



Lord of the Clans (Warcraft, Book 2)

By Christie Golden

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In the mist-shrouded haze of the past, the world of Azeroth teemed with wondrous creatures of every kind. Mysterious Elves and hardy Dwarves walked among tribes of Man in relative peace and harmony -- until the arrival of the demonic army known as the Burning Legion shattered the world's tranquility forever. Now Orcs, Dragons, Goblins, and Trolls all vie for supremacy over the scattered, warring kingdoms -- part of a grand, malevolent scheme that will determine the fate of the world of

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Slave. Gladiator. Shaman. Warchief. The enigmatic Orc known as Thrall has been all of these. Raised from infancy by cruel human masters who sought to mold him into their perfect pawn, Thrall was driven by both the savagery in his heart and the cunning of his upbringing to pursue a destiny he was only beginning to understand -- to break his bondage and rediscover the ancient traditions of his people. Now the tumultuous tale of his life's journey -- a saga of honor, hatred, and hope -- can at last be told....

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Editorial Review

About the Author

New York Times bestselling and award-winning author Christie Golden has written more than forty novels and several short stories in the fields of science fiction, fantasy, and horror. Among her many projects are over a dozen *Star Trek* novels and several original fantasy novels. An avid player of World of Warcraft, she has written two manga short stories and several novels in that world. Golden lives in Tennessee. She welcomes visitors to her website: ChristieGolden.com.

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Chapter One

Even the beasts were cold on a night such as this, mused Durotan. Absently he reached out to his wolf companion and scratched Sharptooth behind one of his white ears. The animal crooned appreciatively and snuggled closer. Wolf and orc chief stared together at the silent fall of white snow, framed by the rough oval that was the entrance to Durotan's cave.

Once, Durotan, chieftain of the Frostwolf clan, had known the kiss of balmy climes. Had swung his ax in the sunlight, narrowing small eyes against the gleam of sunshine on metal and against the spattering of red human blood. Once, he had felt a kinship with all of his people, not just those of his clan. Side by side they had stood, a green tide of death flooding over the hillsides to engulf the humans. They had feasted at the fires together, laughed their deep, booming laughs, told the stories of blood and conquest while their children drowsed by the dying embers, their little minds filled with images of slaughter.

But now the handful of orcs that comprised the Frostwolf clan shivered alone in their exile in the frigid Alterac Mountains of this alien world. Their only friends here were the huge white wolves. They were so different from the mammoth black wolves that Durotan's people had once ridden, but a wolf was a wolf, no matter the color of its fur, and determined patience combined with Drek'Thar's powers had won the beasts over to them. Now orc and wolf hunted together and kept one another warm during the interminable, snowy nights.

A soft, snuffling sound from the heart of the cave caused Durotan to turn. His harsh face, lined and held in perpetual tautness from years of worry and anger, softened at the noise. His little son, as yet unnamed until the ordained Naming Day of this cycle, had cried out as he was being fed.

Leaving Sharptooth to continue watching the snowfall, Durotan rose and lumbered back to the cave's inner chamber. Draka had bared a breast for the child to suckle upon, and had just removed the infant from his task. So that was why the child had whimpered. As Durotan watched, Draka extended a forefinger. With a black nail honed to razor sharpness, she pricked deep into the nipple before returning the infant's small head to her breast. Not a flicker of pain crossed her beautiful, strong-jawed face. Now, as the child fed, he would drink not only nourishing mother's milk, but his mother's blood as well. Such was appropriate food for a budding young warrior, the son of Durotan, the future chieftain of the Frostwolves.

His heart swelled with love for his mate, a warrior his equal in courage and cunning, and the lovely, perfect son they had borne.

It was then that the knowledge of what he had to do sank over him, like a blanket settling over his shoulders.

He sat down and sighed deeply.

Draka glanced up at him, her brown eyes narrowing. She knew him all too well. He did not want to tell her of his sudden decision, although he knew in his heart it was the right one. But he must.

"We have a child now," Durotan said, his deep voice booming from his broad chest.

"Yes," replied Draka, pride in her voice. "A fine, strong son, who will lead the Frostwolf clan after his father dies nobly in battle. Many years from now," she added.

"I have a responsibility for his future," Durotan continued.

Draka's attention was now on him fully. He thought her exquisitely beautiful at this moment, and tried to brand the image of her in his mind. The firelight played against her green skin, casting her powerful muscles into sharp relief and making her tusks gleam. She did not interrupt, merely waited for him to continue.

"Had I not spoken against Gul'dan, our son would have more playmates with which to grow up," Durotan continued. "Had I not spoken against Gul'dan, we would have continued to be valued members of the Horde."

Draka hissed, opening her massive jaws and baring her fangs in displeasure at her mate. "You would not have been the mate I joined with," she boomed. The infant, startled, jerked his head away from the nourishing breast to look up at his mother's face. White milk and red blood dripped down his already jutting chin. "Durotan of the Frostwolf clan would not sit by and meekly let our people be led to their deaths like the sheep the humans tend. With what you had learned, you had to speak out, my mate. You could have done no less and still be the chieftain you are."

Durotan nodded at the truth of her words. "To know that Gul'dan had no love for our people, that it was nothing more than a way for him to increase his power...."

He fell silent, recalling the shock and horror -- and rage -- that had engulfed him when he had learned of the Shadow Council and Gul'dan's duplicity. He had tried to convince the others of the danger facing them all. They had been used, like pawns, to destroy the Draenei, a race that Durotan was beginning to think had not required extinction after all. And again, shuttled through the Dark Portal onto an unsuspecting world -- not the orcs' decision, no, but that of the Shadow Council. All for Gul'dan, all for Gul'dan's personal power. How many orcs had fallen, fighting for something so empty?

He searched for the words to express his decision to his mate. "I spoke, and we were exiled. All who followed me were. It is a great dishonor."

"Only Gul'dan's dishonor," said Draka fiercely. The infant had gotten over his temporary fright and was again nursing. "Your people are alive, and free, Durotan. It is a harsh place, but we have found the frost wolves to be our companions. We have plenty of fresh meat, even in the depths of winter. We have kept the old ways alive, as much as we can, and the stories around the fire are part of our children's heritage."

"They deserve more," said Durotan. He gestured with a sharp-nailed finger at his suckling son. "He deserves more. Our still-deluded brothers deserve more. And I will give it to them."

He rose and straightened to his full imposing height. His huge shadow fell over the forms of his wife and

child. Her crestfallen expression told him that Draka knew what he was going to say before he spoke, but the words needed utterance. It was what made them solid, real...made them an oath not to be broken.

"There were some who heeded me, though they still doubted. I will return and find those few chieftains. I will convince them of the truth of my story, and they will rally their people. We shall no longer be slaves of Gul'dan, easily lost and not thought of when we die in battles that serve only him. This I swear, I, Durotan, chieftain of the Frostwolf clan!"

He threw back his head, opened his toothy mouth almost impossibly wide, rolled his eyes back, and uttered a loud, deep, furious cry. The baby began to squall and even Draka flinched. It was the Oath Cry, and he knew that despite the deep snow that often deadened sound, everyone in his clan would hear it this night. In moments, they would cluster around his cave, demanding to know the content of the Oath Cry, and making cries of their own.

"You shall not go alone, my mate," said Draka, her soft voice a sharp contrast to the ear-splitting sound of Durotan's Oath Cry. "We shall come with you."

"I forbid it."

And with a suddenness that startled even Durotan, who ought to have known better, Draka sprang to her feet. The crying baby tumbled from her lap as she clenched her fists and raised them, shaking them violently. A heartbeat later Durotan blinked as pain shot through him and blood dripped down his face. She had bounded the length of the cave and slashed his cheek with her nails.

"I am Draka, daughter of Kelkar, son of Rhakish. No one forbids me to follow my mate, not even Durotan himself! I come with you, I stand by you, I shall die if need be. Pagh!" She spat at him.

As he wiped the mixture of spittle and blood from his face, his heart swelled with love for this female. He had been right to choose her as his mate, to be the mother of his sons. Was there ever a more fortunate male in all of orc history? He did not think so.

Despite the fact that, if word reached Gul'dan, Orgrim Doomhammer and his clan would be exiled, the great Warchief made Durotan and his family welcome in his field camp. The wolf, however, eyed with suspicion. The wolf eyed him back in the same manner. The rough tent that served Doomhammer for shelter was emptied of lesser orcs, and Durotan, Draka, and their yet-unnamed child were ushered in.

The night was a bit cool to Doomhammer, and he watched with wry amusement as his honored guests divested themselves of most of their clothing and muttered about the heat. Frostwolves, he mused, must be unused to such "warm weather."

Outside, his personal guards kept watch. With the flap that served as a door still open, Doomhammer watched them huddle around the fire, extending enormous green hands to the dancing flames. The night was dark, save for the small lights of the stars. Durotan had picked a good night for his clandestine visit. It was unlikely that the small party of male, female, and child had been spotted and identified for who they really were.

"I regret that I place you and your clan in jeopardy," were the first words Durotan spoke.

Doomhammer waved the comment aside. "If Death is to come for us, it will find us behaving with honor."

He invited them to sit and with his own hands handed his old friend the dripping haunch of a fresh kill. It was still warm. Durotan nodded his acceptance, bit into the juicy flesh, and tore off a huge chunk. Draka did likewise, and then extended her bloody fingers to her baby. The child eagerly sucked the sweet liquid.

"A fine, strong boy," said Doomhammer.

Durotan nodded. "He will be a fitting leader of my clan. But we did not come all this way for you to admire my son."

"You spoke with veiled words many years ago," said Doomhammer.

"I wished to protect my clan, and I was not certain my suspicions were correct until Gul'dan imposed the exile," Durotan replied. "His swift punishment made it clear that what I knew was true. Listen, my old friend, and then you must judge for yourself."

In soft tones, so that the guards sitting at the fire a few yards away would not overhear them, Durotan began to speak. He told Doomhammer everything he knew -- the bargain with the demon lord, the obscene nature of Gul'dan's power, the betrayal of the clans through the Shadow Council, the eventual, and dishonorable, end of the orcs, who would be thrown as bait to demonic forces. Doomhammer listened, forcing his wide face to remain impassive. But within his broad chest his heart pounded like his own famous warhammer upon human flesh.

Could this be true? It sounded like a tale spewed by a battle-addled half-wit. Demons, dark pacts...and yet, this was Durotan who was speaking. Durotan, who was one of the wisest, fiercest, and noblest of the chieftains. From any other mouth, these he would have judged to be lies or nonsense. But Durotan had been exiled for his words, which lent them credence. And Doomhammer had trusted the other chieftain with his life many times before now.

There was only one conclusion. What Durotan was telling him was true. When his old friend finished speaking, Doomhammer reached for the meat and took another bite, chewing slowly while his racing mind tried to make sense of all that had been said. Finally, he swallowed, and spoke.

"I believe you, old friend. And let me reassure you, I will not stand for Gul'dan's plans for our people. We will stand against the darkness with you."

Obviously moved, Durotan extended his hand. Doomhammer gripped it tightly.

"You cannot stay overlong in this camp, though it would be an honor to have you do so," Doomhammer said as he rose. "One of my personal guards will escort you to a safe place. There is a stream nearby and much game in the woods this time of year, so you shall not go hungry. I will do what I can on your behalf, and when the time is right, you and I shall stand side by side as we slay the Great Betrayer Gul'dan together."

The guard said nothing as he led them out of the encampment several miles into the surrounding woods. Sure enough, the clearing to which he took them was secluded and verdant. Durotan could hear the trickling of the water. He turned to Draka.

"I knew my old friend could be trusted," he said. "It will not be long before -- "

And then Durotan froze. He had heard another noise over the splashing of the nearby stream. It was the snap

of a twig under a heavy foot...

He screamed his battle cry and reached for his ax. Before he could even grasp the hilt the assassins were upon him. Dimly, Durotan heard Draka's shrill scream of rage, but could spare no instant to turn to her aid. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Sharptooth spring on one intruder, knocking him to the earth.

They had come silently, with none of the pride in the hunt that was so integral to orcish honor. These were assassins, the lowest of the low, the worm beneath the foot. Except these worms were everywhere, and though their mouths remained closed in that unnatural silence, their weapons spoke with a purposeful tongue.

An ax bit deep into Durotan's left thigh and he fell. Warm blood flowed down his leg as he twisted and reached with his bare hands, trying desperately to throttle his would-be murderer. He stared up into a face frighteningly devoid of good, honest orc rage, indeed of any emotion at all. His adversary lifted the ax again. With every ounce of strength left to him, Durotan's hands closed on the orc's throat. Now the worm did show emotion as he dropped the ax, trying to pry Durotan's thick, powerful fingers from his neck.

A brief, sharp howl, then silence. Sharptooth had fallen. Durotan did not need to look to see. He still heard his mate grunting obscenities at the orc who, he knew, would slay her. And then a noise that sent fear shivering through him split the air: his infant son's cry of terror.

They shall not kill my son! The thought gave Durotan new strength and with a roar, despite the lifeblood ebbing from the severed artery in his leg, he surged upward and managed to get his foe beneath his huge bulk. Now the assassin squirmed in genuine terror. Durotan pressed hard with both hands and felt the satisfying snap of neck beneath his palms.

"No!" The voice belonged to the treasonous guard, the orc who had betrayed them. It was high, humanish with fear. "No, I'm one of you, they are the target -- "

Durotan looked up in time to see a huge assassin swing a blade almost bigger than he was in a smooth, precise arc. Doomhammer's personal guard didn't stand a chance. The sword sliced cleanly through the traitor's neck, and as the severed, bloody head flew past him, Durotan could still see the shock and surprise on the dead guard's face.

He turned to defend his mate, but he was too late. Durotan cried aloud in fury and raw grief as he saw Draka's still body, hacked almost to pieces, lying on the forest floor in a widening pool of blood. Her killer loomed over her, and now turned his attention to Durotan.

In a fair battle, Durotan would have been a match for any three of them. Grievously wounded as he was, with no weapon save his hands, he knew he was about to die. He did not try to defend himself. Instead, out of deep instinct he reached for the small bundle that was his child.

And stared foolishly at the spurting fountain of blood that sprang from his shoulder. His reflexes were slowing from lack of blood, and before he could even react, his left arm joined the right to lie, twitching, on the ground. The worms would not even let him hold his son one more time.

The injured leg could bear him no longer. Durotan toppled forward. His face was inches away from that of his son's. His mighty warrior's heart broke at the expression on the baby's face, an expression of total confusion and terror.

"Take...the child," he rasped, amazed that he could even speak.

The assassin bent close, so that Durotan could see him. He spat in Durotan's eye. For a moment, Durotan feared he would impale the baby right in front of his father's eyes.

"We will leave the child for the forest creatures," snarled the assassin. "Perhaps you can watch as they tear him to bits."

And then they were gone, as silently as they had left. Durotan blinked, feeling dazed and disoriented as the blood left his body in rivers. He tried again to move and could not. He could only stare with failing eyesight at the image of his son, his small chest heaving with his screams, his tiny fists balled and waving frantically.

Draka...my beloved...my little son...I am so sorry. I have brought us to this....

The edges of his vision began to turn gray. The image of his child began to fade. The only comfort that Durotan, chieftain of the Frostwolf clan, had as his life slowly ebbed from him was the knowledge that he would die before having to witness the horrible spectacle of his son being eaten alive by ravenous forest beasts.

"By the Light, what a noise!" Twenty-two-year-old Tammis Foxtan wrinkled his nose at the noise that was echoing through the forest. "Might as well turn back, Lieutenant. Anything that loud is certain to have frightened any game worth pursuing."

Lieutenant Aedelas Blackmoore threw his personal servant a lazy grin.

"Haven't you learned anything I've tried to teach you, Tammis?" he drawled. "It's as much about getting away from that damned fortress as bringing back supper. Let whatever it is caterwaul all it likes." He reached for the saddlebag behind him. The bottle felt cool and smooth in his hand.

"Hunting cup, sir?" Tammis, despite Blackmoore's comments, had been ideally trained. He extended a small cup in the shape of a dragon's head that had been hooked onto his saddle. Hunting cups were specifically designed for such a purpose, having no base upon which to sit. Blackmoore debated, then waved the offer away.

"One too many steps." With his teeth he pulled out the cork, held it in one hand, and raised the bottle's mouth to his lips.

Ah, this stuff was sweet. It burned an easy trail down his throat and into his gut. Wiping his mouth, Blackmoore recorked the bottle and put it back in the saddlebag. He deliberately ignored Tammis's look, quickly averted, of concern. What should a servant care how much his master drank?

Aedelas Blackmoore had risen swiftly through the ranks because of his almost incredible ability to slice a swath through the ranks of orcs on the battlefield. His superiors thought this due to skill and courage. Blackmoore could have told them that his courage was of the liquid variety, but he didn't see much point in it.

His reputation also didn't hurt his chances with the ladies. Neither did his dashing good looks. Tall and handsome, with black hair that fell to his shoulders, steel-blue eyes, and a small, neatly trimmed goatee, he was the perfect heroic soldier. If some of the women left his bed a little sadder but wiser, and more than

occasionally with a bruise or two, it mattered nothing to him. There were always plenty more where they came from.

The ear-splitting sound was starting to irritate him. "It's not going away," Blackmoore growled.

"It could be an injured creature, sir, incapable of crawling away," said Tammis.

"Then let's find it and put it out of our misery," replied Blackmoore. He kicked Nightsong, a sleek gelding as black as his name, with more force than was necessary and took off at a gallop in the direction of the hellish noise.

Nightsong came to such an abrupt halt that Blackmoore, usually the finest of riders, nearly sailed over the beast's head. He swore and punched the animal in the neck, then fell silent as he saw what had caused Nightsong to stop so quickly.

"Blessed Light," said Tammis, riding up beside him on his small gray pony. "What a mess."

Three orcs and a huge white wolf lay sprawled on the forest floor. Blackmoore assumed that they had died recently. There was as yet no stink of decomposition, though the blood had congealed. Two males, one female. Who cared what sex the wolf had been. Damned orcs. It would save humans like him a lot of trouble if the brutes turned on themselves more often.

Something moved, and Blackmoore saw what it was that had been shrieking so violently. It was the ugliest thing he had ever seen...an orc baby, wrapped in what no doubt passed for a swaddling cloth among the creatures. Staring, he dismounted and went to it.

"Careful, sir!" yelled Tammis. "It might bite!"

"I've never seen a whelp before," said Blackmoore. He nudged it with his boot toe. It rolled slightly out of its blue and white cloth, screwed its hideous little green face up even more, and continued wailing.

Though he had already downed the contents of one bottle of mead and was well into the second, Blackmoore's mind was still sharp. Now, an idea began to form in his head. Ignoring Tammis's unhappy warnings, Blackmoore bent over and picked up the small monster, tucking the blue and white cloth snugly about it. Almost immediately, it stopped crying. Blue-gray eyes locked with his.

"Interesting," said Blackmoore. "Their infants have blue eyes when they are young, just as humans do." Soon enough those eyes would turn piggy and black, or red, and gaze upon all humans with murderous hate.

Unless....

For years, Blackmoore had worked twice as hard to be half as well regarded as other men of equal birth and rank. He had labored under the stigma of his father's treachery, and had done everything possible to gain power and position. He was still skeptically regarded by many; "blood of a traitor" was often muttered when those around him thought him unable to hear. But now, perhaps he might one day not have to listen to those cutting comments any longer.

"Tammis," he said thoughtfully, gazing intently into the incongruously soft blue of the baby orc's eyes, "did you know that you have the honor to serve a brilliant man?"

"Of course I did, sir," Tammis replied, as was expected. "May I inquire as to why this is particularly true at this moment?"

Blackmoore glanced up at the still-mounted servant, and grinned. "Because Lieutenant Aedelas Blackmoore holds in his hands something that is going to make him famous, wealthy, and best of all, powerful."

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Users Review

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