon just as great as its mother."

"Aye..." Kurdran said, and he felt a lump moving up his throat.

Hesitantly, he placed his palm on the egg. It was somehow warm, but the sensation was altogether different than the stifling heat of Ironforge. The warmth coursed through Kurdran's veins and made him feel as though he were standing under the blue skies of the Hinterlands, bathed in the light of the sun. In that moment, everything became clear. He knew what he had to do, regardless of the consequences, to honor King Magni and fulfill his own duties as a member of the Council of Three Hammers.

The Great Forge was packed with dwarves shoulder to shoulder when Kurdran arrived. Nearly the entire city had turned out for the reforging of Modimus's hammer. Even a few scattered gnomes, draenei, and other members of the Alliance were in attendance, although they stayed far from the dwarves gathered near the monstrous Great Anvil at the heart of the forge.

A line of Ironforge guards cordoned off the area around the anvil, and only Moira, Muradin, and a Dark Iron smith stood within. Many of the dwarves present were armed, tense with bottled rage. The Wildhammers had assembled near the entrance to the High Seat, far from their usual place at the gryphon roost. After the fire, they had taken all of their winged companions out of the city. The roost, cleaned and lined with new straw, now housed only Ironforge's own gryphons.

Kurdran edged his way through the crowded forge. A great clamor rose from the mob around him, and among the indecipherable din Kurdran caught the word "thief" uttered numerous times. As he neared the center of the room, he could see Moira standing just behind the guards, addressing the audience.

"We have our suspicions regarding who stole the handle of Modimus's hammer," Moira said. "An investigation will take place. We will not, however, allow these thieves to disrupt what we have set out to do. We will commence with the reforging as..." Moira trailed off as Kurdran shuffled through the line of guards encircling the Great Anvil.

"Kurdran," Moira said casually, as if their encounter the night before had never happened, "there's a thief in our midst."

The Ironforge heiress gestured at the Great Anvil, where the Bronzebeard hammerhead and the Dark Iron gem lay in plain sight.

"Care to shed any light on this predicament?" she asked loud enough for the gathered onlookers to hear.

Beneath her mask of civility, Kurdran could sense Moira savoring every moment of what she surely believed was her domination of the Wildhammer representative.

"I do," Kurdran replied, looking momentarily at Muradin. The Bronzebeard stared at Kurdran with disgust, but he said nothing.

Kurdran strode to the edge of the Great Anvil. He drew the Wildhammer heirloom from inside his armor, thrusting the scepter in the air toward the watching dwarves.

"Ironforge!" he roared. "It was I who took the hammer piece."

Shouts rose from the crowd, and dwarves began pushing against the ring of guards around the Great Anvil. Others edged toward the Wildhammers at the High Seat's entrance.

Muradin stepped closer to the anvil and grasped Kurdran's free arm. "Kurdran!" The Bronzebeard was seething. "Ye're goin' tae start a riot!"

"Ye said I could be the one tae set the bickerin' in this city straight. That's what I'm about tae do."

"How?" Muradin asked.

"By breakin' the chain, lad."

Muradin's brows furrowed in confusion. But eventually, it seemed to Kurdran as if the Bronzebeard had realized what was about to happen. Muradin walked toward the crowd and bellowed, "Let him say his piece!"

When the noise died down, Kurdran continued. "Fer many years I was stuck on Outland, never knowin' wi' any certainty whether or nae I'd return home. Durin' all that time, this here piece o' iron gave me an' the lads and lasses at me side hope. It reminded us o' who we were an' what we had tae fight fer!"

Kurdran glanced up at the heirloom. The night before, while he had knelt next to Sky'ree's egg, he had finally realized what the scepter was—a piece of old iron. Tempered metal that had set dwarf against dwarf and instilled fear and hate in Kurdran's own heart. He had been no different from the mindless, livid mob standing before him now. A dwarf afraid of the unknown, unwilling to move forward if it meant giving up something familiar. But he had done so on Outland. He had given up his title as high thane to Falstad. He had given up years of his life in Aerie Peak to secure a better future for his kind. The scepter, by comparison, was incredibly trivial.

"But this isn't Outland," Kurdran continued, "an' this isn't the Ironforge o' our ancestors. So why are we tryin' tae put this hammer together tae make it that way? This is a new Ironforge. It will nae ever be the one o' the past, an' reforgin' Modimus's hammer surely will nae change that!" Kurdran slammed the Wildhammer heirloom onto the anvil. "Me an' me clan will have nae part in seein' this era begin by chainin' ourselves tae a hammer!"

The crowd's movements became erratic. In the shadows of the Great Forge the dwarves looked like a single organism, expanding and contracting, a moment away from bursting apart at the seams.

"He's goin' tae take the piece back!"

"The Wildhammers are showin' their true colors!"

Without another word, Kurdran drew the stormhammer from his back. In one swift movement, he raised the weapon high and drove it down onto the scepter in a flash of light. The resulting thunderclap made Kurdran's ears ring, despite his having used the hammer for decades. The heirloom exploded in a shower of iron shards.

The dwarves in the crowd froze in sudden bewilderment. Confusion rippled across their taut faces.

"The new Ironforge begins here. Ask yerselves, do ye want tae start it by puttin' this hammer back together so that one day it can be broken again? The Wildhammers have chosen tae take a step forward, not back. Who among ye is wi' us?"

As Kurdran turned and extended his stormhammer to the other council members, he was surprised to find Muradin already marching to the anvil.

"The Bronzebeards are!" Muradin shouted, and he grasped the stormhammer with one hand.

In unison Muradin and Kurdran looked to Moira, as did the entire gathering in the Great Forge. She stood alone.

The Ironforge heiress glanced around as if she were searching for some escape. As the silence in the room dragged on, she finally moved toward the anvil in awkward steps, as though her body and mind were working against each other. With her eyes locked on Kurdran, she placed her hand above Muradin's on the stormhammer handle.

With his free hand, Kurdran moved the Bronzebeard hammerhead and the Dark Iron gem to the center of the enormous anvil. As one, the council members drove Kurdran's weapon down. Another thunderclap sounded, and the remaining artifacts fractured into pieces. With them, so too did the lie.

Afterward, the three dwarves stood at the anvil, each still with a hand on the stormhammer, holding it high. The crowd gave applause that soon turned to cheers. All the while, Moira glared at Kurdran as though she were expecting him to say something to her. He said nothing.

By the following week, the tension among the clans had become a smoldering coal; it was still present, but the threat of violence seemed distant. Kurdran was on his second pint of ale in the Stonefire Tavern, sitting alone at a table in a corner of the establishment. His solitude, however, was not born out of anger or guilt. He was waiting for someone with nervous anticipation.

If he doesnae come, Kurdran thought, can I blame him?

As if in answer to the silent question, Falstad Wildhammer entered the tavern, his red hair pulled back in a ponytail much like Kurdran's. He stopped in the doorway, eyes searching the dimly lit room until he found Kurdran. Without a smile or nod, Falstad strode toward Kurdran's table and took a seat.

"Good tae see ye, lad," Kurdran said.

"And ye as well," Falstad replied in an even tone.

A moment of uncomfortable silence passed. Kurdran had called Falstad to Ironforge shortly after the destruction of the Wildhammer scepter, not knowing how his friend would react to the summons. Now that Falstad was in the city, Kurdran was both relieved and unsure.

"Ye dinna need tae do this. Ye have more right tae be on this council than I do," Falstad said.

"Nay," Kurdran replied. "Ye've been high thane o' the Wildhammers fer twenty years. Only thing that's changed o' late is a thick-headed dwarf thinkin' he could do the job better than ye...."

"I spoke tae Eli a moment ago. It seems ye've made yer mark on Ironforge already."

"All I did was clean up a mess I made meself. A mess that wouldna have even happened if ye had been here."

Falstad stared hard at Kurdran, his lips pursed. Kurdran steeled himself, expecting his friend to berate him for his arrogance or even gloat over the unrest he had caused in Ironforge.

"If ye will nae do it fer me," Kurdran said with sudden urgency, "then take yer place on this council fer the good o' the clan."

Falstad leaned back in his chair with his arms crossed, his eyes never leaving Kurdran.

"So ye expect me tae forgive ye and join the council... when ye dinna even have a fresh pint waitin' on the table?" Falstad asked, and a toothy grin stretched across his face.

Kurdran let out a hearty laugh, feeling as though a great weight had been taken off of his shoulders. In that moment he recognized the immense wisdom and capacity for forgiveness that Falstad possessed. They were traits that would lead the Wildhammer clan to great things, even amid the uncertainty brought about by the formation of the council.

After Kurdran had ordered a pint for Falstad, the two dwarves raised their mugs.

"Fer the council," Falstad said.

"Fer the high thane o' the Wildhammers," Kurdran replied.

"Fer Sky'ree." Falstad lowered his mug to his mouth before Kurdran could offer another toast. No doubt, Eli had told Falstad about Sky'ree's death. Kurdran appreciated the brevity of the remembrance, for he knew, as Falstad and other gryphon riders did, that lengthy condolences would do nothing to soothe the pain that came with losing a friend like Sky'ree.

Falstad set his mug down on the table with a hollow thud and asked, "So what will ye do now, then?"

"I might journey down tae Stormwind. I've had good experiences wi' humans in me past and would like tae meet this King Varian. And... I hear there's a statue in honor o' me death in Outland right at the city's gates." Kurdran grinned.

"Aye... I wrote the placard. Was quite a task tryin' tae find somethin' good tae say," Falstad quipped with a chuckle.

As the night wore on, other dwarves joined Kurdran and Falstad at their table. They talked of the great political changes occurring throughout the kingdoms of Azeroth as well as the natural calamities that had reshaped the world following the Cataclysm. Among the topics that interested Kurdran most was a discussion of the scattered Wildhammer dwarves of the Twilight Highlands. Fiercely independent, they had long remained free of governance by Aerie Peak. Recently, though,

word had come that something dark had been taking root among the green hills of the northern lands.

When the dwarves turned to other topics, Kurdran's mind wandered. A week ago he would have been concerned that relinquishing his place on the council would diminish his strength in the eyes of his clan. Today, that mattered little. There was something in making the sacrifice, something in having the will to forgo his personal desires for the good of his people, that filled Kurdran with fire. It was the same fire that had driven him to Outland and had allowed him to break the Wildhammer scepter. His destiny wasn't in Ironforge, nor was it in sitting idly in Aerie Peak. It was here, *and* it was there: a life guided by the winds. In that unpredictability was the strength to face any challenge, to stand firm against insurmountable odds and fight for the bleakest of hopes. That was the will of a Wildhammer.

For the first time since he had come to the city—in fact, since he had returned from Outland—he felt free, as if he were flying among the clouds with Sky'ree. In his mind's eye, he was. Kurdran was with the gryphon's spirit, soaring in a cloudless blue expanse that seemed infinite in scope. Up ahead was something indecipherable, shimmering like a mirage. In his heart he knew that it was peace for Aerie Peak and all Wildhammers. Whether it would take another day, week, or ten years to reach was impossible to predict—and foolish to worry over. With resolve and determination, he gave Sky'ree a firm pat on her neck and let the winds guide them toward the horizon.