

BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT

# Varian Wrynn: The Blood of Our Fathers

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Something had awakened King Varian Wrynn from a deep sleep. As he stood motionless in the gloom, the faint patter of a distant dripping sound echoed off the walls of Stormwind Keep. A feeling of dread washed over him, for it was a sound he'd heard before.

Varian moved cautiously to the door and pressed his ear against the burnished oak. *Nothing. No movement. No footfalls.* Then, as if from far away, the dull and muffled hum of a crowd cheering from somewhere outside the castle. *Did I oversleep today's ceremonies?*

Again the strange dripping sound came, this time echoing off the icy floor, distinct and wet. Varian slowly opened the door and peered out into the hall. The corridor beyond was dark and quiet. Even the torches seemed to flicker with a cold light that died as quickly as it was born. For a man who allowed himself few emotions, Varian felt something stir inside himself now—something old, or young, or perhaps long forgotten. It was almost like a feeling of childlike... *fear?*

He shook off the notion immediately. He was Lo'Gosh, the Ghost Wolf. The gladiator warrior who struck fear in the hearts of his enemies and friends alike. Still, he could not shake the primal feeling of unease and danger that now pervaded his body.

Stepping out into the hall, Varian noticed his guards were not at their usual stations. *Is everyone preoccupied with Remembrance Day? Or is this something more sinister?*

He crept carefully down the dim hall, entering the large and familiar throne room of Stormwind Keep, but now its towering walls seemed different—larger, more shadowed, and empty. From the distant stone ceiling, tarps hung like garish cobwebs, emblazoned with the golden face of a lion—the emblem denoting the pride and strength of the great nation of Stormwind.

In the gloom, Varian heard a muffled cry and then a sudden scuffle. His eyes darted to the floor, where a trail of blood clearly led to the center of the room. There in the murk, he could barely make out a frantic struggle between two figures. As his eyes adjusted, he could see one man on his knees, bloody and wounded, and standing over him was a harsh female shape looming in the blackness.

Varian knew that shape by heart, its distorted silhouette giving away the twisted nature of her body and soul. She was Garona Halforcen, part draenei, part orc—the assassin bred by the twisted mind of Gul'dan.

As Varian stood in stunned disbelief, fresh blood oozed along the edge of the half-orc's blade, reaching the razor-sharp point, then dripping... falling... until it erupted in a rose petal of crimson on the marble floor. Memory rushed over Varian in a flood of recognition. The armor. The regal clothing. The man on the floor was his father, King Llane!

Garona looked at Varian with a hideous, tear-streaked smirk, then swiftly stabbed downward with her blade, the flash of steel cutting through the dark and burying itself deep into the kneeling king's chest.

"No!" Varian screamed, lurching forward, clawing across the blood-soaked floor to reach his father. He grabbed the king's wilted body and held it close as the half-orc's face slowly faded into the dark.

"Father," Varian pleaded, rocking him in his arms.

Llane's mouth twitched up at him in pain, then parted with a stream of fresh blood. With a putrid hiss of air, the old king managed to form a few brittle words. "This is how it always ends... with Wrynn kings."

With that, Llane's eyes rolled back and his jaws gaped open into a hideous expression.

From deep within his throat, a chitinous vibration arose. Varian wanted to tear his eyes away, but found he could not. In the shadow of his father's yawning mouth, something moved, shimmering and wiggling up into the fading twilight.

Suddenly, maggots erupted from the dead king's maw—thousands upon thousands of writhing worms obliterated Llane's ashen face. Varian tried to pull away, but the maggots washed over him as well, chittering and consuming his body as he let out one final scream of agony.

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Varian bolted upright in his chair, a terrible scream still fading in his ears. He found himself sitting at his map table in the private upper chambers of Stormwind Keep. Warm sunlight streamed into the room along with the roar of a cheering crowd from high windows. *The Remembrance Day celebrations are under way.*

In his hands, he held a tarnished silver locket, its keyed hinge securely fastened. Varian instinctively tried to open the trinket, as he had a thousand times before, but found it locked as always.

The door burst open, and the high commander of Stormwind Defense rushed in. General Marcus Jonathan's face was a mask of alarm. "Is something wrong, Your Highness? We heard a scream."

Varian quickly put the locket away and stood up. "Everything is fine, Marcus." The king tried to straighten his armor and brush a clump of dark hair away from weary eyes. His fingers felt the deep lines of worry and lack of sleep over the last few months—a blur of weeks spent responding to the many emergencies in the aftermath of the dragon Deathwing's sudden attack on the city and the world.

Both he and the general were in full dress splendor for the holiday, and General Jonathan, with his tall frame and sharp features, looked the part better than most.

"The Honor Ceremony will be in three hours, Your Highness," Jonathan offered. "Is your speech ready?"

Varian looked to the blank parchment on the map table. "I am still working on it, Jonathan." *And I can't seem to find the right words.*

The high commander studied him, and Varian sought to quickly change the subject. "Has my son arrived yet?"

General Jonathan shook his head. "No one has seen Prince Anduin, Your Highness."

Varian tried to hide his disappointment by looking out the keep's windows to the courtyard below. It was a sea of people, with flags and streamers waving in the air, children dressed as their favorite heroes of old, and food and mead flowing with laughter. Remembrance Day was part memorial, part celebration, yet Varian himself could never find mirth in this event.

As he watched, the throng slowly moved toward the Valley of Heroes, heading for the statues of the great champions of humanity that lined the entrance to Stormwind City. The stage for the Honor Ceremony had been set up in the shadow of these impressive leaders, and today they would be acknowledged with respect and thanks for their great deeds.

Jonathan continued. "When you are ready, sire, the archbishop is waiting outside to brief

you on the city's repairs and our care for the wounded."

"Yes. Yes, in a moment." Varian waved him off. Jonathan bowed his head and quietly backed out of the room, closing the door behind him.

Varian shook the cobwebs from his mind and pulled out the delicate locket again, staring at the rumpled reflection of himself on its mirrored surface. *The world has changed, but I must hold steady.*

Varian glanced up at the portrait of King Llana over the fireplace. Today of all days, the leader of humanity, the king of Stormwind, the rock of the Alliance, must be at his very best. His father would expect nothing less.

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Archbishop Benedictus stood adorned in his finest robes and trinkets, representing the pride of Stormwind's culture for the great day at hand. Next to him stood a small and grimy man carrying a large bundle of wrinkled scrolls.

Benedictus looked up eagerly as Varian emerged from his private quarters. "Light bless you, King Varian." He smiled as Varian descended the stairs.

"And you, Father," Varian said. "You look dressed to meet your maker."

Benedictus waved his staff in a well-rehearsed and solemn gesture. "In such times as these, we must all stand ready to join the Light at any moment."

At the archbishop's side, the rumpled and nervous-looking fellow fidgeted with his overloaded bundle of papers and city diagrams. Varian suddenly realized it was Baros Alexston, the city architect. He was barely recognizable with all the mud covering his face and clothes.

Varian motioned for them to continue following him down the stairs. "How go the city repairs, Baros?"

"As well as can be expected, Highness." Baros nodded, trying to keep from dropping his scrolls. Benedictus reached over and patted the architect on the back. "He is being entirely too modest, Your Majesty. Baros here has pulled off miracles getting much of Stormwind back in order, even making some notable improvements to the city."

Varian felt a sense of relief. It was good to see some optimism returning to his advisors. "So what is most pressing?"

The architect nodded and went to nervously unroll one of his many scrolls as he walked, causing at least three others to slip from his grasp and tumble to the ground.

"My apologies, sire... yes, here it is." Baros pointed to a place on the map, his dirty fingers leaving earthy smudge marks behind. "We've investigated the damage to the two main towers at the entrance to the city." He shook his head and blew out with a whistle. "That black dragon must be even heavier than his massive size would suggest—likely the beast's dark elementium armor. We've tunneled down, and the damage to the tower foundations is quite severe."

Baros thumbed through more diagrams as he spoke. "The same is true for the east wing of the keep here... and here, and a few of the larger buildings above the harbor, including what's left of..." The architect paused, seeming too pained to complete the list.

Benedictus stepped in. "And of course, what's left of the Old Barracks, and the terrible crater where the Park once stood. Light bless their souls."

Baros's face saddened behind the smear of mud. "I'm afraid extensive repairs will be required, and it will not be cheap."

Varian's eyes flashed to the architect, long-buried pains leaping to the surface. *He talks of money? At a time like this?* Neither Benedictus nor Baros seemed aware of his reaction, and Varian hastened his steps down the stairs to quell the knot of anger building in his stomach.

At the next landing, the king stopped to take in some of the damage to his castle. Debris covered the stairway where a gaping hole in the wall opened up to the sky and city below. As Varian examined the wreckage, Baros quickly checked his papers.

"We have already requisitioned replacement stones from the quarry for this, Highness." The architect looked up and recognized his king's growing irritation. He tried to lighten the moment. "We will have it repaired in no time. Castles are drafty enough without them missing entire walls, yes?"

Varian ignored him, lost in thought, as he ran his gloved hand along the ragged stones, torn from the tower as if a huge bite had been taken out of it, which wasn't far from the truth.

Something sharp caught the king's glove. He reached up and pulled on a dagger-shaped obsidian splinter protruding from the damaged wall. It was a piece of the dragon's elementium armor—a sliver black as night, almost two hands long, and razor sharp. The shard of armor was buried deep inside the stone, but with some effort, Varian managed to pry it loose.

He held it out for the men to see. "This vile creature, this... Deathwing... is certainly not the first menace to threaten Stormwind's walls." His stare burrowed right through the architect's skull. "We will rebuild and stand firm, as we always have. Whatever the cost. And we will make that black beast pay the price tenfold!!"

The king gazed through the jagged hole at his damaged city; his plate glove creaked as he squeezed the dragon's armor in silent rage. Below him, Stormwind's great harbor was a vast forest of ship masts. The port was full of hulls in every color, shape, and size. Remembrance Day always brought a host of pilgrims to honor and celebrate humanity's heroes, but this was like nothing even he had seen before.

As he watched, another ship sailed slowly into the harbor and dropped anchor. It was a grand kaldorei ship, gleaming with silver filigree and purple, perfumed sails. Varian tucked Deathwing's armor shard into his belt, then turned to his advisors. "Have they come this year out of honor for the past, or in fear of the future?"

Benedictus looked past his king to the mass of ships below. "To be sure, many seek shelter from the dark wyrm's menace, Your Majesty. Some even proclaim this to be a portent of the end of times."

Varian scoffed. "I would waste little breath, Father, and even less sleep over the insane musings of a few Twilight's Hammer cultists. Unless you find their blather useful for your fiery cathedral sermons?" Varian gave the archbishop a wry smile.

"Whatever it takes to get people believing... and doing." Benedictus smiled back. "No doubt, the people of Stormwind need hope, but they need a plan even more. I trust our king will give us all something to believe in when you speak at the Honor Ceremony later today."

Varian thought about his Remembrance Day speech: what could he possibly say to salve the deep wounds this world had suffered?

General Jonathan appeared and gave a courteous bow to the archbishop, then turned to the king. "Excuse me, Your Highness, but I have been asked to remind you that the Honor Delegation awaits your presence in the throne room." Jonathan tried to smile, hoping to soften the news.

Varian winced. He hated the duties of office, especially the pomp and patter of holidays. He'd rather be out doing what a warrior did best—raiding a dragon's lair or hacking through a sea of demons, instead of dealing with a delegation of insufferable diplomats. *The latter are far more dangerous to one's health.*

Varian let out a sigh, resigned to his fate. "Very well, General. Let us get this over with."

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Jaina Proudmoore stood in the throne room observing the eclectic gathering of nobles, politicians, and other delegates.

The great hall of Stormwind Keep was indeed large, but the perfumed mass of dignitaries more than filled the space and choked the air. The rainbow of luminaries stretched through the grand archway and out of sight.

As the leader of Theramore Isle, Jaina was part of the Honor Delegation selected to stand behind the king today as he gave his memorial speech. With the Alliance pressed on ever more dangerous fronts, many had come to see what the great leader of Stormwind planned to do about the recent world crisis.

Genn Greymane stood nearby, his eyes scanning the crowd with the same intense fire as hers. Jaina looked across the room, hoping to find Anduin's face in the throng, but the prince was nowhere to be seen. She wondered if Varian and the young prince had resolved their last argument, a disagreement that had driven Anduin away from his father's side and toward the wisdom of Prophet Velen of the draenei. But, aware of Varian's rigidity, Jaina knew the only hatchets the king ever buried were those in the skulls of his enemies. No, with the prince conspicuously absent, clearly the rift was still there.

Greymane sighed impatiently next to her. The assembled audience had been waiting for quite some time, all vying for a view of the center of Stormwind's power and the famous Lion Seat, the great filigreed throne of the Wrynn kings.

Jaina looked at the great cats that adorned the dais, each standing alert and fierce as if guarding the whole of Azeroth. She wondered how deeply this ideal had been ingrained into Varian as a child, and how much that pressure affected his thinking. *Growing up in the shadow of heroes must have been difficult. To think any one man could shoulder such a weight is folly.* She had once loved a man who had broken under just such an impossible burden.

Jaina watched the restless crowd and took in the scene. She had the enviable gift of being able to read people with amazing insight. But today it did not take much talent to sense the palpable fear and frustration in the air. She had zeroed in on one wellspring of discontent in the mob. It seeped mainly from a group of nobles and delegates surrounding a large bear of a man with an unhappy and rather reddish face. Lord Aldous Lescovar, son of the traitor Gregor Lescovar, was clearly brooding about nearly everything, and it was infecting others in the room.

The nobles had been drinking enough to loosen their tongues, and as she listened in, King Wrynn's name came up over and over, often spit from the mouth like bitter poison.

Jaina knew that some of what these men said was true. Varian was a difficult man at times, and his intensity was as hard on his friends as it was his enemies. But she also knew the king well enough to know his true heart. He would willingly give his life to save his people. He was driven by ancient principles few understood today—a code of conduct that demanded something more of its leaders. This misunderstanding had slowly closed off the king from his people, even from his own son, and the king's enemies used it for their own devious ends.

Jaina had always been King Wrynn's ally, if not his staunchest supporter. *And, the Light knows, Varian does not make it easy to be his ally, much less his close counsel or friend!* When dealing with the Ghost Wolf, Jaina knew it was best to approach his heart rather than his fangs.

She herself had come today to once again try to dissuade the king from his unbending stance against the Horde, but the drunken delegates surrounding the hotheaded baron could easily derail her agenda. Forcing a smile, she approached Baron Lescovar and his rabble.

"Remember well." Jaina bowed to them all, using the traditional greeting for the holiday.

"Remember well, Jaina Proudmoore." The baron glanced to his allies, then back at her, unable to make up his mind if the sorceress's approach was a sign of support or danger. Jaina felt the man's eyes walk all over her as only a young baron would dare. He had a brutish face, and despite how he put on the airs of rich furs and silk, his harsh eyes betrayed any elegance his clothes tried to create.

The baron was wary, his mind wavering much like his body. "What brings you so far across the sea when your own homeland burns in slag?"

Jaina could now see the baron was drunker than she'd realized, and ignored his dig. "Just like you, I come to pay my respects to the heroes of old, but also to seek a wise plan for the new dangers that ail the Alliance today."

The baron gestured at his compatriots with a somewhat wobbly sweep of his hand. "Indeed, these new dangers hurt us all—rich and poor, merchants and rabble alike. How did it come to this, wizard? Who shall we blame?"

Jaina kept her face straight, unreadable. After a careful pause, she spoke. "Alliance leadership has faced many challenges of late. Yes, errors in judgment have been made, and many lessons learned. But we have also achieved great victories."

An old and sinewy noble pushed his way forward, shaking his silver head in frustration. "We are tired of Alliance wars depleting our gold and our blood. Reckless adventuring and personal vendettas only undermine our chances for peace and prosperity!"

Jaina put up her hand gently to calm the mood. "Many have voiced similar concerns. For example, the ill-directed aggression toward the Horde. I, for one, believe good allies are hard to come by these days, even as our enemies seem to multiply without end."

The baron put his meaty hand on her shoulder, and her skin crawled at his touch. "I think we have an orc lover here, boys." The ensuing laughter smelled of stale mead. The baron leaned in close, too close, his breath hot and mocking. "Or maybe your tastes run more toward reeking tauren?"

Jaina gracefully slid out from under the baron's grasp and put on the mask of sympathy for his concerns. The Alliance could ill afford to have more rifts weaken it these days. Azeroth had recently revealed its own hidden fractures, and they had literally torn the world apart.

Jaina tried to smile, and the baron smiled back, but it only served to highlight the swine-like features of his face. He gave her a wink. "We know you and the king are close. We need you to reason with him. Make King Wrynn listen to his nobles; get him to find peace where we can and make sure that damn dragon is taken care of before there isn't a city left for us to trade with."

"I understand your concerns. I share many of them."

"Then do your duty, and use your influence. No one profits from mindless war. The king's current plans are—"

"Are what?" came a deep voice behind the baron. Everyone wheeled to see King Wrynn standing in the doorway. The murmur of voices faded as Varian strolled in. "Please, Baron Lescovar, enlighten us all. Tell us all what my plans will bring." Varian's stare was like a bolt of lightning, burying itself between the baron's eyes. Lescovar stepped back in unconscious submission.

"My apologies, Highness." The baron bowed. "We were merely having a lively debate with Theramore's esteemed leader."

Varian walked up to the baron and only stopped once he was well within the noble's personal space. Nose to nose, the king spoke quietly, but his growl came through loud and clear.

"While you were a whelp in your family's fetid den, I was leading Stormwind's armies to triumph." Varian's eyes flashed across the room to the others, daring any face to challenge him. "I have led us across the sea, to the cold climes of Northrend, to the unholy depths of the Undercity—victory after victory, and yet many of you still doubt."

The dignitaries shuffled uncomfortably, but no one dared breathe a word. Jaina was beside herself with internal anger. *So much for keeping the king's fangs at bay.*

Varian looked across the faces. "So why did you come here today? To waste my time? To demand I hear your petty complaints about my efforts to protect this world? To protect *you*?!"

Silence.

The fire of the Ghost Wolf burned in his eyes now, an ember-hot glow that stood fearless in the night, holding back the shadows.

"Or did you come to see Lo'Gosh yourself? To behold up close the one who wages war with a relish equal to his enemies?!"

Many people began to carefully exit, but Varian wasn't finished.

"Some say I am no better than those we fight! That I am the monster. Well, if so, then I am the monster you need! I am the one ferocious enough to strike fear in the very heart of darkness! The one who has the courage to do whatever it takes to protect humanity from the abyss!"

As Varian ended his diatribe, he looked around and caught the familiar face of Anduin staring back at him from the rear of the throne room. His son had arrived sometime during the king's rant. By the horrified look on the young prince's face, it was clear that nothing had changed since they last had parted on such bad terms.

Anduin's eyes were filled with both fear and bewilderment, and Varian's heart sank. *Have I become such a stranger to my own son?* He tried to soften his face, but the king could feel the heat of his rage still burning on the skin. Anduin slowly backed away, then turned and fled the room. As Varian watched him go, his anger drained like water from a broken dam, leaving only emptiness behind. Varian sat down on his throne and motioned wearily for everyone to leave.

The stunned audience slowly filed out, filled with fear both of the future and of the leader of mankind. Only Jaina and the archbishop remained, eyeing Varian warily. Unconsciously the king



reached into his tunic and touched the silver trinket in a pocket, its cool metal surface soothing the fevered purpose still boiling in his blood. Varian knew that no one understood what he must do, what he must be. No one understood him, and no one ever would.

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Varian paced the floor back and forth like a caged animal as Jaina and Benedictus watched. He turned the silver locket over and over in his hands, its bright chain lashing about with the same fury that consumed the king. Jaina and Benedictus stood helplessly nearby, trying to find a calm harbor in the storm.

"The prince will understand someday, Highness," Benedictus offered. "He has an enlightened soul." The archbishop looked to Jaina for support, but before she could say anything, Varian scoffed.

"I should never have let him leave. Anduin's duty lies here with his own people, not with the draenei."

"But he is still young," Jaina said. "Anduin is still looking for his place in the circle. He's on a quest to find out who he really is."

Varian stopped pacing and glared at her. "Who he is, Jaina, is the heir to the throne of Stormwind, and very nearly a man! At his age, I had already mastered the sword and was ready to meet Alliance enemies in battle!"

Jaina flinched at his anger. "Is the only measure of a man how early he kills, Varian?" She tried to return his fierce gaze with one of her own. "Can't you see that Anduin has chosen a different path?"

Varian paused at this, thinking. "I have... come to terms with Anduin's choices, but I fear he still lacks the strength needed to rule. These are perilous times, as you yourself have noted, Archbishop."

"It is true the world teeters on the brink." The archbishop tried to fashion the words carefully with his hands. "But the Light shows a different path for each of us, to whatever end is in store."

"No more sermons, Benedictus! The real world is not so forgiving as your church. Being king is dangerous work; one misstep and people die!"

Benedictus stepped forward and put his hand on the king's shoulder. "On Remembrance Day, more than any other, I know you hold yourself responsible for many things, especially what we've lost..." He continued carefully. "What *you* have lost."

The king reached for his silver locket, lost in a jumble of thoughts and worries. "If Anduin is not ready, if he is weak in any way, it will lead to..." Varian stopped cold and tried to shake off the thought.

Jaina jumped in to dispel the dread. "Anduin has a different strength to give this world, Varian. He chose the priesthood for a reason. He is a healer, and he is attuned to the Light."

Varian nodded. "What you say is true, Jaina. Anduin has never been... like me." With a sigh, Varian sat down hard on the throne again.

"As you said earlier, my king," Benedictus began, "times have changed, and it is clear we

must change with them. The age when hearts like Lothar's were the only way to survive may be drawing to a close. The world seems to yearn for someone new."

Varian looked at him, his mind flooded with uncertainty for so many things. The very foundations of Azeroth had recently been shaken to the core, with many of its pieces cast off or forever gone. Now, his own once-firm beliefs had somehow become tenuous. Benedictus and Jaina began to leave, but the archbishop had one last request.

"Speaking of renewal, Your Highness. I have a gift for you on this Remembrance Day—actually, for both you and the prince."

Varian sighed. "I'm afraid that I alone can receive your generosity this day, Father. My son clearly does not want to be near me."

Benedictus smiled. "Let not your heart be troubled. The Light has a way of shining through even the darkest night. Will you meet with me later today? I believe it will remedy many of your ills."

Varian was not convinced of that. "Where and when, Father? As you know, I have a very busy day."

The archbishop leaned in close and whispered the location. Varian's face grew hard as the meeting place was revealed, but after a moment, he grudgingly nodded his head.

As Jaina and the archbishop left, Varian had one last question for Benedictus. "Tell me, Archbishop. Do you think Anduin will make a good king?"

The archbishop turned and nodded with authority. "Most certainly, sire. If he survives the crucible of these times. Desperate days such as these tend to burn away all impurities, leaving only the strongest steel behind. And Wrynn kings have always shown their mettle, Highness." He bowed, then exited with Jaina, leaving Varian alone in the throne room with the solitary burden of command the king knew only too well.

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As Varian walked into the city cemetery, the sun was beginning its slow descent toward the horizon, casting warm sienna rays across the towering cathedral spires and quiet gravestones.

Sadness washed over Varian as he strolled past the headstones he knew all too well, on a path he had traveled so many Remembrance Days before. The spicy sweet smell of fresh lilacs touched his nostrils, and it conjured up memories of his wife Tiffin's wonderful scent, her joyous laugh, her tender smile.

He approached the stone lions that stood guard over his wife's grave, his walk becoming trancelike as long-lost memories cascaded through his mind. Rays of golden light reflected off the bronze plaque on the memorial. Varian read the last line of the inscription, *For our world grows cold in your absence*, and he felt a wave of bitter truth flood his heart. *You and Anduin are the only things that ever gave me warmth, Tiffin.*

He heard footsteps behind him, and turned, surprised to see Benedictus and his son approaching. The excitement at seeing the prince was quickly doused by the shocked look on Anduin's face, and by the prince's sharp glance at the archbishop.

Varian was surprised to see how much Anduin had grown. Or was it just a trick of the light?

The prince shifted his bow and quiver of arrows in frustration, scowling hard at the priest. "When you implored me to accompany you, Archbishop, you failed to mention we would be joined by my father."

Benedictus smiled down at the boy. "Sometimes, dear prince, to heal the world, we must keep a few secrets."

Varian felt himself slipping into the role of father. He wanted to tell the boy to stop acting foolish and grow up. He wanted to command Anduin to stay in Stormwind and fulfill his duties as prince and heir apparent. But he knew this would only result in the same angry ending as before. The rougher he got with the boy, the more he drove Anduin away.

"So this is your Remembrance Day gift, Archbishop?" King Wrynn tried to soften his voice. "A surprise family reunion?" His eyes flashed unconsciously to include Tiffin's grave.

The archbishop looked them both over, and seemed satisfied. "Partly. But there is more. Remember the quest you gave me long ago, just after dear Tiffin passed away?"

Varian thought for a moment. It had been so long now. So much had happened since his wife's death. So much had changed. So much of him had changed. *Would Tiffin even love the man I have become?*

Benedictus reached out and handed Varian a glittering silver key. Varian stood in shock at the weight of the thing in his palm. Anduin knew what it was immediately. "The key to Mother's locket."

Varian was speechless. He searched for something to say. "You found it! How?"

"Yes, sire. As you commanded. I apologize that it took so long to track down, but I thought today was as good as any to give the memories back to you both." Benedictus patted the prince's head.

Varian felt something moving deep within him. "Thank you, Benedictus. You are a good man. I hesitate to think what I'd do without you."

The archbishop bowed his head. "Please, allow me to leave you to it." He turned to go, and as he did, he waved his arm once more. "Peace be with you both," he said, and he disappeared down the path into a grove of trees.

Varian stood there, turning the silver key over and over, wondering about the archbishop's strange farewell. Finally he noticed that Anduin was watching him. All the harsh things he had wanted to say to his son were of no consequence now. He realized only one thing was true: Anduin was more important than all of it. It was so clear.

The prince turned to stare at his mother's gravestone, lost in his own thoughts. Varian finally broke the silence. "It is good to see you, Son. I think you've grown at least a head or more since..." Varian caught himself. "I take it draenei food suits you?"

"Master Velen says that I grow in all directions," Anduin replied, still staring at his mother's grave. "Velen keeps reminding me that 'We each must grow in every direction, every day.'"

Varian nodded. "Wise and worthy advice. Especially for a king... or future king."

Anduin winced at that, then looked up at his father, his eyes flashing a deep azure blue. "Is the world dying, Father?"

Varian was caught off guard by the simple intensity of the question. It reminded him of the innocent, yet profound, queries Anduin used to ask when he was a young child. Even then, the boy's deep wisdom was clearly evident.

Varian tried to answer carefully. "I hold no deep philosophy on such things, but I know the

world cycles, just as do the seasons. Everything has its time, and things must come and go in the circle of renewal."

He thought about how to describe it better, and then pulled out his sword. "Just like a great weapon, Son: the edge must be renewed every now and then if it is to retain its full power."

"That's how Velen talks too. He says death and rebirth are part of the same wheel of the stars. And his people have seen the long march of time like no other."

"Then he must know that kings and kingdoms come and go, but truth, honor, and duty last forever."

"And love," Anduin said, barely glancing at his father.

The king thought about that, and nodded. "Yes, love."

Anduin continued, "I think love outlasts everything."

Suddenly Varian knew what he must do. He had the silver locket in his hand and was speaking before he even knew what he would say. "I have kept your mother's locket all these years to remind me of my responsibilities as king. To remember that actions have consequences, and a leader must live with his choices, both good and bad, because so many are counting on him."

He held out the locket.

"I want you to—" He stopped himself. "I mean, I thought maybe you would want to have it now. If you like."

Anduin nodded, and Varian slowly placed Tiffin's locket around his son's neck. The prince held the locket in his hands and rubbed his fingers over the engravings in exactly the same way as Varian had done for so many years.

Varian handed him the silver key, and the moment stood still. Even the breeze in the graveyard seemed to hold its breath in reverence for the event. Varian felt as if he was passing some sort of torch, some sense of belonging, a powerful symbol of growth and adulthood that would somehow aid his son in the future. "It is yours now," he said. "You can open it when you are ready."

Anduin thought about it for a moment, then put the key away in his pouch. He would find a time to make peace with the past on his own terms.

"She loved that locket, Anduin," Varian said. "She loved beauty, and the people of Stormwind... but the thing she loved most of all was you."

Anduin's eyes glistened with moisture in the afternoon light. Varian looked deeply at his son, seeing more than he had ever seen before. "I have been a bit... blind... in not seeing the man you have become."

With that, the boy's tears welled up and came gushing, along with the words he had always wanted to say. "I wish so much that I were more like you, Father. I *do* want to be a great king. But... I am not... as strong." He wiped his tears angrily as if they were a sign of weakness.

Varian put his arm around his son. "No, Anduin. You have more courage than I do, and it flows from a place deep within your heart. Remember what your uncle Magni used to say? 'Strength comes in many forms...'"

They both repeated the last part of the line in unison. "'Both small and large!'"

Anduin smiled at the warm memory. Varian continued, "I stand rigid and inflexible against the storm, but you feel the wind—you bend with it and make it your own—and thus become unbreakable."

Varian turned to Tiffin's memorial. "Your mother had those same qualities. She had perfected the art of gentle persuasion, and her love moved the world."

The prince stared at his mother's final resting place, trying to control fresh tears that flowed. Varian found himself saying things without thought, not as the king of Stormwind, but simply as a father to a son.

"It is good that you can cry over her, Anduin. I have never had that... strength." They both stood for a few moments, looking at the grave of the person whose mutual love was their deepest connection, even deeper than blood.

"I miss her." Anduin finally said. "I know I was just a baby, but I can still feel her."

"And that is why you will be the greatest of Wrynn kings," Varian said, patting his son's back. He wished the moment could last forever, but knew it could not. Looking up, he scanned his surroundings. "So, tell me, from what direction do you think the ambush will come?"

Anduin brushed away his tears. "They've been watching us for some time. Who do you think they are?"

Varian mused, "Likely assassins. Possibly taking advantage of the holiday distractions, a good time when the leaders of Stormwind would be together in public. So, what is your plan?"

Anduin tried to glance around without being obvious. "They will hit us from the east, trying to cover the main exit. We will be faced with a blunt attack of force, not guile. If we put our backs to the west wall, we can be sure to face them on more even terms."

Varian could not suppress his smile. "Impressive. You actually were listening to all those tedious lessons I gave."

"You've taught me more than you know, Father."

Varian nodded and Anduin grinned in reply. Something unspoken passed between them, something that needed no words.

A roar of rockets overhead suddenly broke the silence. Magic missiles shot high into the air from the Valley of Heroes and exploded above the city with a blossoming cascade of colors and shapes. The closing ceremonies of Remembrance Day had begun.

But the fireworks were also the signal for something else. From all around, a group of dangerous-looking men emerged from cover. Each of them carried ugly weapons and the grim face of an assassin intent on killing.

Varian turned to his son, almost enjoying the moment. "It appears I'm going to be a little late for my speech."

The attackers converged on the two men, and Varian counted ten of them. *Not a problem*, Varian thought, until Anduin pointed to the rear and they both saw another man appear from behind a tree. This last one was a very powerful sorcerer: his dark purple robes glowed with protections, and burning runes of energy orbited his gnarled staff.

"I don't like the look of that one," Varian said, drawing his sword. Anduin nodded and unfastened his bow, then nocked an arrow.

As they watched, the sorcerer waved his staff, tracing a large glowing oval in the air as he began to chant words of summoning.

More fireworks split the sky above, and the attackers suddenly charged at the king and prince. The booms overhead drowned out the harsh battle cries of the assassins as a vicious clash of steel sent sparks and blood flying, and from across Stormwind Lake, the twin voices of father and son echoed out proudly, "For the Alliance!"

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A kaleidoscope of people surrounded the great statues along the bridge over the Valley of Heroes. The crowd cheered the wizard's magic fireworks with wild abandon as the explosions reverberated back and forth between the walls of the city and into the moat below.

Tailors, blacksmiths, cooks, vendors, and soldiers alike stood shoulder to shoulder across the bridge and as far down the road to Goldshire as the eye could see. Everyone was having a wonderful time, caught up in the spectacle.

But onstage, a contingent of the Honor Delegation was not as enthusiastic. King Wrynn was scheduled to speak next, yet he was nowhere to be found! Jaina and Mathias Shaw gave each other worried glances as Field Marshal Afrasiabi stood at the podium waving to the crowd. It was to be the field marshal's great honor to introduce King Wrynn today for his speech. But as the fireworks display came to a close and the king of Stormwind was nowhere in sight, the ceremony was now well off track, and Afrasiabi did not like it when plans went off track.

The field marshal turned and growled, "Blast it! Where is he?" Everyone onstage shrugged, and Afrasiabi gave a glancing smile to the audience, then huddled with the delegates and heads of state. The delegation itself was in disarray, arguing over every possibility and contingency. Some of the nobles wanted the ceremony to move forward, king or no king. Others insisted they must wait for their leader, no matter how long it took.

General Jonathan, ever the tactician, had a compromise plan. "Field Marshal, I suggest you begin a delaying action. Feint and bluff. Hold the line, as it were, while we go look for the king." Jaina and Mathias nodded in agreement.

The field marshal liked this new strategy even less. "General, I am a commander of the king's armies; I am not a circus performer." He scowled at everyone but was met only by a collection of desperate faces, each pleading for him to take one for the team.

"But I have nothing prepared!" the field marshal protested.

"Just improvise. Distract them. Keep them entertained," came a chorus of responses.

The crowd grumbled anxiously behind him, and finally Afrasiabi gave in with a sigh. Muttering under his breath, he turned to the fickle throng. "Damn blasted gnome and pony shows..."

The high commander of Stormwind forced a smile that outshone even the gleaming patchwork of medals that adorned his armor, and he began to regale the audience with one of his favorite topics—the fascinating history, and little-known nuisances, of steam-engine siege tactics.

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Varian Wrynn moved like a wind elemental, jumping and spinning in every direction, desperate to protect his son at all costs. One moment, he was charging to the left, swinging his sword in wide sweeps just to push back a line of attackers; the next, he was intercepting another

group pressing Anduin from the other side, slashing his savage blade Shalamayne down with deadly effect.

They kept the stone wall to their backs and tried to repel the attackers, but despite their best efforts, the king and prince could not make headway toward the sorcerer. In the back, the magician was clearly summoning something into Stormwind, and his portal was growing more distinct by the minute.

Varian parried one attacker's axe, then removed both the assassin's weapon and the arm that held it with a crushing follow-through of his sword. Varian leaped forward, trying to press the advantage, but each time he made progress toward the summoner, the attackers capitalized on Varian's fear for his son and closed in on the boy. It became clear to the king that the assassins were just toying with him until something else could be brought through the portal, though what it might be he could not imagine.

Varian stole a quick glance toward his son and was filled with pride. The prince bravely stood his ground, firing arrow after arrow into the attackers. Many of the assassins were now bristling with feathered shafts, but even so, only three had fallen. Dark magic was at work.

Anduin nimbly dodged a thrown dagger and landed closer to Varian. "They are warded, Father! Watch out!"

Varian turned to his son. "Stay close. We must reach that sorcerer before he completes his spell!"

Anduin nodded. "Two can play the protection game!" he said, raising his hands. He uttered a prayer and spoke the power word "Shield." It echoed into the sky like a thunderclap.

Varian felt the hairs on his neck tingle as a divine shield of energy surrounded him. He flashed a wolfish grin at his son, then turned to face two very unlucky rogues who happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time. "Let's see if they are protected from this!" Varian roared. He charged forward, making a heroic leap high in the air, then bringing down his sword in a savage strike.

Shalamayne's blazing orb left an arcing blur of light as the blade split a surprised assassin from head to gut. The lifeless torso fell away in two gory halves, but even before the pieces hit the ground, Lo'Gosh was already moving to his next victim, swinging his sword and finishing him just as quickly. Anduin fired arrows in support, keeping his father's flanks free from attack.

The crowns of Stormwind moved as one, slashing with blade and stinging with arrow as they cut through the line of defenders toward the ever-more-desperate sorcerer. King and prince were a perfect team, with Varian dealing unending brute force and Anduin unleashing a fusillade of biting razorheads where it would do the most damage.

The dark sorcerer quickly realized his opportunity for success was growing short, and he redoubled his efforts, sending more purple energy snaking into the glowing field. As he did, something large and fearsome began to take shape within the portal's spinning haze.

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"He's not in the keep. I've checked everywhere," General Jonathan said, still breathless from his search.

Jaina looked at Mathias and frowned. "This is not like him. Where else would he be? And where is the prince?"

At that the general became even more alarmed. "Both the king and prince unaccounted for? This is a disaster!"

Shaw shook his head. "Widen the search, General. I'll mobilize SI:7."

"I'll check the port," Jaina said as she blinked out with a flash of white light.

Jonathan frowned and began to leave.

"And, General," Shaw said as he grabbed Jonathan's arm, a look of deep concern in his eyes. "Be ready to sound the alarm. I fear something sinister is afoot."

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The king was a ferocious wolf, taking on each defender in his path, sometimes two or three at a time. His eyes were mad with bloodlust as he slowly cut his way toward the sorcerer. After a flurry of attacks, only three defenders now stood between them.

Anduin nocked and fired arrows in a smooth and skilled blur of mastery. The streaking shafts hit one of the last defenders with perfect accuracy, burying themselves deep. The rogue dropped where he stood. Anduin blinked in surprise. Obviously the shield spell had worn off, and the magician was too intent on using every bit of his mana on the portal to bother with protecting his comrades. The last two assassins looked to the sorcerer in dismay, and Varian saw his opening.

In a blinding rush, he closed the distance between them instantly and crossed blades with both rogues at the same time, knocking them back with his fury. His surprise charge left the two stunned and open to attack, if only for just a brief moment—but that was all Varian needed.

With a war cry from the depths of the Maelstrom, Varian spun in a whirlwind of deadly blades, sundering armor and then decapitating both assassins simultaneously, their shocked expressions never changing as their heads fell to the earth.

Varian stopped and, breathing hard, faced the sorcerer now only paces away. The magician flashed his yellow teeth in triumph. "Too late! Your doom is—"

Before the summoner could finish, Varian charged again, reaching out with his sword even as Anduin sent a deadly, straight missile over his father's shoulder. To their surprise, the sorcerer didn't even try to defend himself. His only concern was finishing the portal spell, sacrificing his life as the arrow sliced through his neck, followed closely by Varian's blade through his chest.

The sorcerer was still smirking in victory as he fell dead, his last incantation finished, the portal pulsing now with energy, framing the dark and bulky silhouette of a creature coming through it!

"Get back, Anduin!" Varian yelled.

With a flash of effervescent light, a huge shape stepped out from the portal and into Stormwind City. Anduin gasped in shock as Varian fell back in a defensive stance. Before them was the biggest drakonid they had ever seen. The enormous half-dragon, half-man monster was adorned from head to tail in colossal purple armor bearing the markings of the Twilight's Hammer cult, its thick plates burning with protection spells.

The drakonid pulled mammoth twin axes from his back and bellowed a challenge that



shook the trees and sent shivers down Anduin's spine. Varian stepped between the monster and his son, then looked over his shoulder at the prince. "Stay behind me, Anduin. No matter what happens. Do you understand? Keep back. This creature... this thing... is something different."

The prince didn't even have a chance to nod before the drakonid howled with rage and charged the boy.

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"So with the advent of the transversal Gnomeregan steam crank," the field marshal droned on, glancing over his shoulder, hoping against hope to see the king had finally arrived, "ah... with this amazing new cog-shaft interlink, the pressure-assisted siege engine could hurl projectiles in excess of fifty stones, even in the coldest climes of Icecrown."

Field Marshal Afrasiabi paused, waiting for the crowd to be as impressed as he was at this fact. The people of Stormwind were impressed, all right—into utter silence. From way in the back, everyone heard a trinket drop. The field marshal turned and shrugged in surrender.

The city nobles were beside themselves. One blurted out, "Someone, do something. This is a disaster! Where is the king?!"

The delegates began talking all at once. They had been whispering and arguing for some time, but now came to a consensus. They turned to Benedictus. "We have decided the archbishop should speak in the king's stead."

Benedictus waved them off. "No, no. You flatter me, but it is not my place. Let us wait to see what has become of our king."

The crowd was booing and hissing now. Field Marshal Afrasiabi abandoned his post at the podium and sat down in disgust. "Hmph... I win battles, not hearts!"

A growing sweep of concern moved across the audience. People were beginning to sense something was wrong. Small snippets of anxious dissatisfaction reached the grandstands as the wall of voices from the crowd grew louder.

"We're losing them, Father. Do something," one of the nobles pleaded. "Please! They love you."

Benedictus looked at the delegation and finally acquiesced. "Very well. It will be my great and humble honor to say a few words in tribute to this day."

The crowd murmured with satisfaction as Archbishop Benedictus stepped up to the podium. His reassuring presence seemed to fill the emptiness of the valley, and the throng calmed and quieted, waiting for a word from their spiritual leader. The archbishop paused to take in the moment, then raised his hands. A cheer went up, and Benedictus began to speak.

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Bright blood oozed from fresh wounds as Varian stumbled back from a powerful strike of the drakonid's bulky axe. The massive creature lumbered forward and swung again with his second

axe, sending Varian reeling as his sword barely absorbed the bone-crushing blow. Varian saw a brief opening and, with expert skill, lunged and chopped across the beast's belly armor, but his blade merely glanced off the creature with a bright shower of sparks. The drakonid looked down and gave a guttural laugh, then circled the tired warrior, toying with the human.

Anduin fired the last of his arrows into the beast, but they were like gnats on a gnoll. Varian kept maneuvering against the brute, trying to keep the creature's attention away from his son as blow after blow rained down upon the king. Anduin could only watch in anguish as his father tried in vain to deflect the enormous power of the monster.

Suddenly the drakonid spun, moving faster than his size would suggest. Varian managed to parry the incoming axes, but the creature's spiked tail caught the king square in the chest and sent him tumbling to the ground. Varian landed hard, rolled to a stop, and didn't move.

Anduin stared in shock at the prone body of his father. It all seemed like a nightmare that he could not wake from. "Father!" Anduin shouted, but Varian lay still, covered in dust and blood.

Anduin moved toward the king, but then he felt the earth rumbling through his legs. He looked up just in time to see the drakonid bearing down on him like a charging bull, massive and without mercy, one of his huge axes already cutting through the air, slicing for the bridge of the prince's nose.

Anduin fell backward, holding his bow out like a feather in a hurricane. The drakonid's axe slammed into the boy's weapon, shattering it and sending him spinning to the ground.

Anduin found himself face down in the dirt, his arms and chest numb from the impact. He tried to get up, but his stunned body refused to cooperate. All he could do was roll, but that alone saved his life. Just as he did, the other huge axe crashed into the earth where his head had just been. Dirt and pebbles exploded from the massive blow, stinging his eyes.

The prince collapsed, gasping for breath, his mind reeling. Anduin glanced at his father's still body, then forced himself to look up at the massive bulk of the drakonid above him, trying to be unafraid and proud as a prince of Stormwind should be, as his father would be. He stared up into the creature's cold blue eyes and felt a strange calmness envelop him.

The half-dragon raised his axes high and sneered, the beast's gnarled fangs dripping from bloodlust. Anduin said a brief prayer, knowing it would soon be over. The axes whistled down with savage glee...

Suddenly a flurry of blue and gold armor was over him. His father was there, bloodied and staggering, and with an outstretched sword he managed to stop the drakonid's strike in a blast of light and sparking steel. A teeth-jarring screech of grinding metal wrenched both the man-dragon's axe and Varian's sword from their grasps... even as the drakonid's second axe came cutting down behind the first.

Varian felt the burning bite of the blade slice through his armor and then continue deep into his ribcage. The violent impact slammed the king to the ground, but his eyes never left Anduin as he sought to make sure his child was free from harm.

Their gazes met, and Varian's eyes softened with relief that his son was unhurt. But as the dust settled, Anduin's own stare grew wide with horror at what he saw.

Varian lay sprawled and twisted with the drakonid's axe buried deep in his chest. Anduin let out a wail of anguish as the moment stretched out like an eternity. Varian looked deep into his son's eyes and let him know that everything was all right. *This is how it always ends with Wrynn kings...*

The drakonid stood over Varian and laughed as the broken king coughed and pleaded with his stare for Anduin to do him one last favor.

"Run..." Varian whispered as a cool and gentle blackness slowly enveloped him. *Let me be the last to pay this price.* The creature sneered down at the king, pulling the axe out of Varian's chest. It was a strangely numb tug. There was no more pain, no more sadness. Varian knew he would die as he had lived. The creature raised the wet blade overhead, its notched and bloody surface glistening in the setting sun. *How peaceful it is here, Tiffin...*

Varian felt the world slipping away... but then someone was suddenly kneeling next to him, praying and holding his ground against the menacing drakonid. The king struggled for consciousness and slowly realized it was his son, the prince's arms raised high, his shouts and prayers protecting his father and keeping the creature back. Anduin stood up now and opened his arms wide to the sky, a golden nova of holy energy forcing the monster to retreat as the prince advanced, strong and fearless. *Like a king!*

As Anduin shouted the power word "Barrier," the graveyard seemed to blur and shimmer around the king and prince. The drakonid was confused now, and he swung his axe at the prince, but the mighty weapon harmlessly glanced off with a heavenly ring. Varian watched in wonder as Anduin persevered. The drakonid circled, preparing to attack, and Anduin's only weapon was his faith! Varian tried to reach for his sword, but it was too far away. He fell back, gasping in pain. He could barely breathe, much less move.

Anduin stood like a rock, courageous and resolute, even as the drakonid prepared one final charge. Varian rolled over despite the searing pain and tried to get up. He had to do something. Suddenly, he felt the heavy shard of the black dragon's armor in his belt. The king struggled to reach it, finally pulling the razor-sharp spike free.

As the drakonid charged, the boy stood firm, surrounded by an aura of Holy Light. He opened his palms to the sky and spoke the words to dispel magic. With each word, the earth resonated with energy, shaking the gravestones and sending a ripple across the surface of the lake. A flash of fire exploded from the sky and hit the drakonid as he rushed in.

The inferno blinded the beast, and he stumbled toward the serene silhouette of Anduin, the hideous creature screaming in both pain and rage. As the drakonid fell, his armor quickly faded to a dull gray, no longer protected by dark magics.

At the last possible moment, Varian lunged forward with everything he had left in his body and raised the hungry point of Deathwing's splinter of armor.

The impact with the drakonid was like a mighty avalanche as his massive weight collapsed on top of Varian and the razor-sharp shard penetrated through the monster's armor and chest. Somewhere in his mind Varian heard a scream that was half battle cry, half agony, but he wasn't sure if it had come from him or the creature. Then, mercifully, everything went black.

Somewhere far away Varian felt Anduin was there. He opened his eyes to see his son holding him, the boy's tears mixing with the king's pooling blood.

Jaina and Jonathan came running into the cemetery, followed by a host of guards. The general frowned and motioned for his men to check the assassins' bodies as Jaina dropped to her knees next to the king and prince. She looked at Varian's terrible wound, then glanced at Anduin and shook her head.

Varian gazed up at Anduin with newfound warmth and admiration. "You were right..." He grimaced in pain. "Love outlasts everything." Anduin brushed the blood and dirt from his father's

eyes, but Varian could barely feel his touch, his body was so cold—the whole world seemed to be melting away.

The sun shone blood red on the horizon now, casting the whole cemetery in a deep crimson hue. The king closed his eyes and let the Light do its bidding. As the entire honor guard of Stormwind gathered around their dying king, Varian's wheezing grew softer and less frequent.

"I am so sorry, Father," Anduin managed through his tears.

Varian opened his eyes again and tried to smile. "No. It is I who am sorry... for not seeing earlier what you are... what you have always been. I'm so proud... that you are my son." Varian reached up with his bloody hand to touch the boy's smeared cheek. "Do not mourn for me, Anduin. This has always been my fate... do not let it be yours."

With that, Varian's arm and body fell limp. Anduin sat there, frozen, for a long moment, his whole body numb, his life spinning away before his eyes. Jonathan reached down to help the young man up. "Come, Anduin, we must get you to the safety of the keep. The heir apparent must be protected."

Anduin sat motionless, hearing nothing the general said, looking at the dying hulk of his father in disbelief.

"Let us leave this place," Jaina pleaded, reaching for him. But the prince pushed them both away and wiped his eyes in sudden fury.

"No! This is not how it ends!" He shook the king. "Do you hear me, Father?! A Wrynn prince will not again watch a loved one die before him! This is not our fate!" Anduin screamed into the sky, and the clouds seemed to part in sympathy.

The others present watched in awe as the prince closed his eyes and slowly began to chant. At first it was a soft and gentle sound, but as his voice rose in crescendo, it became a beautiful and powerful song. As the words came, his hands began to glow with light, faint at first, then brighter and brighter, until it was competing even with the setting sun, bathing the entire cemetery in the shadowless light of midday.

The song reached a fever pitch, and the young priest lifted his eyes and voice to the heavens, calling to the very heart of the cosmos for a source of divine power.

Suddenly, liquid rays brighter than a thousand suns burst from Anduin's fingertips, penetrating the king's body and painting everything in a brilliant yellow glow. The guards gasped and stepped back, shielding their eyes as Varian's entire being was rocked by an influx of pure light. And at the center of it all was Anduin, holding his father close while a vortex of infinite beauty danced between them.

Then, in sharp contrast to the intense swirling energy billowing all around, the prince began to speak with a melodious and gentle voice as he carefully laid his hands on the immobile king's forehead and quietly, peacefully, began to pray.

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Benedictus was in his element. The crowd was cheering everything he said. The people of Stormwind would someday realize that this day had been inevitable, that through him, the world would finally be purified by these great events.

He shot an arm out to the masses, who hung on his every word. "As I stand before you, we face a terrible time. The world has torn its foundations asunder. Azeroth is even now being cleansed by divine fire, and we will long remember these days of trial as the crucible from which a new age was born!"

The crowd cheered without knowing why, and Benedictus smiled to himself, closing his eyes in satisfaction. Suddenly, the crowd cheered again, even more loudly than before. Benedictus opened his eyes in surprise. Another roar, louder than the last, and the archbishop turned to see what the multitude was cheering at.

Limping onto the stage, disheveled and covered in blood, came King Varian and Prince Anduin, barely holding each other up in their fatigue. As the realization of their dire state spread, a concerned murmur arose, but Varian raised his hand in a gesture of reassurance, and the crowd grew silent.

Benedictus was completely speechless as he bowed and gave the stage to the king of Stormwind. Varian limped to the podium, with Anduin helping him stand tall in his weakness. Varian gave his son a pat on the shoulder and a nod of appreciation as Anduin moved back to be with Jaina and the rest of the Honor Delegation's contingent.

It suddenly dawned on Varian that he had never found time to prepare his Remembrance Day speech. The king paused for just a moment, trying to smile through the pain, and then realized with utmost clarity that he now knew exactly what to say. He pointed to the massive statues around them.

"Hear me, people of Stormwind! Your king stands before you with his heart still beating, a drum that grows stronger each day as he sees the determination you have shown to rebuild from tragedy. Just as these statues still stand watch, so shall Stormwind, now and forever!"

As if the first rays of morning had suddenly burst over the horizon, the crowd exploded with the brightest cheers ever heard before the gates of the great human city.

"We are gathered here on Remembrance Day to honor those heroes who have shown us the way, by the light of their lives and the glory of their deeds."

The crowd replied with enthusiastic applause.

"Uther Lightbringer!"

The cheers grew into a wild roar.

"Anduin Lothar!"

The ovation drowned out everything for the longest time as Varian patiently waited for the acclaim to subside. He was awash with pride—for his people and for his city. But now his voice took on a more somber tone.

"Once again, we face a new and great threat." The king gestured to the damaged towers. "Even now, we bear the fresh scars of evil forces bent upon our destruction." Varian raised his voice for all to hear. "But humanity is not so easily cowed! We stand in the breach and we hold the line! We will never be slaves to fear!"

The gathered mass cheered with wild abandon! The delegation members on stage behind the king applauded as one, their differences and complaints lost to the moment. As the crowd continued to shout, Varian glanced over at Jaina and Anduin, fighting down his own wave of deep emotions. When he spoke again, his voice was softer and more paternal, something the people of Stormwind had never heard before.

"On this day we must remember not only the good but also the bad, for it is through

adversity and failure that we become our best! I myself have been... an absent king, chasing our enemies to the very heart of the underworld. I hold your safety as my highest responsibility, your good livelihood my first and only calling. For the truth is it is not the people who serve their king; it is the king who serves his people!"

The audience cheered yet again. Roses flew onto the stage and well wishes came from every corner of the throng. It was clear that the people cared more than the king had known, and it moved him deeply.

"I have not always been the best leader... or father... or husband." Varian's eyes became glassy with memories. He turned and nodded to his son.

"A wise man once said, 'We each must grow in every direction, every day.' Well, I still have some growth left in my bones. And behind me, I see a city rising from disaster, with fresh hope and gleaming new spires!"

The cheers from the architects and masons were loudest of all. Varian raised his hand to continue.

"Yes, today we honor the past, but only with our eyes firmly fixed on a brighter future! One that we will forge together, for ourselves, for our children, and for our children's children!"

The ensuing roar mixed love and hope into a potent new brew. Varian looked across the crowd and saw so many young faces peering up at him—children who would soon lead their own quests, and who would, in their own special way, make the world a better place.

"Each generation is destined to achieve its great promise. To be sure, each will face a unique set of tests and adversities, and some will be certain that the end is near. But there is no truth to the tavern-told lie that the 'good old days' are forever behind us. No! Each day we are alive is a great day! And each generation finds its own way to become the greatest generation that has ever lived!"

As the crowd cheered, the king stole a glance back at the Honor Delegation. Jaina was smiling and Anduin was applauding louder than anyone, his mother's silver locket dancing on its chain. The young man's face was full of pride, and something else: love.

Varian no longer felt alone in his struggle to protect the world. He had the blood of his fathers in his veins, and in turn, Anduin had it in his. Varian felt the warmth and comfort of his ancestors across the great divide. It gave him the strength to be king, and someday it would give Anduin the power to fulfill his own destiny. Varian smiled at his son, then turned to the crowd with an assuredness that now filled the empty spaces that had long festered in his heart.

"In the past, we have relied on strength and steel to forge our way. We protect what we can, destroy what we must. But that is not the only way. If we are to ever restore this world, then there must come a time when the leaders of Azeroth are no longer the warriors, but instead the healers! Those who mend instead of those who break. Only then can we truly cure our deep ills and achieve lasting peace."

The crowd roared its approval from all directions. Even Baron Lescovar and his clump of nobles were standing and cheering now, swept up by the power and pride of their king's vision. Varian Wrynn raised both hands to quiet the audience one last time, then gestured once again to the grand statues in the valley.

"Look above you! The heroes of old stand tall, and we honor and remember them well this day. But now look next to you! By your side, in this crowd, stand all the heroes of tomorrow! You... and you... and you. Each of you will play a part; each will make a difference; and in time, some will

be honored on this day for deeds far greater than any we could possibly imagine!"

The younger generations in the crowd added their own voices to the roar, innocent eyes alight with the promise and excitement of the grand adventures to come. Even gruff Field Marshal Afrasiabi pretended to have a gnat in his eye instead of a tear.

"So, people of Stormwind! Let us unite this day. Let us renew our promise to uphold and protect the Light, and together we will face down this dark new storm and stand firm against it—as humanity always has... and humanity always will!"

The crowd saved its greatest roars for the end. A chorus of "Long live King Varian! Long live King Varian!" rose into the sky with vigor and conviction. The cheers were unending, echoing deep into Elwynn Forest and faintly reaching even the distant peaks of the Redridge Mountains.

As Varian basked in the warmth of his people, he felt truly at home for the first time in years. He found himself relishing his great fortune to be a father, his incredible honor to be the king of Stormwind; and not for the first time, nor the last, King Varian Wrynn felt very proud to be human.